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METHODS AND TEXTS

GAMING RELIGION?

Teaching Religious Studies with Videogames

RACHEL WAGNER

As a scholar interested in the intersection between religion and culture, a few years ago I found myself wanting to teach about religion and videogames but not feeling especially competent to do so. This was around 2007, when the academic study of gaming was still new and little scholarship on religion and gaming existed. I knew a few people who were working on case studies of particular games, but what I most wanted to think about more theoretically was how gaming can work *like* religion. John Lyden had laid the theoretical groundwork for more careful study of religion and film in 2003 in his *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals*. I wanted to use his work as a model, and provide students with the tools and language to think about gaming as a phenomenon with religious qualities. The problem was I didn't know much about videogames, and I wasn't very good at playing them. Furthermore, as a busy scholar and teacher, I didn't have the time to immerse myself in fan culture or spend forty hours playing a single game.

My solution was to involve my students in my own learning process. Over a period of several years, I taught three semester-long iterations of an upper level seminar called "Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality" as I worked on the manuscript of the related book, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. I spent the summer before the course creating the preliminary bibliography, then built the course around it. Each "unit" was affiliated with a projected chapter, and students worked through the bibliographical material with me, composing their own research questions and projects along the way. I wrote alongside them, discovering and synthesizing, asking questions for which I didn't yet have the answers. Students thrived on the sense of co-discovery, and their insights were sometimes profound. After three iterations of the course, the book was finished, and several students had presented their own projects at local and regional venues.¹

Right now, I am repeating this process as I teach the first of another series of upper level seminars that will result in my second book, to be focused on the intersection between violence, gaming, and popular apocalypticism. For this course, called "Religion, Media, Apocalypse," we are again using selected videogames as part of a larger conversation about media and religion. We are also examining less interactive media like serialized television shows that explicitly evoke apocalyptic imagery as part of their negotiation of imaginations of the end times (*Supernatural* and *Sleepy Hollow*, for example). Any instructor who wants to learn about religion and gaming can adapt this kind of emergent teaching style in order to

¹ I included all of my students in the Acknowledgments.

develop new theoretical structures alongside students. And what's more, it is now easier to get up to speed on the theory of religion and gaming, as much theoretical groundwork been laid in the past five years.

An easy place to begin is with some of the best emerging gamer theory, which can then be appropriated for the study of religion. One of the key tools in thinking about religion and gaming is what media theorist Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric." His book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* provides a foundation for understanding how games work. The first chapter alone can provide a theoretical boost to any unit on interactive media. Bogost argues that games and other software programs persuade us to act in certain ways by offering limited choices in behavior and urging certain choices over others. Accordingly, if we repeat the same kinds of choices over and over again via programming, he suggests that we may be tempted to let those same kinds of choices impact our offline experiences as well. We may become programmed, and see the real world in more limited ways.

Bogost's writing on procedural rhetoric is closely related to important theoretical work that has taken place in recent years on the phenomenon of play, a field of study that also has surprising parallels to elements of conventional religious studies. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* is a foundational text for gamer study. The Anthology includes some important crossover pieces like excerpts from Johan Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play-Elements in Culture*, containing Huizinga's famous argument for religion as a form of sacred play. To delve more deeply into how ritual theory may intersect with gamer theory, selections from Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan's edited volume *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* introduce students to key concepts in the theory of play and narrative. I pair these with readings of classic and contemporary ritual theory from *Readings in Ritual Studies*, edited by Ronald Grimes. The juxtaposition of ritual theory with play theory shows how both rely upon the careful scripting of interactivity with a predetermined structure of experience.

These were the foundational texts I used when I first taught my course. However, the intensifying cross-pollination between cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, communications, and religious studies has resulted in recent years in an explosion of new scholarship focused on understanding digital culture. In *Godwired* I draw on these disciplines and add gamer theory into the mix, inviting an examination of how interactivity is shaping religious practice as it too is implicated in the technological revolution that increasingly shapes our daily lives. A number of anthologies I have contributed to take up similar approaches, including *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, edited by Heidi Campbell; *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve; *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, edited by Terry Clark and Dan Clanton; and *God in the Details*, edited by Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy.

These collections, and my contributions to them, show how rich interdisciplinarity can yield fruitful analysis and new pedagogies. *Digital Religion* includes short readings largely from a communications studies focus, and introduces key concepts in religion and virtual reality across a variety of media. *Playing with Religion* includes a number of well-written case studies of games with religious influences, as well as chapters on the theory of how gaming can work like religion. *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture* and *God in the Details* place digital religion within the broader scope of religion and popular culture. Any of these can help students to think carefully about religion, gaming, and popular culture. A quick look at the table of contents for each will reveal the approaches scholars tend to take, although most choose either to engage in case studies or to look more broadly at theoretical issues. An easy place to start is “Shooting Aliens in Cathedrals: Teaching with Video Games,” my introductory essay on religion and gaming in *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, where I outline some of the key issues like the intersection between ritual, storytelling, and games.

The theory of play is surprisingly applicable when integrated into the religious studies classroom because it gives us a mechanism by which to think about how choices in interactivity work in various modes of religious practice. Gamer theorist Eric Zimmerman offers one useful definition in “Narrative, Interactivity, Play and Games,” where he calls play “the free space of movement within a more rigid structure” (*First Person* 154–164). Zimmerman is thinking especially about the relationship between play and narrative, but those teaching about religion can expand the applicability of this definition to include consideration of the degree of “play” allowed in the performance of religious ritual, or the interpretation of scripture, or communal definitions of faith and practice.

The “rules” of “play” in reading a sacred text are the hermeneutical principles at work for determining which interpretations are possible for a given scriptural passage based on the expectations of a tradition, the limitations of sensibility, or the presumptions of gender roles. For example, readers of the letters of Paul may argue about how much new interpretation should be allowed in making sense of Paul’s statements about the roles women should play in church worship. Some people, shaped by the “rules” of biblical inerrancy, may read the text as exhibiting very little play at all and thus argue that Paul’s teachings about women in the first century CE should apply to today in exactly the same way. Others, such as contemporary feminist readers of the same text, may determine that certain longstanding “rules” of interpretation evince anachronistic patriarchal limitations and accordingly, will refuse to “play” according to those “rules” today. Play is evident anywhere that texts exhibit tension based upon rules that shape what is possible in interpretation.

To take a much broader theological approach, one could consider the degree of play allowed in the unfolding “story” of human history. How much control do humans have over the human “story” in differing religious

traditions? How much “play” is allowed within the rules of particular religious groups? How does God “play” with the tension between divine providence and human free will? Religion itself can be viewed as a kind of ultimate game with “play” based on rules that are determined by its founders, but which are also shaped throughout history by its practitioners. Some of us play to win, some of us play to learn, and some refuse to play at all.

When explaining the relationship between religion and gaming to my students, I often invite them to consider a simple thought experiment. Most of them have seen *The Matrix*, or at least know its premise, so I tell them to imagine the day when our own technology will have developed to the point that it so effectively mimics our daily lives that we will have full sensory engagement with virtual reality. Things will smell, feel, taste, and sound just like they would in real life. But in this imagined future, we are in a computer program, and we *know* we are in a program. Such a future isn’t so far away. In 2006, Washington University in St. Louis ran an experiment in which a teenager played *Space Invaders* using only his mind, as he was wired to a computer via a brain-machine interface. A less invasive form of immersive gaming has recently been developed in the Ocular Rift system, a visor that players wear to experience three-dimensional surround-game experiences. Google Glass, too, may offer future iterations that enable immersive experiences with virtual reality, perhaps by moving even closer to the body with contact lenses on the eyes. *Star Trek*’s “Holodeck” could soon be real, enacted via devices placed on and in our bodies. Visual systems might be supplemented via sensory implants in the skin via gloves or minor surgical insertion. Already we have haptic engagement via gaming systems like the Wii and the Kinect, inviting bodily engagement and a smoother interface between our real lives and our virtual lives. Indeed, the technology being developed reveals the direction of our desire: toward deeper engagement with virtual reality. Students typically easily accept that the trend is toward greater immersion, and they often note the deep effect such engagement has on their daily lives. Even the ubiquitous smartphone reveals how much we depend upon entry into digital spaces to maintain relationships, locate resources, and make plans for the future.

Right now, our engagement with virtual reality enables the screen to act as a visible divider between virtual space and real life. However, if we *could* achieve such deep connectedness with virtual reality that the screen disappeared, and perfect replication of sensory experience of real life were possible, what would be the difference between virtual and real life? This might take the form, for example, of the kind of wiring into the brain that was imagined in *The Matrix*. Or it might take more mundane forms like digital contact lenses and digital gloves. The most important difference in such an immersive digital environment, I propose, is that we would *know* that the virtual world was programmed, even as the world might seem identical in many ways to the one in which we now reside. We would be confident that designers, albeit human ones, had shaped this environment

for us, and that they had determined what kinds of experiences we could have. We may indeed be offered choices in this virtual environment, in terms of our engagement with its programming. But we would rest confidently in its purposive design, and we would give ourselves over to the presumption of fewer real choices based on the procedural rhetoric of the designers. This, I tell my students, is the secular re-emergence of a desire for providence, for theological design in the cosmos. By placing our lives so much in the control of computer programming, we give ourselves over to the Programmer's designs. We are engaging actively in the human desire for order, for purpose, for meaning. Our fascination with technology has some quasi-religious roots. Students who have been working with the theory of ritual engagement for the better part of a semester often find this argument irresistible, and are surprised to acknowledge that human beings are, at root, devoted meaning-makers—even in the manufacture and consumption of pop culture.

As may be obvious by now, my students and I work under the presumption that what people are doing in popular culture can teach us something about what people believe and what they value. This presumption frames the kinds of questions we ask. The fact that games exhibit repeated patterns of engagement that too easily diminish the "others" portrayed in them makes them important sites for critical analysis and deepening awareness. When we enter into programmed spaces, we know there are rules and we seem to *like* being subject to them during our wired experiences. We might even see gaming as a popular form of backlash against postmodernism's loss of cohesive narratives, if we consider that the radical loss of what Jean-François Lyotard calls metanarratives drives us toward digital spaces where we satisfy ourselves with temporary micro-narratives.² These micro-narratives are increasingly defined by binaries of "us" and "them," with a procedural rhetoric that invites identification of those different from us as "enemies," especially in violent videogames that are based on war. Thus, in these more rigid digital spaces, the same troubles that haunt modernism re-emerge as well, including a tendency to re-entrench stereotypes and foster tribal identities. So even though we crave order in a seemingly disordered world, the *kind* of order that gaming tends to provide can encourage a perspective of insiders and outsiders, us and them, good and evil. It's not hard to see that this kind of "gaming" mindset is on the rise in contemporary culture offline too as one ideological response to the challenges of globalization. Students invited to think in these terms may become more aware of the ways that the procedural rhetoric of violent games may affect their offline perspectives in subtle but powerful ways. Students have often told me that after engaging in the theoretical analysis of videogames that they can no longer play them in the same way. Aware of the ways that games mimic ritualized encounter and limit choices in interactivity, they find themselves inviting friends and family to think more critically about the political, religious, and cultural impact of videogaming as well.

2 See, for example, Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, where he defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv).

Students introduced to this line of thinking will consider how and why they are drawn to digital gaming, and integrate this mode of experience with the critical tools they are developing not just in religious studies classes, but also in affiliated fields like politics, gender studies, critical race theory, history, and the social sciences. For example, they may consider the analysis of gaming in critical race studies, where scholars are examining why the white male hero is so often the only option for gameplay. They may also, for example, become interested in the hypersexualization of female entities in digital gaming, or they may want to explore the implications of gender experimentation in online worlds.

The strength of using videogames alongside other modes of media is that instructors and students can ask comparative questions about how interactivity affects the kind of theological portrait that a media artifact exhibits. For example, in some of today's most popular media like film, television, and gaming, even in those that explore ancient stories of apocalypses, human agency is dramatically ramped up and divine activity is diminished, suggesting a greater desire for human control in determining our own fates. Both ancient stories of apocalypses and contemporary gaming are modes of "otherworldly journey," but it is startling to see how God recedes to the background in contemporary imaginings of otherworldly order, leaving humans to fend for themselves. This phenomenon can be observed vividly in the transformation of ancient biblical or mythological apocalypse stories into contemporary games, as is the case with *El Shaddai: Ascension of the Metatron* (based on the Book of Enoch) and *Darksiders* (based on the Book of Revelation). Students can see this for themselves if a class session is devoted to the comparison of one of these ancient apocalypses with its contemporary gaming retelling.

It's easy to make an argument for *why* we should include analysis of gaming in the religious studies classroom. But what about the nuts and bolts of making the course actually work? Unless we are already experienced gamers, we have no choice but to practice humility and curiosity, making room for shared learning and discovery with our students. When I teach a course with a gaming focus, we typically spend a few weeks with shared readings on foundational theory in media and religion, using some of the key texts I have already mentioned. Then, for the rest of the semester, we alternate between theory and application, spending one day per week building on our theoretical foundation and a second day each week looking at a specific example of interactive media. Since I am cursed with the slow and clumsy thumbs of someone over forty, when I use the gaming system in class, I typically preselect particularly important chapters in the games and let students take turns trying the game out. If the game requires sequential play to get to a particularly important narrative moment, my especially eager students play on their own time to "pre-set" the game to desired places in the interactive story. In order to facilitate discussion, I make sure we don't play for more than thirty minutes, and if the game allows it, I turn the volume down and encourage analysis during active play

while everyone is watching a single screen where the game is being played. This kind of classroom activity requires a firm hand, since students tend to drift into passive enjoyment of the experience. Asking key questions based on the current week's readings about theory helps, and encourages students to see how theory can be applied. Pausing the game to discuss critical elements disrupts the flow of game play to remind the students of their status as theoreticians at work. Students usually know how to play the games much better than instructors, but instructors know much better how to *analyze* that gameplay. Repeatedly and persistently, instructors must model deep theoretical engagement and urge students to think about how to *apply* the theoretical tools we are developing to the gameplay itself.

To ensure that they move beyond fandom to critical analysis, my students keep regular reflective blogs, where they explicitly integrate classical religious studies theory into their reflections and critical work. In their long research papers, my students typically look at a case study of a single game to which they apply the theories we have studied. Students also take individual responsibility for an article for a given unit. Each student blogs about his or her chosen article before class. On these days, when we arrive in class, I divide them into groups based on the content of their articles and tell them: "Figure out what your articles have in common. You don't know it yet, but you have a shared issue to discuss."

After small group discussions, students come back together to integrate their insights. Students invariably discover for themselves connections across otherwise very different materials. One student, for example, may have read an article by a social scientist dealing with the impact of violent gaming, while another may have read a case study by a play theorist on how violence is integrated into plot and interactive experience within a particular game. As a guide coaching them through these discoveries, I help students articulate their findings into theoretically grounded language, and ask them follow-up questions that often lead to the other groups contributing their own findings enthusiastically and organically. One of my favorite techniques at this point in the discussion is to pull up a blank document on the classroom computer and project it onto the single screen so everyone can see our observations unfolding, in real time, with shared notes and discoveries. I post these for everyone's access after class.

For those who are not interested in teaching an entire course on the theory of religion and gaming, it would be feasible to introduce a short module on interactivity into another umbrella course, perhaps an "Introduction to Religion," or a "Methods and Theories" course. A basic essay on religion and play that offers a lot of the substantive theoretical issues in easily digestible form would be a good starting point. For example, in my article, "Video and Internet Games," I outline the key theoretical tools needed to analyze videogames with a religious studies lens. For a more topical approach, a number of excellent essays in Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve's recent *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* deal with specific games or examine particular religious traditions as expressed

in gaming environments. The chosen introductory essay could then be partnered with an analysis of a single videogame discussed in it.

Gamer theory can also enter into conversation with already-existing religious studies theory, relating analysis of a particular game to ritual studies, for example, or applying Mircea Eliade's phenomenological approach to the cosmos-building, order-making properties of game design and play. Anthropology and sociology are also obvious conversation partners in these kinds of analyses. Emile Durkheim's identification of totemic practice comes to life in examining deep fan devotion to new media universes and affiliated real-life events like Comic-Cons. David Chidester's more recent look at desire as a mode of religious work, in his book *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture*, can be readily applied to gaming fandom's ability to inspire deep devotion. Clifford Geertz's observations about religion's functions can also be applied to gaming fandom with compelling results. I often access introductions to the theories of Eliade, Durkheim, and Geertz via Daniel Pals' *Eight Theories of Religion* in my lower level courses, and supplement these readings with short excerpts from Malory Nye's *Religion: The Basics* to flesh out an informed approach to religion and culture. By studying how foundational theories in anthropology, sociology, and religious studies can be applied to popular elements of culture that they encounter every day, students learn that theory relates concretely to real life.

In addition to *El Shaddai* and *Darksiders*, other games are particularly fruitful for classroom analysis. *Assassin's Creed* takes place largely in Jerusalem during the time of the Crusades. *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* is a powerful example of a game designed specifically by Christians for Christians, with strong apocalyptic themes.³ The *Bible Champions* series is excellent for looking at how Christian education utilizes gaming principles by interacting with scripture. *Journey* is a vivid and powerful nonverbal experience of pilgrimage, with no clear identification of a single religious tradition as inspiration. Whichever game we are using, I usually start the game at its very beginning and play through any "backstory" material it may offer, in which the game's story and context are revealed usually in the form of a short movie or "cinematic." This part doesn't require much active engagement with the game controller, so it is easy for students or instructors to manage.

After viewing the backstory cinematics, I have students watch (or play) the game's tutorial, in which game mechanics are revealed and can be easily analyzed for procedural rhetoric. Every game teaches people how to navigate its landscape, and these lessons can say a lot about the political assumptions behind the game itself. For example, if students are required to learn to fire a weapon, instructors could consider how this lesson is initiated, and what the game teaches about *who* to shoot, and *why* to shoot them. Other more religiously-inspired games may require interaction with religious texts or rituals, and invite analysis of how the click of a mouse, for example, may compare to the actual gestures involved in

³ This game is now difficult to find, since the company that produced it no longer exists. However, instructors can access walkthroughs of it via YouTube.

lighting incense or performing a prayer. If there's time, students can play a little of the game itself in class, to consider things like what weapons players can use; how they defeat opponents; and how goals are defined. These observations are then placed in theoretical context, using questions about procedural rhetoric, play, rules, and purpose. Even this small amount of game play can yield a great amount of information for critical analysis and integration. For example, students may learn that a particular game has xenophobic tendencies or that it encourages violence with no options for peaceful resolution. Thinking about procedural rhetoric is important because it urges students to consider what players *cannot* do in a game as carefully as what they can do, and to become more aware of the ideological implications of such limited choices.

Some instructors don't have easy access to a gaming system, or don't feel comfortable bringing a gaming system into classroom space. This need not be a problem. It is typically possible to get a feel for a game without actually playing it, by accessing visual and procedural content via YouTube "walkthroughs." A walkthrough is a video recording of a complete play of the game, created by fans as they showcase their talent. Purely descriptive textual walkthroughs on blogs and fan sites offer a sense of the plot and ways to locate important units in the game's story. Instructors can Google the name of the videogame and "walkthrough" to locate these resources. Using this approach, an instructor can select a video walkthrough that has no fan-layered voiceovers. Instructors familiar with the basic features of QuickTime can download and shorten the videos to save the desired portions as briefer, offline videos. Because game designers typically try to orient their players right away, I find that the first twenty minutes or so of a video walkthrough is usually enough to get a sense of the game's design, story, and purpose. With a little preparation, anyone can effectively teach using videogames while creating a theoretically rich critical environment.

The study of religion and gaming is growing, and with good reason. It effectively taps into student interest, as digital interactivity increasingly shapes our everyday experience. This study can invite students to consider anew how and why ancient visionaries were enchanted with what I call imagined other-spaces, spaces that exist beyond our ordinary real-life experience. Where once we imaginatively peered into heaven for a sense of purpose and order, today we peer into digital screens. The study of religion and gaming refreshes for students questions that they may previously have thought arcane, like how and why religious practices can affect people so profoundly, or how rituals work in shaping beliefs about the world. Studying religion and gaming can also invite students to seriously consider how playing religion *like* a game can oversimplify complicated real-life issues into systems of winners and losers, us and them. It can make them more careful consumers, wary of the ideological potential of games. Teaching about religion and gaming offers a fresh perspective on what our fascination with technology may mean in the larger structures of human meaning-making.

Students respond in surprisingly sophisticated ways to the analysis of videogames once they have been exposed to the critical theory that will help them understand the experience. Because digital culture is so much a part of their everyday lives, they are often inspired to understand the implications of this phenomenon for their own meaning-making processes. Some students find themselves so empowered with new theoretical language that they spontaneously share their insights with others in the midst of gameplay outside of class. We live in a world deeply shaped by computer programming, with limiting choices that sometimes seem invisible to us because they are fluidly experienced via the ubiquity of our digital devices. The study of gaming in the humanities may include elements of “fun,” but that is not the reason to teach it. Gaming is the site of some of the most powerful and poignant new modes of mythmaking today. Millions of people engage with these new myths, spending many hours a day being shaped by the affordances of scripted storytelling with pronounced ideological content. By providing students with the skills to think critically about this powerful form of entertainment, instructors also can provide them with the tools to tell new and better stories for themselves.

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