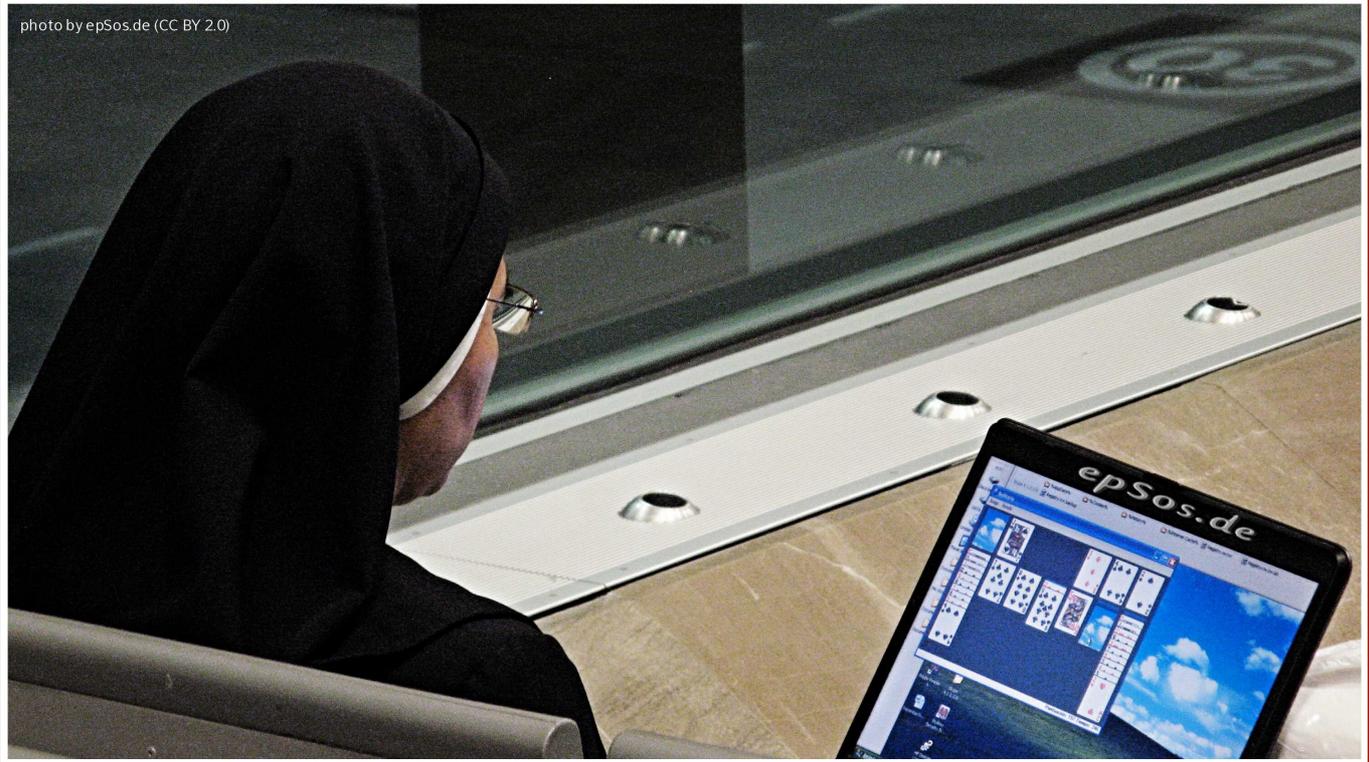




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Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll, Jan Wysocki (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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of Heidelberg

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Religion in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds

Review

Jan Wysocki

Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger, the editors of *Religions in Play* present us with a collection of essays that consciously wants to diverge from certain parts of classical academic enterprise. Instead of looking at beliefs, they want to tackle the notion of practice. Instead of texts, the editors confront us with the importance of materiality and objects. And most importantly: Instead of going along the well taken path of ‘serious’ academic topics, they want to focus on the often disregarded cultural element of play.

At the time of its publication, this volume was one of the first that discussed the field of games or play and its relation to religion and vice versa. Collecting an extremely broad spectrum of approaches toward the topic, this work stands out in a number of ways. There is something in it for everyone, be it historiographical works, ethnological fieldwork studies or media analysis. But with so many different themes and approaches, it is hard to stay in control over this wealth of thoughts.

The editors seem to be aware that in order to ‘quell’ the diverse inputs of the authors and to bring some order into it, they have to build certain categories in which the essays will be aligned. Every one of these chapters containing three to four essays is preceded by an introduction that gives the reader an overview over the following works. This is enormously helpful not only by giving short abstracts but also by making the reader familiar with the overarching topic of the specific chapter. It binds everything together so that the quite diverse works however often fit nicely into the respective bigger thematical framework.

In ‘Part 1’ this specific framework is history and ‘ludic practices’ therein. We learn about gambling houses in medieval Spain from Ulrich Schädler, self-romanticizing knightly tournaments by Valérie Cangemi and Alain Corbellari and the diverging positions on the origins of chess by Philippe Bornet. Especially Bornet’s introduction to the chapter has a great point in explaining how and why games have been neglected by academic thought and practice for such a long time. He advances the theory that the history of religions has had an impact on how games have often been ostracized from society and therefore also science and academia. Among other things, early

Christian theologians, then the Reformation, and finally utilitaristic ideas in the early industrialization were forces that devalorized games. It is important to know something about the history of the negligence of games in order to appreciate and expand the newly found interest in this field of study.

The second chapter has a more abstract topic in that it explores the connection of chance (or the absence thereof) and religion. Here we see in parts an approach to contemporary objects of inquiry. Burger talks about historical as well as modern decks of Tarot-cards while Thierry Wendling visits a Bingo-event in Neuchâtel in Switzerland and tries to discern through observation and conversation what religious markers one can find in even such a place. Jens Schlieter describes the Tibetan Buddhist board game of ‘Ascending the Spiritual Levels’, better known to us as ‘Snakes and Ladders’. He explains that although the game is played with dice and therefore it is possible for the playing monk to fall back in the ascension the game can’t be lost per se but stops eventually with reaching the goal of the spiritual path. This observation leads to very interesting possible discussions about the mechanics of chance and its implications on religious meanings in games. The chapter topics of chance, randomness, and luck are discussed in the introduction by Maya Burger but without giving it too much of a theoretical positioning. This is understandable due to the character of such a volume: it is more a collection of different analysis than a group effort streamlined on the basis of theoretical coherence. Here we see that it is hard to put every essay retrospectively into a perfectly shaped theoretical structure. The reader has to be satisfied with quite general statements about concepts like chance or luck in the context of religion and games.

The third chapter “Play and Ritual” offers among others two actor-centered essays. One written by Ute Hüsken explores the learning of Brahmanic rituals in South India through means of play. Florence Pasche Guignard authored the other one that has also a similar focus on children’s play by looking at religious toys and how they are used to school children in the right ritual behavior. These works fit perfectly together giving the reader interesting ethnographical accounts about certain human actions. Here we see how the editor’s thoughts on researching practice rather than text and playfulness rather than classical material (that is often regarded as more ‘serious’) are pursued. Both essays fit better in the proposed research direction than e.g. Johannes Bronkhorst’s thoughts about the possibility of play in ritual based on textual analysis of classical Indian literature. His strict theoretical ruling on the predetermined aspects of ritual and the exceptions he makes from this theory do not seem to follow the editor’s research proposal.

The final and fourth chapter closes the book with the theme of virtual worlds featuring digital games, analogue role-playing game, and movies. Oliver Steffen’s work analyzing the computer game *Risen* was likely one of the first religious studies projects in this new field and has to be given credit in making the first step into a very important direction. Due to opening up such a new field it

is not unusual that Steffen's interpretation is not without problems. He rightly works with a ludological framework starting with the thoughts on game-elements such as 'hit points'. He claims to find direct connections between 'hit points' or 'mana points' and classical academic ideas about 'life energy' formulated by e.g. religious scholar Gerardus van der Leeuw. Steffen tries to show the reception of this concepts by the designers of the game. But unfortunately he can only give rather speculative interpretations without any substantial clues about how the reception history of these symbols, ideas, and semantics really unfolded. This first and very important effort presented by Steffen has to be further polished and refined and put through a comprehensible methodological program. A more compelling study on digital games in this volume is proposed by Julian Kücklich where he describes how players 'break' games or use cheats. Although religion is only a side issue here Kücklich makes good points theorizing the inner fabric of games and their possible methodical research.

Bornet's and Burger's task was not an easy one. They delivered a much needed book about the academically underrepresented topic of games, play, and religion and gathered many interesting scholars for this enterprise. The book delivers a plethora of diverse material from different perspectives using a multitude of research questions and methods. This interdisciplinary effort has to be praised. But simultaneously the work lacks a heuristic definition of games and play and only brushes the surface of theoretical discussions. The chapter forewords try to compensate for this but have a hard time to fit retrospectively every article into a joint framework.

But despite the critique this is overall a great resource for every scholar of games and religion in that it exemplary shows the reader on how many levels games are an important part of religion as well as general culture. If one can select the most useful articles and does not bother with a concise theoretical framework that connects all essays this volume will offer a lot of inspiration for possible own projects. Hopefully we will see a lot more volumes that show us examples of how games and religion can be studied. But I also strongly hope for works that tackle the more theoretical part of this cultural connection. This emerging field will have to use thorough reflection of categories, historical data, and implicit assumptions about religion and games in order to grasp and reconstruct the complex cultural dynamics in a scientific valuable way.

Religions in Play. Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds
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