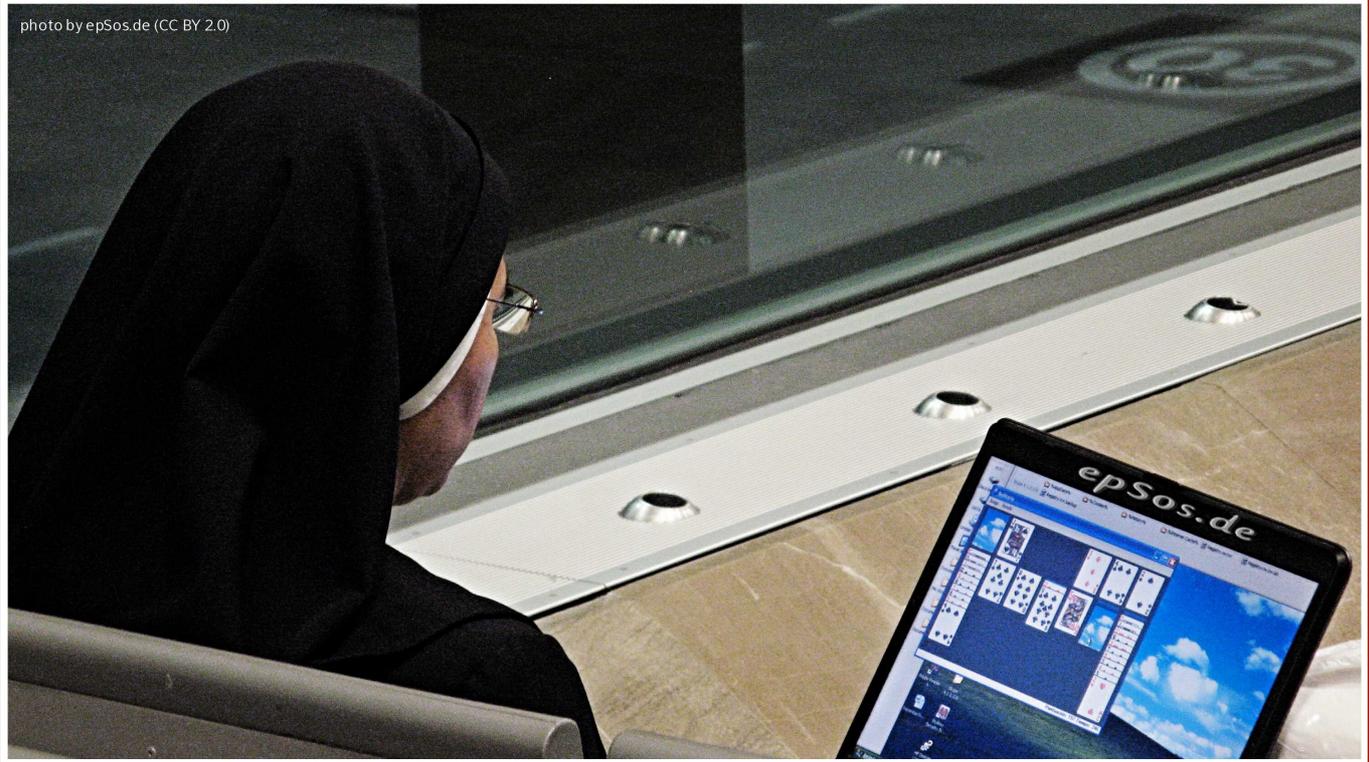




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HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET

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Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

Volume 07 (2015)

Institute for
Religious Studies

University
of Heidelberg

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Playing with Religion in Digital Games

Extensive Review

Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll

What does religion have to do with digital games? How can the intersecting fields of discourse of those two at first glance contradictory areas of cultural practice be properly analyzed? The long awaited volume *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, edited by Heidi Campbell and Gregory Grieve, two renowned scholars of the field of religion and media studies, and published in spring 2014, attempts to provide answers to this quest(ions) which has bothered many researchers of disciplines such as religious, cultural, media and game studies for quite some time now. An introductory essay by the editors and 12 case studies by authors from different academic backgrounds address a variety of aspects concerning religion and games in an interdisciplinary and multimethodical perspective.

According to the introduction, the main goal of the book is to highlight and emphasize the importance of digital games for contemporary research of religion in popular culture. Digital games often rely on cultural and religious content to steer the narrative as well as the gameplay and as such both reflect and shape contemporary religiosity. Consequently, the contributions in the book focus on different layers of how religion shapes digital games as well as gaming experiences (and vice versa) but also the institutional and public responses. Thus the importance of games as emerging media genre cannot be underestimated; as per the editors “digital games now depict the religious within the twenty-first century” (p. 2).

The book is subdivided into three parts. Part 1 (“Exploration in Religiously Themed Games“) focuses on the deliberate use of religious narratives and themes as basis for gameplay design and asks for the impacts of digital gaming on the presentation and perception of religious game content in the context of contemporary culture. The contributions assembled in this section seem rather eclectic in its focus and academic quality.

Jason Anthony’s paper “Dreidels to *Dante’s Inferno*: Toward a Typology of Religious Games” (chapter 1) tries a practical approach towards the commonality of digital games and religion. By means of a typology which is supposed to highlight the religious dimensions of digital

games by looking at the history of pre-digital games in religion, the author with a background in journalism and game design tries to show how and why “games are exploring ways to tap the mind’s capacity for transcendent experience” (p. 26). Even though the games he uses to emphasize his assumptions are fascinating and show a broad knowledge of the field, his view on games, gaming and game-related topics (such as his use of rather outdated approaches in ritual theory) as well as his typology is rather rigid, inflexible and reductionistic. Instead of applying heuristic and pragmatic small-scale categories for the respective contexts (which would be one possible state-of-the-art approach in religious studies), the general perspective seems to be a normative generalization postulated by the author without considering the positions of the actors (that is, the players of the respective games) or the different socio-cultural, geographical, medial and time contexts where the games are embedded in. So Anthony’s hope that his “typology’s value might outweigh its limitations” (p. 27) is certainly as debatable as the practical applicability of his approach. In how far Anthony’s typology might prove helpful for game designers in creating more sophisticated religious content however is beyond the power of judgment by the reviewers.

Chapter 2 is a game-immanent and (in parts) an actor-centered approach towards “Locating the Pixelated Jew: A Multimodal Method for Exploring Judaism in *The Shivah*” by Isamar Carrillo Masso and Nathan Abrams. Based on the observation that even though the image of “the Jew” has been examined over many formats like art, film, TV, cartoon, comic, etc, it has still to be researched in the context of digital games. Consequently, the authors with a background in film and new media studies apply the Jewish point and click, single player detective video game *The Shivah* as case study to analyze the representations of Judaism and questions of religious-based beliefs, behaviors, values and ethics in the context of video games. By taking an exceptionally well documented semiotic approach derived from film studies combined with a corpus-based critical discourse analysis they reveal the multitude of discourses on religion present in the *The Shivah* and show how players enact them. The main focus of the paper lies on the discussion of the method, a multimodal approach which considers among others the perspective of the designers and the researchers’ own playing experience. The well-balanced study concludes, that in *The Shiva*, Judaism serves as backdrop, setting and reason for the game which results in a non-monolithic nuanced depiction of contemporary American Jewish faith and identity. The method seems well-balanced, sophisticated and applicable in practice, as the results of the case study clearly shows.

The key aspect of Xenia Zeiler’s chapter on “The Global Mediatization of Hinduism through Digital Games: Representation versus Simulation in *Hanuman: Boy Warrior*” (chapter 3) lies on the negotiation processes of Hindu authority and identity in gaming contexts. After recounting the background of digital games in India, the author focuses on the case study of *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* (published for PS2 in 2009) as first entirely India-developed digital game based on Hindu

mythology, namely the highly popular legend of Hanuman. Zeiler who has a background in South Asian Studies illustrates the content of the game and describes the heated debates on the appropriateness of incorporating Hindu deities in gaming environments which were triggered by the game's release. Zeiler makes a point in attributing the disputes to the different conceptions of 'simulation', 'performance' and 'representation' in different types of media: In digital games, the deities were controlled by the player's whim and thus not always in accordance with the mythological tales (Zeiler refers to the theoretical concepts of 'simulation' and 'performance') whereas in films they were represented along the lines of 'correct' Hindu mythology ('representation'). The author further contextualizes her findings by localizing and identifying the debates on *Hanuman: Boy Warrior* as one aspect of the mediatized negotiations of religious authority within global diaspora settings. The material as well as the findings of this fascinating case study which highlights many aspects of religion and globalization beyond the context of the digital game prove to be sophisticated, highly relevant and firmly based on a solid theoretical and methodical background.

In contrast the paper "*Silent Hill and Fatal Frame: Finding Transcendent Horror in and beyond the Haunted Magic Circle*" (chapter 4) by Medieval historian Brenda S. Gardenour Walters appears to be of a somewhat speculative nature. Focusing on "supernatural horror" in the gameworlds of two digital games which are both featuring a number of ritualistic settings, the author recounts both Western and Japanese players' experiences of terror, abjection, and (ultimately) "religious transcendence". - Without presenting any reference for having indeed questioned actual players. Drawing (among others) on Salen and Zimmerman's 'ritual sphere of play', Huizinga's 'magic circle' and Rudolf Otto's concept of 'the Numinous', the author detects digital game worlds as ritual spaces where players (which the author terms as "player-pilgrims") can experience spiritual transcendence through the experience of horror. She concludes:

For the religiously minded, then, horrifying digital gameplay might become in and of itself a spiritual action, a sacred conduit to transcendence and communion with the divine. Such transcendent experiences do not remain locked within the ritual sphere of the game, however, but reside in the mind of the player-pilgrim, tracing the memory of and facilitating connections between the sacred virtual world and profane reality until each is imbued with elements of the other. (p. 91-92)

In addition to the normative and in its core exotizing depiction of "Christian" and "Japanese" 'religiosity' in the analysis of the in-game setting, the analysis on the (potential?) reception of the game is also flawed. Without any proof by actor-centered research the author's claims and conclusions seem mostly speculative and do not suffice the standards of modern scientific procedure. Thus the argument is neither valid nor convincing and lacks any empirical groundwork.

Part 2 is titled “Religion in Mainstream Games”. The highlights of this section are the contributions by Vít Šisler (chapter 5) and Shanny Luft (chapter 7), both giving excellent insights into their respective fields of study while at the same time demonstrating the value of incorporating actor-centered perspectives and methods into the research of religion and digital games.

Šisler’s “From Kuma\War to Quarish” describes three layers of representation of Islam in Arab and American video games: audiovisual, narrative and procedural. In addition to analyzing these layers in several relevant games by both American and Arabic game development studios (including the highly popular *Age of Empires 2* and *Civilization IV*, as well as the lesser known *Kumar\War*, *Special Force 2*, *Quaraish* and *Arabian Lords*), the author also provides information and statements by the game producers and designers themselves drawn from the games’ manuals, online resources and interviews. While statements of the actual players of these games would be an interesting and most welcome addition to this chapter, it still stands as an effective example of both game-immanent as well as actor-centered (in this case the games’ designers) research on processes of othering, stereotyping and remediation of schematized images of Islam.

A very player-centered perspective is provided by Luft’s “Hardcore Christian Gamers. How Religion Shapes Evangelical Play”. Based on research on “christian gaming” communities and websites as well as an online survey conducted within these communities the author tries to tackle the questions of how these self-designated “christian gamers” compare to and emulate the broader “mainstream” gaming community (“Christians as Gamers”) and how they differentiate themselves through ‘self-identification’, ‘gameplay behavior’ and interpretation of game content (“Gamers as Christians”). The very interesting and highly relevant results and well reflected conclusions are only slightly tarnished by some terminological inconsistencies (i.e. the interchangeable usage of “Christian” and “Evangelical”) and the author’s insistence on drawing on the notion of games as implicit religious practice (a recurring theme in many chapters of the volume) at the very end of the chapter, both of which luckily do not affect the quality of the rest of the chapter in the slightest.

Unfortunately, this can only partially be stated with regards to Rabia Gregory’s “Citing the Medieval” (chapter 6). The basic premise of the chapter – drawn from Umberto Eco’s concept of ‘neomedievalism’ – seems convincing: medieval religious imagery and references are regarded as ‘narrative technique’ and ‘world-building infrastructure’ which ease transition into a fantasy gaming world through familiar tropes and themes. Unfortunately in some parts the chapter suffers from an overtly normative perspective which clouds the otherwise very promising approach. The author jumps between very pragmatic considerations concerning the repetitive nature of many tasks given to the player in MMORPGs and religion as one tool to give (narrative) meaning to these tasks, and (again) the notion of gaming as an implicitly religious practice, drawing comparisons to 15th century Burgundian devotional practices based on Johan Huizinga’s *Herfsttij*. These allegations,

lacking any kind of empirical evidence through e.g. statements by actual players or game designers, can best be summed up through a quote from the last paragraph of the chapter:

Rather than simply asking “what is religion in gaming worlds?” or “what is being reconstructed out of medieval history in these faux medieval worlds?,” I hope others will join me in considering the coincidental similarities between body and avatar and body and soul, between ascending the spiritual ladder and grinding the gaming treadmill, between achieving salvation and leveling up, between meditating on a hand-painted woodcut while spinning and playing an MMORPG while making dinner. (p. 151)

Coincidental indeed.

The last chapter of this section is “Filtering Cultural Feedback” by Peter Likarish who gives a very interesting historical overview of censorship of religious symbols and references in Nintendo games during localisation from Japan to the US market. Likarish argues that this self-imposed removal or alteration of religious elements (especially in the early nineties) was aiming at preventing cultural feedback within the US market as many of these references in Japanese games were drawn from Judeo-Christian sources. While this chapter is also suffering from some minor normative tendencies (in trying to explain why there seemed to be a bigger problem with religious references in games compared to e.g. movies) and a lack of statements by e.g. game producers in question, it albeit provides very valuable and much needed information and groundworks on the topic of transcultural gaming and economic considerations when dealing with religion in digital games.

The third and last subdivision of the book is titled “Gaming as Implicit Religion”. On the assumption that seemingly ‘secular’ practices may in some peoples’ lives serve ‘religious’ aims and purposes (p. 8), the contributions discuss the ways in which digital games and gaming environments facilitate or encourage forms of religion-like practice and in which ‘secular’ activities take on religious roles or meanings for individuals. The act of gaming itself, the consequential meaning-making process by the gamers and the intersections of in-game experience with the physical ‘reality’ are subject to research in this part of the book.

The first paper “The Importance of Playing in Earnest” (chapter 9) by Rachel Wagner, who is a scholar of religion, focuses on the similarities of religion in games with regard to its order- and meaning-making potential on the premise that players / practitioners obey and play by those rules. As such, religion (mainly as religious practice, or rather ritual) and games can be seen as parallel concepts both striving for “crafting rules, shaping worlds, creating spaces in which predictable ordered systems shape our experiences” (p. 196). Even though Wagner ‘rehabilitates’ Mircea

Eliade's concept of 'holy' and 'profane' for explaining how order is being imposed on (digital game) spaces via rules and structure" (p. 200) she acknowledges the constructivist nature of both religion and games, the rules of which are man-made:

All play, all rules, all order-making is at its root a human constructive activity, a human attempt at meaning-making. (p 210)

On the assumption that the quest for order is a (kind of) anthropological constant and based on a mainly phenomenological theoretical groundwork on rules in game and religion / ritual, Wagner determines that ('secular') gameplay shows aspects of religious practice.

(...) the desire for rules, for order, for cosmos, is nothing more nor less than the desire to play a meaningful game, to live in a world governed by knowable and predictable rules. This desire might be visible in existing religious practices, but may also be visible in the cultural practices of ordinary gameplay, and it is certainly present in many manifestations of religious ritual. It even allows us to see deeply immersive secular gameplay as a kind of sacred practice. (p. 201)

The paper is a creative approach towards the similarities of digital gaming and ritual. However, the lack of empirical data to prove and confirm the author's point is subject to criticism and along with the strong and thus rather reductionistic focus on rules and order-making as reason and driving force for religious interpretation of digital gameplay presents a weak point in Wagner's line of argument.

In the paper "'God Modes' and 'God Moods': What Does a Digital Game Need to Be Spiritually Effective?" (chapter 10) Oliver Steffen wonders if certain categories of games satisfy the same psychological needs as religion and suggests that the feelings associated with 'flow' and '(dis-)empowerment' might be religiously relevant to some users. Starting point of Steffen's musings is the fact that digital games tend to offer a "god mode" which refers to the structures of empowerment which cause a state of in-game digital 'immortality' by altering the game rules. Thus, the intervention with the rule system and the ludological structure towards achieving digital omnipotence leads to an altered game experience for the player which Steffen calls "god mood", comprising the change of the player's consciousness by playing a deity. From a ludologically influenced religious studies approach to digital games and by means of his case study on *The Path* Steffen discusses those basic structural elements of games that according to his elaborated framework generate religiously relevant experience in players. Steffen concludes that the spiritual efficacy of digital games he detects in different aspects of gameplay and player experience are an essential aspect of the implicit potential of digital games which – using the example of *The Path*

“might be religiously relevant to some users” (p 231). Due to the fact that Steffens research is based on a data set derived mainly from scientific and journalistic publications which reference to religious terms, metaphors and themes and presumably his own playing experience his conclusions must remain vague and – from the perspective of empirical research – questionable. Thus, evidence is needed to verify (or falsify) Steffens assumptions which – if proven valid – might shed interesting light on psychological states of play.

On a much sounder theoretical base stands Michael Waltemathe’s contribution “Bridging Multiple Realities: Religion, Play, and Alfred Schutz’s Theory of the Life-World” (chapter 11) which focuses on the relationship between playfully experiencing symbolic universes and transposing those experiences to other parts of the ‘life-world’. Applying a socio-phenomenological approach which allows the adoptions of the individual player’s perspective as well as concepts of sociology of knowledge, Waltemathe examines the relationship between play, religion and virtual worlds and discusses the basic nature of different areas of the ‘life-world’ and the place computer worlds take in it. He states that digital games represent a bridge between different ‘provinces of meaning’ and as such gain specific potential to be used in individual processes of meaning-making:

What makes a video game ‘religious’ is not only the occasional mention of a deity or other overtly religious aspects, but the relation between the mode of playfully experiencing symbolic universes and transforming those experiences to other parts of the life-world. (p 239)

Whereas Waltemathe’s contribution focuses on implicit religion in terms of individual experience and meaning making processes by interconnecting virtual world experience with the ‘paramount reality’ (according the Alfred Schütz), Media Scholar Kevin Shut examines the technological preconditions that influence religious representations in digital games. In “They Kill Mystery: The Mechanistic Bias of Video Game Representations of Religion and Spirituality” (chapter 12) he traces the question if the construction of the digital medium itself has an impact on the manner in which games handle religion. By researching a multitude of different games and applying state-of-the-art theories from game studies, he detects a bias towards a somewhat mechanical, demystified representation of religion as common element (mostly due to the rule-based game mechanics) which he criticizes for showing a tendency towards an ‘impoverished’ and unidirectional vision of individual religious experience. Following an account of several aspects how religion is employed in the context of game mechanics he presents games, where the rich and complex narratives or subtle intertextual references (like e.g. religious symbolism) lead to a multifaceted presentation of religion in games. Furthermore, Shut identifies players’ creativity which he calls “emergent play” (when players play against the rules and do things not provided for in the game setting) as important factor for individual meaning-making.

The models of religion presented in some games may indeed be mechanistic, but that does not mean players will necessarily understand religion that way. Emergent play means divergent interpretations and real creativity. (p 270)

The study is a creative and well-balanced approach towards in-game religious systematization, based on a strictly interview-based actor-centered approach which considers the game mechanics, the narrative structure and the aesthetic. Furthermore, Shut also incorporates the underlying and overarching socio-cultural discourses into his excellent work which in the view of cultural studies offers a promising reflection on an emerging research field.

While in theory, anyone can understand anything from any text or cybertext, in practice, genre conventions, cultural traditions, and the choices of the makers of texts constrain the likely interpretations of readers, viewers, listeners, and players. (p 273)

In conclusion, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* is a multifaceted book which deserves a lot of praise, but also some criticism. Naturally, due to the newness of the research topic(s), the viewpoints and approaches towards the field are quite diverse. The book is the attempt of a general overview of the current state of research – and as such is a great achievement and a milestone in the context of religion in digital games research. However, from a cultural studies point of view the collection somewhat lacks papers based on empirical social research and player-centered approaches. As it is, the absence of empirical data causes the impression that the authors of some of the papers lose themselves in what seems to be speculative musings rather than serious academic research. “Religious-like experiences or gaming encounters can indeed be described in religious terms,” as the editors state (p 9). In the light of the empirical void one has to ask whose “experiences” and “gaming encounters” are indeed the focus of analysis – those of the players or rather those of the researcher?

However, even though the book offers some structural flaws (the organization of the book and the rather arbitrary assignment of the chapters into three different sub-divisions has been criticized elsewhere) as well as some theoretical and methodical weaknesses, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* is an important and informative account of contemporary scholarship on religion in digital games. It is definitely worth reading and merits critical reflection in the research context of religion in digital games – and beyond.

Playing with Religion in Digital Games

Heidi A. Campbell & Gregory P. Grieve (eds.) 2014

Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press

302 pp., US\$85.00 / €78,00 (hb), US\$22.00 / €24,00 (pb), US\$22.00 / €20,00 (e-book)