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## Developing a Framework for Understanding the Relationship Between Religion and Videogames

Richard E. Ferdig

### Abstract

Religion is either explicitly or implicitly found in videogames. In some cases, the player acts as a god or must defeat a demigod or set of demons. In other cases, religious aspects are less transparent, serving as an environmental factor or background to a particular game rule or mechanic. The purpose of this paper is to first acknowledge the potential impact of those intentional and unintentional pedagogical strategies and outcomes inherent in games. It then sets out to further explore how and what people learn about religion while playing; it also addresses how religion changes game play. Finally, although there is value in deeper case studies of specific games, this article takes a holistic approach to understanding games and religion. It does so by presenting a framework of four key areas where religious themes prevail: game content, game context, game challenge, and player capital.

### Keywords

game context, game challenge, player capital, game content, religious games, symbolism

*And if anyone enters competitive games, he is not crowned unless he competes lawfully (fairly, according to the rules laid down).*

*-2 Timothy 2:5-7 (Amplified Bible, 2013)*

## 1. Introduction

Religion is an important part of videogames. Often times the connection is explicit. An EverQuest (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999) player might choose to be a cleric, where they have the ability to heal and to resurrect. Part of their game play includes worshipping a deity—typically the creator of their race. At other times, the relationship is more opaque. Someone playing The Sims (Electronic Arts, 2000) might decide to create a church to have their creations pray or to host a wedding. Or a player might have to go on a mission in or near a church (e.g. The Godfather: The Game, Electronic Arts, 2006).

Regardless of its explicit or implicit visibility, religion is a critical component of many aspects of game design and consumption. Given the inherent and natural connection between videogames and religion, it is prudent to ask about the impact of such a relationship. How does religion impact game play? How are designers utilizing religious symbols to improve game believability? How are religious, moral, and ethical principals built into challenges and overall game objectives? Unfortunately, we know very little about these questions and the broader impact of religion in videogames. This points to a much larger issue of needing more research in the videogames field—a concern highlighted by many researchers (e.g. Ferdig, 2009).

As researchers continue to add findings to a core understanding of videogame play and use, a deeper understanding of the interplay of digital games and religion will be useful for at least two reasons. First, much of the debate about the use of videogames relates to impact and yet the impact on religious beliefs has gone relatively unstudied. Second, churches of varying denominations have gone digital and are exploring the development and delivery of religious games; such an analyses could support future integration.

The need for this framework finds its roots in the early work on videogames. Researchers attempting to understand the field recognized that the 'field' actually consisted of representatives from multiple discipline--all interested in various aspects of the same entity (Ferdig, 2009). An educator might be interested in whether videogames help people learn. A psychologist might be interested in the media impact of playing games. A computer scientist could have interests in the human interaction and the game design. The development of a framework prevents privileging one perspective over another while encouraging these various disciplines to join in the development of a research foundation rather than solely playing in their own arena. DiPietro, Ferdig, Boyer, and Black (2007) proposed one such framework that included game studies as pedagogy (e.g. teacher and student use), psychology (e.g. expertise, cognition, and social skills), media effects (e.g. violence or gender studies), genre studies (e.g. narrative), or game design (e.g. HCI or modding).

The topic of religion and videogames would benefit from the development of a similar foundational framework.

It is worth noting that such a framework is never meant to be static. Its value is in its fluidity--evolving as it becomes disequilibrated. The focus of developing a framework also does not exclude the need for specific studies. For instance, case studies of religious aspects of specific games would lend insight into religion and genre, religion and game play, etc. Many of the papers in this special issue complete this important task. The goal of this paper, however, is to create a much broader framework to be able to understand the work that has been done and will need to be done to deepen our understanding of religion in video games. This framework draws on evidence from videogames, from pop culture's response to videogames, and from research on religion in videogames. The framework helps researchers, designers, educators, and theologians to consider the impact of videogames while contextualizing their specific goals, interests, and perspectives on religion. It helps current and new researcher understand gaps in the field. Perhaps most importantly, there are consistently disagreements in videogames studies. One of the most obvious is the debate on violence after or because of playing violent games. A framework helps readers contextualize the debate regardless of the outcome or beliefs about the topic of controversy.

## 2. Definitions

Prior to exploring a framework for understanding videogames and religion, there are two important questions that must be asked and answered. First, what is religion? The dictionary offers:

- *the belief in a god or in a group of gods*
- *an organized system of beliefs, ceremonies, and rules used to worship a god or a group of gods*
- *an interest, a belief, or an activity that is very important to a person or group (Merriam-Webster, 2013)*

The third definition is perhaps the most commonly used in reference to videogames in popular culture and the media. People refer to players who worship games; game players are often said to have religious devotion to particular platforms. Some reporters call it a cult or say that certain games have cult followings. And, Andy Robertson (2013) even requests membership in his Church of the Gamer. Although this would make an interesting study, the focus of this paper is on videogames that connect to religion as a belief in a god or group of gods or an organized system of beliefs and rules used to worship that god or gods.

Second, what are videogames? In this paper, videogames refer to digital games played on a television or computer screen. Popular game platforms include Nintendo (e.g. DS, 3DS, Wii, Wii U, etc.), Playstation, and Xbox. Games are also played on personal computers, mobile devices, and tablets. These electronic games can be played individually or with other players as a stand-alone option or via an internet connection. The reason for the differentiation is that there is a lot to be learned from a much broader analyses of games and religion. For instance, Anderson, Mellor & Milyo (2010) found that “(c)ontrary to popular wisdom and several recent observational studies, religion is not strongly associated with more other-regarding behavior in controlled experiments” (p. 163). Porter (2008) used role-playing games and found higher motivation with students learning theology. However, neither of these studies (at the time of their writing) was using technology for delivery or interaction. Future studies of videogames should utilize such resources for triangulation of research outcomes, but the focus here is on those games delivered electronically.

### 3. Framework

With these definitions in mind, the paper turns to a framework for exploring videogames and religion. There are four key components to this framework: game content, game context, game challenge, and personal capital. Within each component, examples from games and research are provided to further explore the important concepts.

Game Content. There are cases when the content of the game is explicitly related to religion. This can occur in one of two ways, depending on the definition of religion. First, a game may have been created to teach principles, skills, or knowledge associated with a named religion. *Axys Adventures: Truth Seeker* is an example of a game that is aimed at teaching a Christian message. According to the developers, the story is “ultimately a parable speaking of the healing and forgiveness that takes place in our lives when we give God access to our hearts, but also the danger and tragedy that occurs when we give the enemy access to our hearts by believing his lies” (Rebel Planet Creations, 2007, n.p.). *Bible Quest: Journey Through Genesis* is a jewel-quest type game where players progress through stories from the book of Genesis. Inspired Media Entertainment suggest players can watch the book “come to life through beautiful hand-drawn art and amazing audio storytelling” (2011a, n.p.). *Left Behind 4: World at War* asks players to confront the Antichrist on physical and spiritual battlefronts while witnessing fights between angels and demons (Inspired Media Entertainment, 2011b).

Games for knowledge, skill, and attitude growth around religion can also happen when a game attempts to teach ethics or morals that may be directly or indirectly tied to one or more

religions. This does not refer to moral choices within a game. For instance, in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012, Yager Development and Darkside Game Studios) players must make a moral choice about how to disperse a crowd. Some might decide to shoot into a crowd; others decide to shoot into the air (Jaech, 2012). These are important opportunities and appear in the Game Challenge component of the framework.

Instead, this second aspect of Game Content refers to a desired pedagogical outcome of learning a moral or ethical behavior or attitude. Perhaps the greatest examples of this are social impact games. Here games are intended to promote awareness and action of humanitarian and educational efforts (Games for Change, 2013). Games that aim to have a social impact cover topics like climate change, the impact of technology on nature, ecological concerns, autism, and poverty. An excellent example of a social impact game is *Darfur is Dying* (interFUEL, 2006). According to the developers, “*Darfur is Dying* is a narrative-based simulation where the user, from the perspective of a displaced Darfurian, negotiates forces that threaten the survival of his or her refugee camp. It offers a faint glimpse of what it's like for more than 2.5 million who have been internally displaced by the crisis in the Sudan” (n.p.). (Also see International China Concern, 2013.)

There are religious game development companies and conferences (e.g. Christian Game Developers Conference, 2013). There are also lists of games that would fit under the ‘religious genre.’ ‘Religious games’ fall under some of the same constraints as educational games; given relatively low budgets, they typically do not compete with many of the large fund, popular press games. Research on said games is also relatively nonexistent. The move to more mobile application and game development may change this as development costs decrease. More of the work in this area has been theoretical in nature. Wagner (2013), for instance, presents an argument that religion “can be played as a game, but there are times when it should not be, especially if the model is a first-person shooter and the hope is for a clearly defined set of ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ (p. 258).

Social impact games are more numerous, due in large part to the foundations and other funding sources that support the cause behind the game (e.g. AIDs, poverty, climate change, etc.). However, research on social impact games is also in its infancy. As stated succinctly by Ruiz, the originator of *Darfur is Dying*, “It is indeed difficult to measure the success of a game whose goal is not to turn a profit but rather seeks to incite societal change” (Parkin, 2006). Research in this area has been supported by triangulation with previous studies. For instance, Williams (2006) found that play in an immersive online game produced an increased global outlook and some online community improvements.



**Game Context.** Game context refers to the story, environments and situations within game play that explicitly or implicitly reference religion. These references could be part of the physical environment or part of the game rules or norms created by the designers. However, these rules and symbols only refer to the context, not to the actual challenge of the game. These typically fall into one of three categories. First, there are environmental factors such as buildings (e.g. churches or synagogues) or tools (e.g. crosses or religious artifacts) that create the backdrop or setting for a videogame. In some cases, these buildings add to the realism of an environment. Any player, religious or not, is used to seeing a religious building in their home environment. Seeing a church in the Grand Theft Auto series (1997, Capcom, Take-Two Interactive, and Rockstar Games) is not ironic giving the goal of adding realism to an environment. In that context, not seeing a church might seem more bizarre.

Other games add a religious symbol, building, or entire theme to fit within the narrative of the game. In Dante's Inferno (Electronic Arts, 2010), the main character "journeys through the twisted, menacing nine circles of hell in pursuit of his beloved Beatrice" (n.p.). Here the environment is not added for realism, it is necessary for the telling of the story.

A second aspect of game context refers to situations when religion impacts or directs the rules of the game. Adherence to a rule ties back to moral or ethical behavior; this is often done implicitly. For instance, if you get caught taking or selling drugs in the controversial game NARC (Williams Electronics, 1998), you end up going to jail or losing your job. Other games will allow characters to get married or date but only offer a character that is heterosexual (Taylor, 2007).

There are also situations where religion explicitly impacts the rules of the game. In Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar Games, 2010), players responses impact a morality system. Riding vs. eating your horse and capturing vs. killing your opponents all impact the game's outcomes. Moore (2011) shares:

A good example is the 'alignment' rubric used by many role-playing games. As players navigate through the secondary world, they must make choices which in turn impact their characters' relative alignment to a set of binaries: good or evil, just or merciful, cunning or honest, and so on. Players' status according to these binaries usually has an impact on their interaction with the game world. For instance, villagers might flee a character aligned with 'feared' while they would circle round a character that is 'loved.' In this way, players are able to participate in the construction of their game characters. (p. 73)

A final aspect of game context refers broadly to miracles of fantasy and the science of the real world. This relates to the concept of explicit and implicit rules, but it refers more to underlying characteristics of players and/or the worlds they live in. A game that more closely mirrors reality might have a person driving a car, playing a sport, or simulating a business venture. A game that is

more fantasy-based might give the player the option to fly, possess a superpower, or conduct magic. This is particularly true in cases where a player can choose a game character who by their very definition have the ability to produce miracles of religion or modern science (e.g. a wizard in a role playing adventure). Each of these choices represents underlying assumptions about the world; those assumptions relate to one's faith and beliefs.

Some of the current research in this area has focused on avatar use and choice. Black et al. (2009) gave users the opportunity to create avatars based on four scenarios. Participants were asked to create a hero avatar, a villain avatar, an avatar that looked like themselves and an avatar that represented what they wanted to look like. Avatars were then analyzed and compared with actual photos of the participants. The researchers found that participants created avatars that most looked like themselves when asked to create heroes or villains (e.g. seeing the good and bad in themselves). Participants were also overwhelmingly willing to change characteristics that were temporal and easy to change in real life (e.g. hair color or length) but less likely to vary enduring characteristics like gender or race.

A second set of research studies that is obviously related refers to the importance of realism in game design. Reyes and Adams (2010) suggest that " the experience and enjoyment of video games are affected in part by social reality and, in turn, social reality is being affected by the experience and enjoyment of video games" (p. 149). In their work, they also describe three types of realism. Representational realism relates to graphics, sounds, and how a game represents time and place. Simulative realism relates to the correlation between the game rules and real life models. Finally, inverse realism relates to the real world interactions in games, such as motion controllers and connections to real businesses.

Much of the research on videogame use and religion might immediately examine the game challenges and outcomes. Although this is valuable work, more research needs to pay attention to the context that sets the space for the game play. In some cases, the realism of the religious artifacts and symbols as well as the rules of the worlds might lead to differentiated play and outcomes (particularly explored as representational, simulative, and inverse realism). Research has already provided evidence that players make moral decisions in games as if they were true interpersonal interactions (Weaver & Lewis, 2012); how would that change given changes in the realism of the context? The choices that are presented to the user about their world and the actions they can take in that world could also preempt attitude and knowledge outcomes. If players choose to pick characters that represent the evil and good in themselves, researchers could find a way to study those choices and how that impacted moral, religious, and fantasy-based outcomes and game play.

Game Challenge. Game challenge refer to the actual goals and presupposed outcomes of the game being played. This relates to game content. For instance, if the goal of the game is to teach

religious knowledge, then there is a good chance that the challenges of the game are going to be associated with that goal. However, challenge has more to do with the techniques and methods of the game--it is the actual game play that potentially leads to encounters with religion.

There are at least three avenues for exploration related to the game challenge. The first challenge type is that of a "god game." A god game is one that gives the user an omnipotent and, in some cases, an omnipresent perspective on the world they are engaging. An example would be *The Sims* where players have the opportunity to control the lives of their creations. Another case is *Spore* (Electronic Arts, 2008). The game provides an opportunity for the user to create an organism and take them through the evolution of cell, creature, tribe, civilization, and space. Being a 'god' gives them the opportunity to put into practice their beliefs and to mimic their theological understanding of their creator, albeit theistic or not.

This 'god game' is different than a 'god mode' of a game. The 'god mode' often refers to a cheat code or limited-time supernatural power that makes the user invincible. Although such modes do provide exploration of omnipotence, it is typically not the focus of the game or is limited in scope. Conversely, these god games give players an opportunity to think, rethink, and act religiously, morally, and supernaturally (Geraci, 2012).

A second broad conception of game challenge relates to games where the sole purpose is being evil or being good. Where the god game lets you make choices, there are often game narratives that set the stage for the player and put them in specific roles. A player automatically assumes the role of a NYPD detective in *Max Payne* game series (Rockstar Games, 2001). The *Everquest* series allows you to create an 'evil' race. In many cases, the choices are not clear. There might be an overarching narrative but the player can choose to make good or bad decisions. These decisions may or may not impact the game rules (see: game context in the framework).

A third type of game challenge refers to activities that are part of a larger narrative and may be presented in a god mode; however, they are challenges that represent one's view of the role of their religious deity. For instance, from a Christian perspective, Schuurman (2013) argues that technologists should understand technology from a world perspective of being created, having fallen, and then having been redeemed. Games would therefore provide opportunities (either in their many challenges or in their overarching goal) of creating and redeeming the world. Hayse (2010) refers to many of these games as messianic in nature:

Many videogames cast players as heroes on quests to save the world. Along the way, players aspire to dominance in order to finally defeat an archvillain that holds the world in a dark grasp. The player's path to victory inevitably results in death and resurrection, not only once, but over and over again—all in a day's work for a videogame savior. Although these themes are messianic, they do not accurately reflect the life and work of Christ. Instead, they reflect

a form of messianism that Walter Wink (1992) has described as the “myth of redemptive violence”—the achievement of a so-called moral victory through the use of coercive force. For example, strength points, gold pieces, and powerful weapons are the ordinary means of grace in videogame salvation. He, who dominates, brings salvation. (pp 71-72).

Much of the research in this area has focused on media impact studies. For instance, does playing games with a violent nature then impact one's actions? Does it change their moral or theological beliefs? Unfortunately, most of the literature in this area is polarizing. Games can be good for cognitive growth (Annetta, Minogue, Holmes & Cheng, 2009) and cognitive development (Olson, 2010). However, research also provides evidence that games can lead to addiction, attention deficits, decreased school performance, and increased aggression (Anderson, & Warburton, 2012). Research has provided evidence of the potential impact on moral development (Weaver & Lewis, 2012), but less work has been done on the impact on theological and religious beliefs.

Player Capital. The final category in the framework is player capital. Each of the previous three concepts (content, context, and challenges) have related directly to a characteristic presupposed by the game designer. This last part of the framework attempts to take into account what a player brings to the table when they decide to play a game. This concept deals with the external religious and moral beliefs and actions starting from the actual decision on game choice to the actions and interactions in game play. These player characteristics obviously get put into practice during game play, but the focus here is on what a player brings to the controller.

The first aspect here is the theological and moral beliefs that a player possesses. There has been some research in this area; however, most of the research has focused directly on morals. Klimmt et al. (2006) conducted a study on how players handled moral concerns in violent video games. They described players who relied on game/reality distinction as well as a desire for winning as ways to temporarily place their morals on hold. "Overall, findings suggest that players mostly do not find it difficult to cope with moral concern; they frequently seem not to experience any moral problems at all" (p.324). The asterisk by that study, however, is that such research often includes players who are willing to play such games or who already play such games and therefore have self-selected themselves into a specific population.

The second facet of player capital is that many game players hear implicit or explicit insight into videogames from their theological leaders. Here, such leaders may refer to school teachers or principals, pastors, or parents. For instance, Pastor Josh Zoerhof (2013) recently told Ridge Point attendees that *Grand Theft Auto V* should not be played because it is incredibly violent, sexually explicit, degrading towards women, has no moral redeeming qualities, and is too real.

These messages from theologians are not always negative. For instance, Richtel (2007) reported on a church near Denver where videogames (in this case, *Halo 3*, Microsoft, 2007) are encouraged and even played at church. Richtel writes:

Those buying it must be 17 years old, given it is rated M for mature audiences. But that has not prevented leaders at churches and youth centers across Protestant denominations, including evangelical churches that have cautioned against violent entertainment, from holding heavily attended Halo nights and stocking their centers with multiple game consoles so dozens of teenagers can flock around big-screen televisions and shoot it out. The alliance of popular culture and evangelism is challenging churches much as bingo games did in the 1960s. And the question fits into a rich debate about how far churches should go to reach young people. Far from being defensive, church leaders who support Halo — despite its “thou shalt kill” credo — celebrate it as a modern and sometimes singularly effective tool. It is crucial, they say, to reach the elusive audience of boys and young men. (n.p.)

The final piece of player capital are the characteristics that represents the essential beliefs or tenants of a religion that a player subscribes to. A players morals may include these beliefs; theology leaders might prescribe game play based on these principles. However, this third aspects refers more to the essential beliefs that draws a person to a religion. For instance, a person might believe they should live their life according to faith, hope, and love. Another might subscribe to the principle of doing no harm to others or loving one's neighbor as oneself. The insight here is not solely about commercial outcomes (e.g. what game does someone decide to buy). It is a reciprocal relationship between game play and game outcomes. Does a person decide to buy a game and are their interactions in that game controlled by their religious beliefs? Then, does actual game play strengthen or weaken those beliefs? Sadly, this is an area that needs more research.

#### **4. Discussion**

There are many people in the field who are interested broadly in the concept of digital games. Research has been undertaken in fields ranging from education and psychology to business and computer science. A strength of the more recent work is the development and continued refinement of a framework to understand the ways in which people from various disciplines can work together as they study games.

This paper has presented such a framework for the relatively nascent field of religion and videogames. The framework consists of four components summarized in Table 1. This framework is not meant to unmove; it is offered as a starting point to grasp where we are at in the field and

our future directions. The hope is that someone would be able to read a study on games and religion and then place the study in this broader framework. Under conditions where the framework fails to hold, an adapted framework would emerge.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Game Content	This concept refers to games whose purpose is to instruct about a specific religion or to teach characteristics that match desirable traits of one or more religions.
Game Context	This concept refers to the environment, symbols, rules, and characteristics (of players and worlds) that represent explicit or implicit religious tones in a game.
Game Challenge	This concept refers to the challenges that are presented in a game such as undertaking a god role, being good or evil, and representing characteristics of a religion's deity (e.g. creating or redeeming).
Player Capital	This concept refers to the moral beliefs, the explicit and implicit feedback from others, and the religious essentials that a player brings to a controller regardless of the game play.

Table 1. An framework for understanding and exploring videogames and religion.

There is a second hope for this framework. If we have learned anything about technology writ large and educational games more specifically, it is that we will never be able to answer broad sweeping claims about its use. Instead of asking whether games work in religion, or what role religion has in games, we begin to ask questions about the conditions of games, game players, and the interactions between the two that provide further insight. One use of this framework is to use it in a constant comparison method, checking back frequently to see if the research in the field fits within its boundaries. A second use is in the actual preparation and presentation of research. Rather than making broad claims about a particular game, we would be able to assess the conditions under which those outcomes occurred. A study might specifically be about a game context; researchers are then able to compare that to other research within similar or different contexts. Other researchers might produce outcomes on theological uses of games which could then be further refined by understanding the context, content, and challenges of the games as well as the characteristics of those playing the games.

A third goal for this framework is to set the stage for further research--to help assess what it is we know and what is yet to be learned. For content, what are the characteristics of games that enable others to learn or to question their religious beliefs? How do various game components put into context change the realism of the game and thus the beliefs and actions of the game players?

There are traditional narratives for the challenges present in games; how are those narratives changing or reinforcing theological beliefs and what are new models that could be created? Finally, what are the moral and religious essentials and characteristics that are critical for understanding game choice and game play (presumably not all will impact both)?

## 5. A Practical and Pedagogical Analysis

To test this framework, this paper concludes with an example from teaching and learning. How would this framework apply--or would this framework stand--for those interested in pedagogy? Pedagogy is used broadly here to refer to any situation where someone is attempting to teach or to learn across the lifespan.

Game Content. Game content is the part of the framework that most directly fits with those interested in teaching and learning. The focus here can be on the design of such games or research on whether said games help teachers teach or learners learn. Pedagogical research states that students learn best when engaged in authentic learning environments, where they have opportunities to show ownership, where they can create multiple artifacts demonstrating their growth, and where they practice and receive feedback (Ferdig, 2006). Exemplary learning environments, at least from a social constructivist perspective, push engage students in communities of practice where they can learn with and through more knowledgeable others.

Someone interested in game design for increased skill, knowledge, or attitudinal outcomes would want to first define their intentions as well as their instructional strategies to meet those objectives. What is interesting about the framework from a pedagogical approach, is that although game content is the most directly related, in order to create an authentic learning environment for learning, designers would need to draw on the other three components. For instance, they would need to build the game environment with rules and contexts that matched their pedagogical intentions. If the goal is to teach about Moses, it would seem ludicrous to not include Moses or contextual references to Moses. A goal of increased moral fortitude would seem unreachable without opportunities to test ones ethics and ideals. The same is true with the challenge; it becomes the pathway by which players practice and then receive feedback. Finally, it is critical from almost any theoretical stance to include the prior experiences and knowledge (e.g. capital) that a player brings to the game.

Pedagogical research on game content is where current and future discussions become the most interesting. There are 'religious games' whose sole intent is to teach a belief structure, knowledge about religion, or moral and ethical growth. However, there are games that can be used

directly or indirectly (just by their use) have the potential to produce similar outcomes. The challenge for many pedagogues relates to some of the basic tenants of most religions. Most religions have central beliefs that make them incompatible with other belief structures. As such, many educational games, including those with the sole intent of teaching religion, often end up becoming behavioral in nature. Said differently, players end up memorizing and/or utilizing central tenants rather than having the flexibility to explore within and outside of those tenants. It is possible that future pedagogical research will look more to multiplayer games where more knowledgeable others (e.g. pastors or elders) play with and act as sages and guides.

Perhaps a more important question for pedagogues has to do with when learning does *not* occur. If religion is a central component to most games, are there circumstances where players do not learn something about religion, ethics, values, etc.? A positive answer would mean further investigation was required to determine the variables by which outcomes were changed or impacted. A negative answer--stating that players always learn something about religion or morals or ethics in every game--would mean designers, parents, players, teachers, etc., would need to become more aware of the learning they did *and did not* know was happening.

Game Context. Although a majority of the interest in pedagogy seems to be focused on the design or research-based consumption of game content, the framework still holds for the other three components. What happens, however, is that the components become core variables in design *and* in understanding achieved (or unachieved) content, skill, and attitudinal outcomes. For instance, in game context, there has been a lot of work done in the area of virtual reality and realism (e.g. Ferdig et al., 2013). Sight, sound, and even smell all add to the realism of an environment, which can lead to improved outcomes. How much 'religion' is necessary in a game is required for intended or unintended outcomes? In other words, if the goal of the game is to directly teach religious content, how important are the religious artifacts not central to game play? Conversely, in a game that does not have religious skills, attitudes, or knowledge as its central objective, how important are religious artifacts to intended and unintended outcomes?

Game Challenge. Like context, game challenge becomes a variable to explore in understanding positive, negative, intended, and unintended consequences. The research here begins to focus on how important the challenge is to both the overall narrative and the player outcomes inside and outside the game. Does a religious game produce better outcomes if the player receives challenges that fit their current world view (e.g. being able to make moral choices) or one that contradicts what they believe (e.g. they get to play God)? Do players learn more about themselves and their morals, ethics, and religious beliefs when they get to make choices about being good or evil or when they are forced into being one or the other? Here again the proposed goal is a deeper understanding of pedagogical strategies by exploring the variations in challenges and their perceived impact on game play.



Player Capital. Outside of the pedagogical interest in game content, skill, and attitude learned, player capital is perhaps one of the most important for theoretical educational philosophers. Different theoretical stances place a greater or lesser role on key variables like prior knowledge, locus of control, motivation, and external communities of practice. A long-standing member and regular attendee at any given church will probably have a different game play experience than someone who is not affiliated with a religious group. That does not mean one will do better or worse, but the experiences will be different. A theorist who highlights the role of connected learning and the importance of more knowledgeable others will focus heavily on the relationship of multi-player games and artifacts in all games that challenge or strengthen a players' belief structure. Research in this area will not only need to explore the importance of capital, it will need to find a way to perhaps elicit that prior knowledge and belief within the game in order to compare and assess outcomes.

## 6. Conclusion

More research is required in the area of religion and games. This paper suggested that an evolving framework would support those efforts. A four-part framework was then presented that highlighted the goals of the game (game content), the contexts that influenced game play, the challenges that were presented to the players, and a deeper understanding of the religious, moral, and ethical capital that players brought to games. The paper concluded with a focus on teaching and learning; the goal of which was to test whether those interested in pedagogy could find their research interests within this framework. Although those interested in instructional strategies may find their easiest stake in the game content component, game context, game challenges, and player capital become critical variables that help explain the processes by which people learn--or fail to learn--about religion in video games. Thus, at its surface, this framework becomes an important place to continue conversations about the role of religion in video games.

There are at least two overarching objectives for those interested in religion and games. First, how do we develop more research in this important area? Schurrman (2013) and others make the case that no technology is value-free; it is embodied with belief systems. It would be a dangerous proposition to ignore that fact. Second, how can we use this research to make games designers, players, parents, and others aware of the sometimes explicit and sometime explicit religion in games? It is hoped that such a framework would lend itself to continuing those conversations.

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**Biography**

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