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“The Light of a Thousand Stories”

Design, Play and Community in the Christian Videogame *Guardians of Ancora*

Tim Hutchings

Abstract

Understanding a videogame requires attention to the social dimensions of its production, its material form and its reception. Games are produced in communities of designers, played by communities of gamers, and accepted into families, households, and other communal settings. Christian games have often been designed with this wider community context in mind, advertised to families and churches as products that can help attract and retain new audiences.

This article focuses on the children’s videogame *Guardians of Ancora* (GoA), produced by the Christian organization Scripture Union in 2015. We will use an interview with the product developer to explore the intent behind the game, and we will use an interview with a British volunteer at ‘St. George’s Church’ to discover how the game has been used within a Christian community. GoA incorporates a degree of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007) into its design, but St. George’s invites children to engage with the game’s story and world in the context of a week of crafts, songs and other volunteer-led activities. Scholars of digital religion have long been fascinated by the relationship between online and offline religion, and the study of the social context of religious gaming offers a new way to approach this classic theme.

Keywords

Videogame; Jesus; Bible; Proselytism; Children; Congregation

1 Introduction

The study of religion and gaming is a particularly vibrant subfield of research on digital religion, which itself is a growing area of the field of media, religion and culture. Scholars to date have

primarily focused their attention on representations of religion in mainstream gaming, leaving aside the marketplace of games produced on behalf of and for the attention of religious communities. This article attempts to redress this imbalance through a case study of the Christian game *Guardians of Ancora*, published by Scripture Union England and Wales in 2015. *Guardians of Ancora* (henceforth GoA) is of interest as a high profile, relatively successful Christian game, produced outside the more intensively studied US Christian context, and as a game intended for children, a target audience that remains understudied in media, religion and culture. More importantly for this special issue, GoA allows us to study the material and symbolic contexts within which media are adopted into religious communities.

Scholars of digital religion have long been fascinated by the connection between online and offline religion (Campbell 2012). This article contributes to that tradition of research by exploring the relationship between a digital product – in this case, a game – and its context of use. As we shall see, GoA has been developed at least in part as a tool, theme and marketing opportunity for Christian churches, holiday clubs and school groups. Previous research has demonstrated that online religious activity tends to supplement participation in offline community activities (Hutchings 2017) rather than replace it. This article addresses a slightly different and less well-studied case, in which a local religious community temporarily adapts, absorbs and restructures itself around a digital product.

This article begins by surveying the limited body of research on Christian games. I will then introduce GoA in three sections, paying attention to its design, the experience of gameplay, and the material embeddedness of the game in communities of play. The article concludes by reflecting on all three sections in light of prior work on gaming and religion. As we shall see, GoA is intended to be a persuasive game that guides players toward faith in God, but its designers and the church leaders who implement it have different understandings of how that persuasive process works and what makes it effective.

To explore the design, purpose and use of the game, I draw in this article on two interviews. The first interview, with GoA product developer Maggie Barfield, took place by telephone in February 2018. I then located one church that had organized activities for children around GoA, and interviewed the leader of that church's holiday club in person in July 2018 to ask about their practices and perceptions of the game. This conversation, of course, reflects the experience of only one congregation, and directions for future research on GoA and Christian gaming will be indicated at the end of the article.

2 Literature Review: God and Games

Religious communities have been creating their own video games in large numbers since the 1980s. Vincent Gonzalez has extensively catalogued examples, and concludes that evangelical Christians have been particularly active in game production, “outpacing the efforts of all other religions” (Gonzalez 2014, abstract). Gonzalez has identified 1,652 examples of religious games as of November 2018 (available at religiousgames.org), of which he lists 1,087 as some variety of ‘Christian’ or ‘biblical’.

Despite this rich history, scholarly engagement with games actually produced by and for religious communities has been rather limited. Far more academic energy has been expended on studying how religions and religiousness are reflected or represented in mainstream games, or applying concepts like ritual or myth drawn from the study of religion to the study of games, or using games to encourage new attention to the importance of playfulness, imagination, rules and competition in religious communities (for a summary, see Campbell et al. 2016). Some rare exceptions include work on Muslim games by Heidi Campbell (2010a) and Vit Sisler (2014) and Owen Gottlieb’s (2017) recent article about his own experience designing a Jewish game, but these examples remain unusual.

In the Christian game sector, design is often motivated at least in part by evangelism. “Evangelical Christians perceive the proselytising potential of media” (Jacobs 2015, p. 88), even while remaining wary of its secular origins and perceived values. Games are popular, including among younger generations, and Christian game designers see an opportunity to deliver Christian content to audiences both inside and outside the Christian community. However, making a game that might in some way change players’ minds is a significant design challenge. The few published studies of Christian games have identified serious tensions between this ambitious goal and the theological commitments and economic realities faced by Christian gaming companies, as we shall see below.

The goal of persuasion connects Christian games closely to the field of educational gaming, which also seeks to use games to form knowledge, understanding and character. Ian Bogost’s influential work in this area introduced the concept of ‘procedural rhetoric’, which he defines as “a practice of using processes persuasively” (2007, p. 3). Bogost argues that games with an educational or moral purpose should not concern themselves only with delivering persuasive narratives, images and texts; gameplay can itself be persuasive. A game takes place within a world governed by rules, and the player must discover how this world works in order to succeed within it. Procedural rhetoric uses rules and processes to make claims about how the world functions.

Bogost applies his ideas to the Christian games marketplace, looking for evidence of procedural rhetoric. He begins with the company Wisdom Tree, which produced Nintendo games for evangelical Christian audiences in the 1990s. In Bogost's estimation, Wisdom Tree "did not proceduralize religious faith" (2007, p. 288) at all; rather, "they borrowed the operational logics of platform and adventure games, applying vaguely religious or biblical situations atop the familiar gestures of moving, running, or jumping". Fifteen years later, he argued, not much had changed: even in the early 2000s, "Christian game developers create religious games in the hopes of associating isolated Bible facts with videogame-playing target demographics, rather than simulating interaction with systems of belief" (p. 289).

Videogame historian Gabe Durham (2015) has published an oral history of Wisdom Tree and its 1991 product *Bible Adventures*. According to employees, the company's initial vision was to reach the "untapped market" of Christian gamers by finding ways to "turn famous stories from the Bible into games that children can have fun playing and learn scripture at the same time" (p. 37). In practice, however, their games were produced as cheaply and quickly as possible, disguising pre-existing games (including *Wolfenstein 3-D* (Durham 2015, p.122)) with Christian imagery and giving little thought to the theological significance of game mechanics, visuals or narrative (pp. 59, 91). "The cost of making games rose as technology progressed" (p. 134), eventually leaving the company unable to turn a profit from their niche Christian audience.

Bogost also considers a more recent and more ambitious Christian product, *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a real-time strategy game based a best-selling series of evangelical novels by LaHaye and Jenkins (1995), and launched for PCs in 2006. *Eternal Forces* throws players into the end times, challenging them to combat the forces of the Antichrist with spiritual conversion and lethal force. Bogost acknowledges that this game does make procedural claims about the effectiveness and difficulty of the spiritual practice of prayer, but he remains critical, arguing that "religion takes a back seat to military strategy" (Bogost 2007, p. 291). The game reflects only a generic form of religion, he claims, and its creators "have withdrawn considerably from the clear religious specificity of their source materials" (p. 291).

Religious scholars have also examined *Left Behind*, with somewhat different results. Rachel Wagner (2012) and Stephen Jacobs (2015) find significant parallels and resonances between the structure of the game and the end-times theology of the books. Bogost assumes that military strategy is separate from authentic religion, but this understanding is much too simplistic. Some Christians are drawn to games precisely by their violence – a point also emphasized by Shanny Luft (2014, p. 159) in his study of evangelical players of mainstream games (p.159). The *Left Behind* games divide the world into good and evil and instruct the player to fight for the cause of God. Wagner argues that this limited narrative compels the user to play like a believer: "[O]ne cannot complete *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* without at least imaginatively buying into this dualistic

system of good and evil, which is fully integrated into the game’s procedural rhetoric” (2012, p. 170). Similar theological echoes can be found in the binary worldview of many games, and Gonzalez (2014) and Wagner (2012b) have both extensively explored the ambivalent appeal of first-person shooters to evangelical audiences. These games invite the player to act out a form of spiritual warfare, often against demonic opponents, even while they provoke Christian fears of the malevolent influence of media violence.

Wagner and Jacobs also draw attention to the ways in which theological commitments can operate against the needs of a game experience. Jacobs argues that *Left Behind* is “not structured like a game” at all, as the theology of the authors ensures that “there is effectively only one successfully prescribed course through the game, and only one possible resolution” (Jacobs 2015, p. 99). The player appears to have a wealth of choices, but this is an illusion: deviation from the correct path leads only to defeat. Wagner has explored this problem of inflexibility in several of her writings (2010, 2012), arguing that the role of prophecy in the Christian understanding of biblical history encourages a “preference for narrative over game” (2010, p. 48). For example, if the death of Jesus on the cross was pre-destined, revealed in advance and predicted both in the Hebrew Bible and in Jesus’s own ministry, then “tampering with the story, especially in terms of imagining that things could have unfolded otherwise, is not an option” (p. 48).

This brief survey has highlighted a few key themes of scholarship on Christian games. Games often aim to introduce new audiences to Christian stories, but they have been criticized for a lack of investment in the kinds of procedural rhetoric that could (according to Bogost, at least) make them genuinely persuasive. Christian gameplay has often copied mainstream gameplay mechanics, a tendency compounded by the high cost of game development. Game developers have also been unwilling for theological reasons to risk allowing players to change sacred narratives and characters. However, the deeper moral structures of good and evil present in many mainstream games lend themselves particularly well to particular evangelical and fundamentalist views of the cosmos. With this in mind, even a derivative action game can invite the player to experience a theological argument about the nature of reality.

What is missing from these works is consideration of the social context of Christian games: the way they operate not as isolated texts but within networks of family members, church congregations and peer friendships. The remainder of this article will explore these themes through a new, community-oriented case study, asking how the logics of Christian theology and game development come together in an example produced far away from the American context described by all the scholars above.

3 Designing *Guardians of Ancora*

Guardians of Ancora (GoA) is a mobile game for phones and tablets, available as an app in Apple, Android and Kindle versions. It was launched in 2015 by the England and Wales branch of the charity Scripture Union, an international organization founded in 1867 which now describes its mission as “actively introducing children, young people and families to Jesus and helping them to meet God through the Bible and prayer” (Scripture Union n.d. a). GoA’s target audience is aged 8–11. The game is still being expanded at the time of writing, with new missions, supporting materials, and translations into additional languages published each year. The exact number of downloads and active users is unclear, but Scripture Union announced in summer 2017 that the game had been played one million times (Mbakwe 2017).

The product developer for GoA is Maggie Barfield, who agreed to a telephone interview with me in February 2018. According to Barfield, the story of the game began with a completely different assignment: to revamp Scripture Union’s line of printed Bible study materials for children. She quickly realized that “the market wasn’t there for that kind of product”: children just didn’t want more print resources, however good they were. So instead, she began asking a new question: “What *would* get children into the Bible, and the Bible into children?” More specifically,

What could we do that would hit that goal of children being able to encounter God, meet Jesus, and for it to be something where [...] it wouldn’t just be a head knowledge thing but it would be where they’re able to respond in some way to what they’re finding out?

Barfield’s answer, after “a lot of thinking and searching and researching and talking to people”, was that children were “doing stuff online, or digital stuff, or playing games”. There might be scope, she felt, for a game to encourage “the sort of immersive quality” of “something where you’re really involved”, going beyond “hitting a button at random” to demand real commitment.

To achieve this level of engagement, the game would have to be truly excellent – Barfield’s goal was to produce something “that was good enough to sit on the App Store”, a game that children would play it because it was good, “not because they’re being pushed into doing it because it’s a Christian thing and mum or dad or somebody at church says you ought to”. In fact, the game had to be so good that even non-Christian children would play it for fun: “What we wanted was a game that any child could play, and that wherever they were in their faith it would give them an opportunity to kind of move towards God from having played it.”

Developing this kind of game would require more expertise than Scripture Union could offer, so Barfield partnered with Dubit, a game company that specializes in development and research for children. Like Wisdom Tree’s games (Durham 2015, p. 57), GoA would be built through a

partnership between Christian and non-Christian teams. Unlike Wisdom Tree's games, GoA would be an expensive production: Barfield wasn't willing to be specific, but she revealed that the budget included "a ridiculous number of noughts", and that the team had been "really blessed with a major donor who's been with us from the start". In fact, Barfield dismissed the Christian games marketplace altogether:

Very few of them actually work as games. They are worthy and they are very Christian but they don't have that mathematical edge, so you don't have risk and you don't have chance, you don't have balance. You don't have the things that make a game a game. [...] I drew no inspiration from anything in the Christian game world. What we were inspired by was the secular games, and the quality of them.

The GoA team drew on Christian expertise in the theology and spiritual formation of children, but when it came to game design, "What we were looking at was the secular wisdom, not the Christian wisdom."

GoA introduces children to stories from the life of Jesus, set within the following framing narrative:

The city of Ancora used to glow with the light of a thousand stories. Now these tales are gone and the Spire grows dim, but some still search for stories, to relight the Spire once more. They are called the Guardians of Ancora! (Scripture Union n.d. b)

The home screen of the app (Fig 1) displays an image of Ancora, which sprawls across a green hillside. White stone buildings glowing with light are connected by a network of fountains, lakes and aqueducts. At the heart of the city is the Spire, a tall tower pointing a finger of light into the sky. The player clicks through from this landscape into the world of the Bible by selecting the Spire and choosing one of a series of 'easy', 'normal' or 'hard' missions, each transporting the player into an episode from the life of Jesus.



Figure 1: *The City of Ancora*. © Scripture Union

In our interview, Barfield explained that many biblical allusions and parallels are hidden in this scene, from “the city of God in Revelation... and the river running through it” to “Jesus of course being the light of the world in John 8”. These allusions are not explicitly marked, but “we’re turning these biblical pictures into an actual picture that people can inhabit and play with”. The player’s task is to discover Bible stories to keep the Spire shining, and this too has theological significance:

What we were looking for is that quality where the player has an influence on the world in which they inhabit, and it would be a positive influence, and so the good that they do has an impact on the world that they live in. [...] Your job is to find these stories and bring them back and share them with everybody else, and the light, the literal light, because we turned it from being a metaphor into a literal light, the light of God’s word shines brighter in the world because of you. So it’s giving that role and responsibility, that you are an important person in the world. So it’s like practicing for being in the real world outside. The real world is a better place because you are there, and if you have God’s light shining in you, that is having an impact on the world around you. So it’s kind of doing that in the digital world; it’s like a rehearsal in that sense.

In its current form, the game explains very little about Ancora. The light from the Spire is supposedly going out, but within the game itself the player never discovers why this is happening, and there is no final end to the game in which the Spire can finally be cured. As Barfield puts it, “You have to keep going, the light fades, you have to keep going out again.” When I asked Barfield what this darkness represented, she laughed away the question: children “don’t really notice the fading thing. They’re much more interested in lighting it up.”

Scripture Union did at one point intend to build a much more elaborate story around the world of Ancora. In the App Store, the description of the game explains that the city “is still recovering from the attack of the Great Shadow, Ancora’s greatest enemy”, but this character is never seen or referred to in the game itself. In our interview, Barfield admitted that “if I had a limitless budget, the world of Ancora would be more engaging than it is. [...] This is where budget starts to influence what you’d really like to do. As we’ve already said, it’s cost a crazy amount of money. We needed a simpler story than that.”

Barfield also suggested another reason for Ancora’s simplicity: the framing narrative just wasn’t needed. Through focus group research, the GoA team discovered something “quite striking”:

We didn’t need to invent an Ancora story that would be like a new story for [children] in which they would trip over a Bible story. They had no clue about Bible stories. And so we were doing a lot of research with [...] non-faith children, and they were as interested in the Bible story as anything else. There was no sense of being anti, they just hadn’t got a clue; they didn’t know anything about them.

For an audience of British children, Barfield concluded, there was no need to “dress everyone up in, oh, you know, medieval garb or Westerns or spacemen or anything” – the Bible stories themselves were already strange, unfamiliar and exotic. To catch the interest of child audiences, it was quite enough to “present it as, ‘Here’s a story from a long time ago.’”

4 Playing *Guardians of Ancora*

To get a better sense of how GoA actually works, we now turn to the game itself, starting with its library of biblical missions. As of November 2018, the following stories from ‘the Saga’ can be played. Easy Mode includes two stories: ‘Jesus and the Fishermen’ (in which Jesus calls his first disciples) and ‘Messages from Angels’ (in which Mary is told that Jesus will be born). Normal Mode includes six stories: ‘Angels and Shepherds’ (Jesus is born), ‘Jesus Feeds a Crowd’ (a miracle story), ‘Jesus and the Roman Officer’ (a healing story), ‘Jesus is Alive’ (the resurrection story),

‘How to talk with God’ (Jesus teaches his disciples how to pray), and ‘The Way to the Cross’ (the crucifixion story, beginning with the confusion of the disciples after Jesus has been arrested). Hard Mode includes the final three stories: ‘Jesus and Jairus’ (a healing story), ‘Jesus Forgives and Heals’ (a healing story), and ‘At Simon Peter’s House’ (a healing story). Each story is divided into one, two or three chapters, each playable separately, adding up to 24 chapters in total.

This selection of stories covers some of the essential milestones in the Christian story of the life of Jesus, including his birth, teaching, miracles, death and resurrection. These stories are grouped by difficulty but are not otherwise laid out in an easily comprehensible order, and they do not progress chronologically or thematically. They emphasize short dramatic events like miracles, particularly healings, rather than the more language-heavy episodes of Jesus’s teaching or his parables. In this sense, the game offers a very different syllabus from the usual content that might be covered by a picturebook, storybook or television show aimed at Christian children (see for example Bottigheimer 1996).



Figure 2: A Gameplay Screenshot from *Guardians of Ancora*. © Scripture Union

When the player travels from Ancora into the world of Jesus, everything visually changes (Figure 2). The landscape is now desert orange, the style of buildings and costumes has switched to an impression of first-century Palestine, and the animation style changes to a more solid 3D. The player's task in each of these stories is simple and consistent: to follow a line of dots, running, jumping, climbing ladders and sliding down ropes. Much of the game involves following a path across rooftops, but the player may also end up climbing the masts of ships, scaling scaffolding in a building site, or journeying through underground mines and tunnels. There are only three controls: left, right, and an action key that switches automatically between jump, scale ladder, slide on rope or turn handle when the player comes close to an object that needs to be activated. Jumps must be perfectly timed, or the player will plunge to their death and reset to the last checkpoint. Simple puzzles may involve turning a handle to raise or lower a platform, and in 'Jesus Feeds a Crowd' the player takes a basket of food past a series of hungry people, but otherwise the mechanics of the game are unchanging. Different missions are assigned different difficulty modes, but these are distinguished only by the increasing length of missions. When the player reaches the end of their mission, they return to the Ancora homescreen, where the dots they have collected become 'Firebugs' and pour into the Spire to power the city.

The narrative told in each part of the Saga unfolds in three ways: through animated cut scenes featuring conversations between non-player characters, triggered when the player reaches certain stages in the game; through the comments of non-player character bystanders overheard as the player runs past; and through the commentary of characters from the framing world of Ancora, who watch the player complete their task and give their own personal responses to the action. The Ancoran comments (visible for example in Figure 2) can be read or heard, but characters within the biblical setting speak only in text speech bubbles. Jesus's presence is overwhelming, even when he isn't visible onscreen: every person in each town the player visits seems to be gossiping excitedly about his latest exploits.

Throughout each gameplay session the player is repeatedly addressed by the game and its characters, calling for a response to the stories depicted. The first time the game is opened each day, the first window features the Guildmaster, who confronts the player with a blunt question about their personal faith before allowing them to proceed, for example: "Do you think it's important to go to church?" In the world of Ancora, the Spire is surrounded by many other buildings that the player can choose to visit, and these also call for responses. The city includes the Theatre of the Saga (featuring animated songs and videos that correspond to particular quests), the Hall of Memory (a timeline showing which year each biblical story supposedly occurred in), the Guild (featuring Bible quizzes and personality tests), City Plaza (where players can create images to keep or to share with other players), the Guardian Grounds (where characters can change outfits, admire their trophies and take selfies), Antiqua's Boat (where items can be purchased to make levels

easier), Shiner's House (where a small physics mini-game can be played), and Swift's Tower (a help center). Each of these locations is associated with a non-player character with their own unique look and style of dress, ranging from robes to steampunk goggles. In addition to this already crowded map, exclamation marks pop up across the landscape to indicate a quest or a quiz, or to ask for a response to a question about one of the Bible stories.

Barfield described GoA not as an educational game, but as a game “underpinned with solid educational stuff”, particularly through this variety of demands and interactive options. She identified the different activity options as evidence of the ‘learning styles’ approach to education, giving players the chance to choose to be active, to create pictures, to read texts, or to explore their environment. According to Barfield, GoA commissioned analysis of player activity, and this showed four main player groups: ‘gamers’, who were very active; ‘socializers’, who used the creative area; ‘readers’, who prefer reading Bible stories; and ‘meanderers’, who combined these approaches. Based on this information, GoA can tailor its prompts to the perceived needs of each player. For example, gamer players are “busy racing around”, but “if we want to do perhaps some more reflective stuff as well, then we need to do something to kind of encourage them for a while to stop racing around and do something a bit quieter”. If a player spends more time in the reading areas, then a different response might be needed: “More and more you get a prompt, a question that says something like, well, ‘Simon Peter was really surprised by Jesus. Has Jesus ever done anything that surprised you?’ And then you go off and you respond to that.”

5 *Guardians of Ancora* and Christian Community

In our interview, Barfield describes GoA as a game that any child could play, “wherever they were in their faith”, with the overarching goal “for their faith to be forming in a Godwards direction”. Barfield was adamant that this formation can be achieved through the game environment itself, in a solo play context, and that GoA “is doing that for plenty of children” already. However, even solitary play can take place within social networks of support and encouragement. Some children are encouraged to play GoA at home by their parents, and Barfield also reports that “we have a lot of grandparents who have tried to learn to play the game so they can teach it to their grandchildren”. Scripture Union has also developed a suite of resources and projects designed to encourage shared contexts of play outside the home, and we now turn to explore how the game can be adopted into communal settings.

According to Barfield, Scripture Union’s own teams “have been using it a lot in what they call pop-up missions, so they’ll turn up in an agricultural show and have a stand there and children

can come and play". Scripture Union produces guides and resources to help groups run holiday camps and summer clubs based on GoA, and Barfield reports that "we know there've been hundreds and thousands of clubs like that". However, she claims, it is in schools that the game has been most successful at reaching non-Christian audiences:

What everybody who has reported it has been finding, is that in a school context it attracts the non-Christian children, so at least 80% of the children who turn up for a club won't have any faith background at all, so of course [...] schools workers [...] love that, [because] they're actually having the opportunity to work with the children they've been desperate to get hold of forever.

Barfield suggests that the game transforms both the appeal and the educational experience of a Christian children's club by disrupting the hierarchical relationship between teacher and students. In the setting of a gaming session, children gain confidence from their mastery of the game and begin to ask their own questions about faith:

[I]nstead of it being, "I'm the club leader and I'm going to tell you about Jesus", or "We're going to read a story about Jesus", or "We're going to play something", what you have is the children setting the pace. They're going to be much better at playing the game than any adult in the room, but on the other hand the adults are the ones that'll know much more stuff about Jesus. And what they report again and again is that you'll have a complete levelling within the group, so you stop having leaders and pupils and everybody comes as equals, because you sit together and the child can play the game really well and will start asking questions, or making comments, and the leaders aren't as good at playing the game but they have those opportunities to be responding to what the children actually are asking and wanting to know. So instead of hammering them with a Bible message, the message is emerging from the children. "How could Jesus do that?" "Is it really possible for someone to come back to life? How can that happen?" "My gran died – if I pray really hard, will she come back to life?" The sort of questions that aren't going to emerge in a sort of standard hierarchical situation. So it's much more meeting as equals, and the sorts of conversations that flow either between the children or between the children and the adults are very different.

This explanation focuses on the educational impact of actually playing the game, but reflects only one of the ways in which GoA has been adopted into Christian communities. GoA has also been deployed in more intensive settings, including residential events and week-long summer courses, and a lot more is involved in these events than just playing the game. GoA is not just a game: it is also a world, a theme, and a brand. As Barfield points out, "When you go to an outdoor pursuit center you can really theme the whole holiday brilliantly as an Ancora experience." Scripture Union's own holiday camp, 'Ancora Explorers', offers "the whole kind of parkour ropes

course jumping around thing”, using Ancora primarily not as a gaming experience but as a source of imagery, characters, costumes and ideas for children’s activities.

Soon after I interviewed Maggie Barfield, I learned of a church that had used one of the GoA holiday club packages. I contacted the church and received permission to interview one of the holiday club leaders to find out more about their experiences. This is of course only one example, but a brief discussion of my conversation with a member of this church offers a chance to balance Barfield’s presentation against comments from someone independent from the GoA company who had tried using the product in their own community.

St. George (not its real name) is a large Church of England parish in a small city. It is popular with university students, and is known for its evangelical theology. The church website does not mention ‘evangelicalism’ by name, but promises ‘biblical preaching’ and outlines a vision focused on four kinds of transformation: discipleship, evangelism, social justice and service to the local community. The website mentions children frequently, promising four childcare options for different age groups during the main Sunday service, in addition to regular family worship services.

Anna, my interviewee (not her real name), first discovered GoA through its advertisements at a major Christian conference. When she decided that her daughter was “probably old enough to understand it”, she suggested she might give it a try. Anna’s daughter normally prefers playing *Sims*-like games of dressing up and “manipulating characters in real-life settings”, and Anna recalls that she “had to help her jump” some of the trickier stages of GoA, but GoA proved popular and quickly joined the rotation of regularly played games. Anna heard that other churches in her city had tried using GoA’s holiday club materials, so she recommended that her own church might like to try them as well.

The church decided to run the second GoA club, an introduction to the gospel called ‘Treasure Seekers’. On Scripture Union’s website, ‘Treasure Seekers’ promises “a flexible programme” supported by “everything you need to run a holiday club – including multimedia downloads, craft ideas and templates, small group discussion ideas, creative prayer suggestions and more” (SU 2017). Churches can download free posters to advertise their course, drama scripts for Ancoran framing narratives and Bible stories, animated Bible story videos, explanations of which Ancoran character each team member is supposed to be and how to create their costume, MP3 tracks of the GoA theme song with suggested dance moves, and many other kinds of resources.

‘Treasure Seekers’ at St. George’s attracted a group of 25–30 children, aged between 4 and 11, all but two of whom were from churchgoing families. The church youth team used many of these resources, singing the theme song, dressing up in Ancoran costumes and theming each day around a hunt for a lost ‘treasure’ – like “an angel, a foam hand, [or] an arrow, which my husband made out of wood”. Each treasure related in some way to a Bible story, and the children first had to

guess what the object might be, then learn the story, play games and build crafts related to the story, and finally find the object itself somewhere in the church. The team created their own Spire as the centerpiece for the week, building a tower from garden canes (“It’s taller than I am!” Anna recalled) and hiding an LED bulb with a dimmer switch inside. The tower grew a little brighter at the high point of every day, when the children successfully completed the day’s mission and added their new treasure to a special plinth the team had constructed in the church.

The youth group also adapted Scripture Union’s materials considerably to fit their skills and aims. They cut down the five-day program to four days, shortened each day’s session, renamed a character from Antiqua to Fabulo to suit the balance of male and female team members, cut out the suggested drama sketches, and added a new Ancoran exercise routine. The children particularly liked Fabulo, so “we got a chant going with ‘hashtag Fabulo!’ every time we saw him”. Anna played the character Swift, who helped to introduce each day’s task, but admitted that her costume was “not anything like the app”: “We just had trousers, a white shirt and we had a sash, bought some shiny material, and every day we wore something different on our head, so one day we had massive sunglasses, something like that.” The volunteers had quickly realized that “the costumes would be too hard to create with our limited resources” and decided to “do our own thing” instead. Scripture Union’s recommendations seemed to Anna to assume a much bigger church with more children and more volunteers. For example, the course materials recommended “having your main space and then the Hall of Memories being somewhere separate”, in a second location where the children could store each day’s treasures. St. George’s did not have the space, “so we just used the communion table and put them on a plinth along there each day”. The team also ruthlessly jettisoned any GoA material they didn’t think was good enough, adding their own alternatives to replace songs and activities that seemed repetitive, off-topic or ill-suited to their audience.

GoA provided the holiday club with a theme, a set of characters, a list of suggested activities, and a set of downloadable videos and songs. It also provided a storyline that Anna found “really confusing”, involving Firebugs (represented at St. George’s by “a glass vase with some fairy lights in it”) that somehow functioned as points, decorations, and active characters whispering clues to the team leaders all at once. One thing it did not provide, however, was the actual game. The church once had an iPad, Anna remarked, but that was stolen. Instead of playing the game in the club, the team chose to tell the children about it at the end of the week, sending them home with something to continue exploring. At least a few parents had reported that their children “really enjoyed” playing the game at home because “they enjoyed the adventure bit of it, the running, the jumping”. The church congregation includes some ordinands training for Christian ministry, and this group of families reported that their children had used the GoA idea to invent their own game on the way home:

Apparently the children were then playing around a lamp post, saying it was a Spire of Light, and went in to get their Bibles and read them quickly to make the Spire of Light shine brighter [laughs].

Without the actual game, what did GoA offer to St. George's? Logistically, of course, the team appreciated how easy the course was to run, because so much of the publicity and course material had been created in advance. For Anna, the fantasy theme "captured the imagination" of children of all ages. The characters were "silly", a word Anna used repeatedly in the interview with great approval. Ancora was also "gender-neutral", because it didn't fit into the children's expectations of boy things and girl things: Ancora is "nothing like anything else they know", and so it remains "accessible by all". Most importantly, the basic concept of saving Ancora was compelling and easy to grasp: "I think they enjoyed the idea of working towards helping the city of Ancora become brighter; they got into that idea, and they didn't mind about the firebugs being different things. It was just the leaders, who were like, 'We can't understand this!'"

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This article has addressed a significant gap in the field of research on religion and gaming, drawing new attention to the marketplace of games created on behalf of and used within religious communities. As we have seen, previous scholarship on this issue has focused on a small number of games created in the United States, particularly for fundamentalist audiences interested in theologies of spiritual warfare and end-times preparation. New studies are needed of examples from different regions and theological contexts to test, build on and expand our understanding of how these games are made, how they work, to whom they appeal, and what they are trying to achieve. We also need new attention to how religious games are used in shared contexts, because these are not just products deployed for solitary or multiplayer use. As this case study has shown, games can be adapted and adopted into entire religious communities, from households and extended families to schools, clubs and congregations. Attention to designers, games and players can only capture part of the significance of a game like *Guardians of Ancora*. GoA also shapes and is reshaped by the practices, aspirations, material culture and social networks of congregations like St. George's.

This exploration of GoA has considered three areas: its design, its gameplay, and its reception. In each case, I have uncovered parallels to previous literature and new findings.

The first section on design used an interview with product developer Maggie Barfield to explore her understandings of the game's aims and strategies. According to Barfield, the game's purpose is not primarily to teach Bible stories but to use those stories to encourage the player to

“encounter God”. Barfield is also determined to produce a game that can succeed in its own right, as an excellent product that children will be drawn to playing, and so GoA draws on the ‘secular wisdom’ of contemporary game development. Barfield emphasized her own understanding of what makes a game worthwhile, dismissing rival Christian games for their ungamelike lack of challenge and balance. At the same time, the game has clearly been limited by its own budget and time constraints, leaving elements of the Ancoran storyline underdeveloped. This is an excellent example of what I have elsewhere called *mediatized religious design* (Hutchings 2017), a process in which the production of religious technologies is informed not only by religious values (as in Heidi Campbell’s (2010b) ‘religious-social shaping of technology’), but also by an ongoing effort to study and understand the inherent logic of new and unfamiliar media – more in keeping with the mediatization thesis applied to the study of religion by Stig Hjarvard (2011).

The second section, on gameplay, echoed some of the older findings of Bogost (2007), Wagner (2010) and others. Like many Christian games, GoA adapts popular game mechanics of running, jumping and collecting dots, without trying to find more ambitious ways to proceduralize Christian faith. The game is strikingly reliant on overheard dialogue, perhaps for budget reasons, often preferring to let the player overhear background characters discussing an event which has just happened instead of actually showing that event or allowing the player to participate in it. Nonetheless, we can still argue that GoA uses procedure to teach key aspects of the faith it wants players to explore. Instead of the violent spiritual binary identified in Christian war games by Wagner (2012) and others, GoA sends players on a quest to change the world by learning the Bible – the same promise that evangelical churches like St. George’s offer to their congregations every week.

In the third section, I ventured into the larger communal contexts within which the game is received, played and discussed. It is here, of course, that we return most obviously to the theme of community that motivates this special issue. The connection between online and offline community has been discussed exhaustively in the field of digital religion, but GoA’s embeddedness in embodied and material community uncovers a new dimension to this relationship, particularly for the study of religion and gaming. GoA can be played as a game, but it is also designed as the centerpiece of an expanding constellation of activities and media. For the club team at St. George’s, the gameplay of GoA was less valuable than its overarching story, which provided ideas for costumes, church decorations and activities, as well as publicity, videos and songs. Children encountered GoA not just as a digital app but as an invitation for physical play, from dress-up and crafts to dance and exercise routines.

Barfield and Anna both suggested that the game functioned to support and transform relations inside Christian families and communities, although – perhaps unsurprisingly – Barfield’s claims were more ambitious. GoA offers a new, non-biblical world and cast of characters to catch the

interest of children and within which they can then be introduced to ‘the Saga’, the story of Jesus. Barfield has suggested that such complicated nesting of narratives might be unnecessary for reaching many children today, because the Bible is already unfamiliar to them and can be encountered as something new. However, but the novel frame was appreciated by Anna and the holiday club team at St. George’s. Barfield also proposed that playing games could defuse the stifling sense of hierarchy between leaders and children, generating new opportunities for conversations about faith. For Anna, the novelty of the setting of Ancora was more useful in destabilizing the hierarchies of age and gender internalized by children themselves, freeing everyone to enjoy the week’s activities.

I conclude this article by calling for further research on the specific case study of *Guardians of Ancora*, on the wider marketplace of Christian games for children, and on the place of games within religious communities. This article is based on two interviews, and conversations with GoA’s Christian funders and non-Christian development partners are likely to reveal new perspectives on the game’s development and its achievements. My observations of the use of GoA within church contexts particularly calls out for future expansion. Ethnographic work within families, schools, churches and holiday clubs could be used to find out more about exactly how a game like this can support or change patterns of religious socialization. The materiality of this example also calls for further study: how are other games being used to provide themes and activities in shared contexts? How are other Christian communities working to adapt and domesticate media products? How are the internal dynamics of a religious community affected by the adoption of these media products? Future studies could also engage with child players of this and other Christian games to explore their own perceptions and responses, offering a valuable counterpoint to the adult perspectives analyzed in this article. The study of religion and gaming is flourishing, but there are still many new areas to explore.

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