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Religion in Digital Games

Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches

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Studying Religion in Digital Gaming

A Critical Review of an Emerging Field

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the study of religion and gaming by outlining the dominant approaches, development and themes in this new interdisciplinary field of inquiry. It highlights dominant thematic and methodological approaches currently within the field of religion and digital games studies including the study of religiously-themed games, the role religion plays in mainstream games, and how gaming can be seen as a form of "implicit religion". This critical review is contextualized in relation to the studies presented in a forthcoming book, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games,* which maps key theoretical approaches and interpretive trends related to how different expressions of religion and religiosity are manifested in various gaming genres and narratives. We show that digital games are an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture helping us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society.

Keywords

digital games, play, implicit religion, narrative, game studies, video games

You feel like you've seen it before. The perpendicular Gothic spires of a thirteenth-century medieval cathedral tower over the strangely empty English countryside. Inside, the richly decorated choir stalls are empty; the sun filters through the stained-glass windows, streaking the dust-filled air and illuminating the gilded nave and the hallowed halls, which are covered with a veneer of centuries of prayer. Suddenly, there is a blood-curdling screech, and the cathedral is filled with the scurry of hundreds of spider-like creatures that fill the shadows. A blast shatters the silence, and multiple flashes of gunfire light the darkness. An archway begins to crumble; tracer bullets fill the air, leaving behind red puffs of blood. For a moment there is near-silence, with only strange

growling whispers to be heard. Then, the click of reloading, and the shooting begins again. Of course, this is not happening in the actual world, but in a digital game. The violent shootout is under way between the alien race called the Chimaera and the last vestiges of humankind in Sony's first-person shooter game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006). Set in an alternative history where Europe has been invaded by aliens, a virtual copy of the Manchester Cathedral in England is utterly destroyed at the hands of warring soldiers and, of course, the gamer.[1]

This example illustrates how modern video games, such as *Resistance: Fall of Man*, are heavily coded with religious undertones, and how they interact with the larger society. Consider for instance, almost immediately after the release of the game in the United Kingdom, the Church of England claimed that the digital depiction desecrated the actual physical cathedral and violated copyright.[2] As the digital recreation of Manchester Cathedral and the controversy its virtual destruction caused illustrate, religion has a significant presence in the digital context. Indeed, since the 1990s everyday religious practices have become increasingly intertwined with new forms of media. In the twenty-first century, scholars have noted how people use digital media to recreate religious practices: they visit online shrines, take virtual pilgrimages, and incorporate social media and the internet into their spiritual routines. Despite this, the study of religion and gaming has not received much attention in the study of religion and the internet and it remains one of the most understudied elements of such digital environments.

This article seeks to provide an overview of the study of religion and gaming by outlining the dominant approaches, developments and themes in this new interdisciplinary field of inquiry. This review is then contextualize in relation to a forthcoming book, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* (Campbell & Grieve 2014)*,* which offers a foundation for theoretical reflection on key themes in the field including how religious gaming is constructed ideologically, and how different expressions of religion and religiosity are manifested in different gaming genres and narratives. Through this work we demonstrate that digital games are an important site of exploration into the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that helps us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society. We contend that just like films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of the twentieth century, digital games now depict the religious within the twenty-first century.

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1   BBC News 2007 Cathedral Row over Video War Game, viewed 14 March
     2013<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.
2   BBC News 2007 Fantasy Meets Reality in Church Row, viewed 14 March 2013
     <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6738309.stm>.

1.   A Prolegomena to the Study Religion and Digital Games

Walter Ong argues in *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, that different media may make different religiosities possible (see Ong 1967). Ong suggests that religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscript writing as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media. Digital games represent an important sphere of cultural and religious study, as they reflect and shape contemporary religiosity in unique intentional and unintentional ways. Digital games have become a fertile and essential ground for research into what it means to be human in the fullest sense.

Though scholars have begun paying attention to the intersection of religion and digital game in the past decade, for the most part the intersections between digital games and religion has often been neglected. We assert this is typically because of four reasons: games are widely considered simply a form of young people's entertainment; video games are often seen as artificial or unvalued forms of expression; technology is thought to be secular; and virtual gaming worlds are seen as unreal. Because games are assumed to be merely frivolous childish fun, mixing religion and gaming is problematic for many people. Religion and games have a long intertwined history. As Rachel Wagner (see 2012c) shows, games and religion share many of the same structural elements, this echoes the work of Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian and one of the founders of Game Studies (see Huizinga 1955).

While some still perceive the average digital game player as a young male playing alone, just wasting time, a large gap exists between the public perception of who plays video games and what the research demonstrates (see Sternheimer 2003). Statistics show that video games are not a ghetto of adolescent boys: the average gamer is thirty-five years old and has been playing for thirteen years.[3] Forty percent of all game players are women; boys age seventeen or younger account for only 18 percent of players.[4] Moreover, gamers do not play alone, but typically play with others - either face-to-face or online (see Gee 2001). The perceived connections between the availability of video games and an epidemic of youth violence do not have a solid foundation, and research has not conclusively proved that video games desensitize players (see Grossman 2000; Heis 2000; Jenkins 2002).

A second reason that religion is frequently overlooked within digital games is that some assume games to be shallow, unable to carry or communicate important ideas. This means that they are seen as an inferior medium of expression, whose messages are playful and not to be taken seriously. Such assumptions have been expressed by religious groups as well as by some

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3   Entertainment Software Association, viewed 14 March 2013 <http://www.theesa.com>.
4   Ibid.

technologists and game designers. For example, in 2012, Apple stated in its "App Store Guidelines," "We view Apps different than books or songs, which we do not curate. If you want to criticize a religion, write a book."[5] The guidelines explain that applications containing critiques, controversial framings of religious groups, and offensive references to or misquotations of religious texts will be rejected. Religious content "should be educational or informative rather than inflammatory." While Apple's stance appears to be an attempt to limit what could be perceived as offensive content to dissimilar groups, it also innately communicates that games are not able to provide critical reflection or arguments about topics such as religion, which the company feels should be covered in text-based, or electronic books. Furthermore, even though the designer sought to provide a space where play could reveal wider implications of multiple outcomes, in 2012 Apple rejected the game *Endgame: Syria* (Auroch Digital Ltd. 2012) (which is based on the real civil war in the Middle Eastern nation) because of its perceived targeting of "a specific race, culture, a real government or corporation, or any other real entity."[6] While this can be seen as simply an attempt at ethical policing of app content, it also points to assumptions about the controversial nature of religion in popular media content, and that certain media platforms, such as games, should be neutral spaces avoiding not only stereotyping, but also complex narratives related to religious history and tradition. This limiting of how religion is dealt with in app and digital culture is something not seen in game development in general, since many popular games draw on religious narratives, characters, and symbols as central themes directing gameplay. The move toward serious gaming has meant that games often deal with very complex historical and cultural framings as religious and political narratives often underlie gameplay.

Reflecting an implied secularization theory, a third reason religion tends to be ignored in relation to gaming is that digital media are seen as the epitome of modernity and therefore imagined as anathema to religious practice. Such secularist assumptions draw from the work of early sociologists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber, who have been re-popularized by authors such as Dawkins and Hitchens, who claim that society is becoming increasingly secularized; this work also contends that scientific progress, especially technological progress, will bring about religion's eventual decline (see Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007; Smith 2007). Some have argued that because digital media and networks bring different traditions in close contact with one another, allowing alternative voices to have a global platform, this will ultimately dissolve traditional faith structures. Indeed, some frame the internet in particular as a catalyst for the potential secularization of society. Nonetheless, as the scholar of religion and digital media Christopher Helland claims, "Religion on

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5   App Store Guidelines, viewed 14 March 2013, reposted at <http://www.cultofmac.com/58590/heres-the-full-text-of-apples-new-app-store-guidelines/#p6smqGUzOLVFkSgv.99>.

6   Venture Beat ,2013 'Apple: 'Want to Criticize Religion? Write a Book'--Don't Make a Game', viewed 14 March 2013,<http://venturebeat.com/2013/01/15/apple-want-to-criticize-religion-write-a-book-dont-make-a-game/#YrZCyRBPJbrTCQ1m.99h>.

the internet is a unique phenomenon. Due to its massive online presence, it challenges traditional academic theories that link the secularization process with developments in modernity and technology." (Helland 2005). In fact, there is no one evolution of technology. Since the mid-1990s, many religions and religious actors have used digital information technology in radically different ways to spread and practice their faith (see Campbell 2005). Consequently, as the chapters in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* demonstrate, claims that the growth of technology and of secularization go hand in hand are unfounded.

Finally, the claim is often made that because digital games are a "virtual" medium, that means they are unreal or do not reflect reality. Indeed, the question of whether digital games can be viewed as an authentic form of expression has been raised in the courts. In April 2002, the U.S. district judge Stephen N. Limbaugh Sr. ruled that digital games are incapable of conveying ideas based on reality, and that digital images are not "real" and therefore enjoy no constitutional protection. As evidence, St. Louis County presented the judge with videotaped excerpts from four games, all in the first-person shooter genre. In June 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the ruling, and declared that digital games are covered under the First Amendment: "Like the protected books, plays and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas--and even social messages--through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player's interaction with the virtual world)." (see Brown 2008).

Soon after *Resistance: Fall of Man*'s release, the Church of England claimed that the digital depiction desecrated the actual physical cathedral and violated copyright.[7] To prevent further virtual desecrations, the cathedral announced its "Sacred Digital Guidelines," which included provisions that game designers "respect our sacred spaces as places of prayer, worship, peace learning and heritage," and "do not assume that sacred space interiors are copyright free."[8] While publicly apologizing, Sony responded to the controversy by arguing that "throughout the whole process we have sought permission where necessary" and, furthermore, that the game "is entertainment, like Doctor Who or any other science fiction. It is not based on reality at all."[9] It is clear that a number of issues and assumptions have framed religion and gaming as a contentious meeting, at odds with one another. Yet the study of this intersection is not only fruitful and worthwhile, but we assert it also contributes new depth to current explorations in Game Studies.

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7   "Fantasy Meets Reality in Church Row, viewed 14 March 2013
    <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.
8   Times Online 2007 Manchester Cathedral Says Sony Apology Not Enough and Issues New Digital Rules, viewed 3
    March 2009. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/faith/article2098466.ece>.
9   BBC Online 2008 Sony Apologises over Violent Game, viewed 17 October 2008,
    <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6276460.stm>.

2.   A Genealogy of the Study of Religion in Digital Games

Because of the relatively brief history of digital gaming and its neglect by scholars of religion and media, the academic study of religion in gaming has a correspondingly short genealogy. Scholarly work began to surface in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century and gained momentum through discussions hosted at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting later in the decade. In 2007, in a panel called "Born Digital and Born Again Digital: Religion in Virtual Gaming Worlds," scholars presented work on religiously themed games, the problematic appearance of violent narratives in religious gaming, and the rise of the Christian gaming industry. In 2008 the panel "Just Gaming? Virtual Worlds and Religious Studies" considered the use and presence of religious rituals and narratives in mainstream video gaming. These presentations drew attention to the need for a more focused study of religion in gaming and virtual worlds. While in the last decade scholars within Religious Studies and Media Studies have begun to pay attention to the importance of religion in gaming, still few books dedicated solely to the critical study of religion and gaming exist. The edited volume *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* was the first collection to offer a range of religious critiques and responses from scholars, religious practitioners, and game producers regarding the nature and content of video games. This was followed by a published collection from a conference on religion and play entitled, *Religions in Play: Games, Ritual & Worlds* that provides an historical overview of the relationship between different forms of physical, board, card and digital games to religion. The most recent is William Sims Bainbridge's book *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* looks at conceptualizations of the sacred in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games. It is within this emerging conversation that *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seeks to contribute by offering a systematic and focused thematic investigation of the growth of the study of religion and its relationship to Game Studies. This article draws its arguments and observations from work presented in this text.

Scholars in the study of religion and gaming within the last decade have primarily focused on a few specialized topics. One of the first areas of inquiry focused on religious education research as it related to video games, including pedagogical reflections on using gaming within religious education (see Scholtz 2004), and how video games may be used to contribute to religious identity formation and the development of critical reflection (see Hayse 2009). Such work has frequently focused on the symbolism and narratives of explicitly religious-themed games. Related to this work, some scholars have considered how specific religious groups, especially within the Christian tradition, have approached or responded to games and gaming culture. Here we see studies unpacking the cultural and theological stories underlying popular games such as *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* and those seeking to provide frameworks for a critical evaluation of games based on the boundaries of specific faith communities (see Schut 2012). Clifford Scholtz emphasizes that the

study of games created by religious groups and for religious education highlights a number of themes that are shared with the broader field of game studies; these include the exploring of identity negotiation, ritual, and flow theory in media environments (see Scholtz 2005).

Researchers have also examined specifically how popular mainstream video games, such as *Halo* (343 Industries 2001-2012) or *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007-2012), use religion as a narrative tool or plot device (see Corliss 2011). In this case, the focus has been on the role played by religion and how religious meaning circulates and is interpreted in readings of video games. The incorporation of religious symbols and characters may have unintended consequences for gameplay. For instance, Mark Hayse has argued that "religion within video games tends to suffer from a narrative and procedural incongruity," since mixing religion and gaming can be inherently problematic (see Hayse 2012: 182). He notes, as similarly observed by Bogost, that the adoption of the procedural rhetoric, especially as it relates to violent narratives in mainstream games, informs religious narratives in ways that challenge the traditional framing of morals and codes of behavior (see Bogost 2007). Issues such as these have been studied in detail in the rising scholarship around Islamogaming, which has questioned how gaming narratives and environments may enforce religious and ethnic stereotypes or be used to present alternative identity representations (see Šisler 2006; Campbell 2010). Vít Šisler, a pioneer in this area, has demonstrated the intentionality of Arab game designers to subvert and refashion traditional Western framings of Arab and Muslim characters as villains. This demonstrates how religious representation can be used to create "serious games," thereby turning gameplay into an important arena for religious and political discourse (see Šisler 2009; 2008). Such inquiries into the consequences of certain game narratives and structures on player beliefs and behaviors are of interest not only to this subfield, but also to Game Studies in general.

More recently, scholars have taken an interest in the relationship between virtual play, the sacred, and the performance of religion in gaming (see Plate 2010). Considering, for instance, how games present and offer rituals that mimic attributes of religiosity, which add purpose and meaning to gameplay in this context, emphasis is frequently placed on the gaming environment and the experiential nature of gaming (see Pargman & Jakobsson 2008). Drawing on Huizinga's concept of the magic circle as the way to explore the relationship between play and symbolic and religious ritual and magic, some work in this category has additionally considered the nature of the sacred and magic in gaming. Notable here is the work of Rachel Wagner, who has explored in detail the ways video games evoke the "otherworldly" and encourage an escape from the daily or mundane in the same way that religious ritual invites practitioners into a space of play and re-imagination (see Wagner 2010; 2012c). Wagner has also produced the only monograph to date that gives significant attention to the relationship between religion and gaming, dealing with gaming in a broad context of religious imagination and virtuality (see Wagner 2012b). Her work explores what she calls "first-

person shooter religion" as a theoretical frame to discuss how the boundaries of computer and gaming culture configure the gaming experience in a manner similar to the ways religious culture and tradition frame behavior in a religious space (see Wagner 2012). As Wagner illustrates in "God in the Game: Cosmopolitanism and Religious Conflict in Videogames," this expression of implicit religion is even more apparent in the proliferation of handheld digital devices, which offer an almost religious vision by imposing order on a chaotic environment driven by information overload. Implicit religion recognizes that seemingly secular practices may serve a religious role in people's everyday lives (see Bailey 1990), which means that traditional religious language and notions can be transposed onto actions and artifacts previously seen as nonreligious. This area of research adds to innovative theoretical thinking on issues arising from gaming studies, and considers how the nature of serious games and the gamification of culture may impact and have application to wider social relationships and contexts.

3.   Emerging Themes within the Study of Religion and Digital Games

In an attempt to provide a clear overview of the field and its emerging themes *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* brings together a range of compelling and important contributors on religion and gaming to offer an overview and synthesis of key questions and approaches being taken in this growing area of research: the study of religiously themed games; considering the role religion plays in mainstream games; and finally--though at first glance it may seem a completely secular enterprise--reflection on how gaming can be seen as a form of implicit religion in terms of experience and expression. Although scholars have paid attention to the dominant narratives in religiously themed games, further work is needed on the implications of such constructs for gamers and each community's presentation of religious identity. Mainstream games such as *Halo* and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986-2013) frequently evoke or rely on religious narratives, symbols, and rituals to frame and facilitate gameplay. The ways in which video games and virtual world environments, such as *Second Life* (Linden Research, Inc 2003) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-2011), might offer players religious experiences has received some attention. However, this raises additional issues about the extent to which religious themes underlie digital storytelling, and the implications this has for the gaming experience. Religious-like experiences or gaming encounters can indeed be described in religious terms. Furthermore, the question of how gaming practice and culture might be discerned and understood as a form of implicit religion emerges especially when secular activities take on a sacred role or meaning for individuals. Thus *Playing with Religion in Video Games* draws together a range of studies from innovative scholars, which coincide with these three common areas of inquiry—religious games, religion in games and

gaming as religion--in order to map and evaluate how studying religion in digital gaming contributes to a fuller understanding of gaming culture.

Through a close reading of literature in the field and works found in *Playing with Religion* we have identified a number emerging themes within religion and digital games research worth more scholarly attention. We argue that the study of religious symbols, representations, and narratives reveals how gaming may have larger cultural and religious implications, which are frequently unforeseen by both game designers and players. This is seen in the presentation of a "haunted magic circle" in gameplay, which associates religious narratives with the horror genre (see Walter 2014) so religion is framed in ways that are both innovative and problematic. From the study of Arab stereotyping within popular digital games to tension and protests within India in employing sacred narratives in violent video games scholars have note different religious and cultural groups may find the employment of religion in games may be seen as highly problematic (see Zeiler 2014). This is especially true when nontraditional religious interpretations unintentionally make gameplay a source of cultural "othering", or Orientalization (see Šisler 2014). This requires scholars to carefully consider the broad range religious and cultural impact of religiously-themed games.

Another observation noted is the need for further investigation of why religion is present at all within popular digital games. This suggests the need to closely examine the implications of the integration of religion into this genre, and what impact this may have on understandings of play and playfulness within game theory. Some research asserts that across history, religion and play have gone hand- in-hand as a way to instruct, inform, affirm, and inculcate players into specific narrative and worldviews (see Anthony 2014). Consequently, the gaming enterprise can be seen as simultaneously playful and provide an indoctrination into certain beliefs and behaviors; gaming must therefore be studied as a culture-building sphere. Gameplay evokes unique patterns of flow, empowerment, and disempowerment that are associated with religious feelings (see Steffen 2014). Because gaming may lead players to draw on broad religious narratives to explain their emotions and experiences, understanding religious language and tradition becomes essential in interpreting the process of gaming. This innate link between religion and play also raises interesting questions about how religion is framed or possibly extricated from a particular gaming context in order to avoid controversy, such as work on gaming companies attempting to erase religion from contexts in which they perceive potential cultural conflict (see Likarish 2014).

It is also noted that there is a move towards describing gaming in terms of implicit religious practice, so studies of gaming behavior seek to identify and explain the meaning behind ritualistic behavior. It may be because religion and play exhibit shared qualities and encourage similar conditions, such as a need to define the cultural boundaries of a given space in order to break the perceived rules (see Wagner 2014). It is also noted that religious gamers often draw similar connections between games and religion in order to justify their participation and engagement in

such a space and culture (see Luft 2014).Thus we suggest more nuanced reflections on why gamers and game designers often read religion into the gaming context is another important area of investigation

Finally, there is a need for more refined theoretical and methodological work to be done in the study of religion in digital gaming. New scholars have begun to make contributions in this area by drawing on established work in Game Studies and considering how they can be applied and adapted. We also note new theoretical and methodological approaches emerging from religiously-focused study of games that may have broader application. From studying ludological structures in light of spiritual efficacy as a way through exploring gaming as a form of implicit religion (see Steffen 2014), to the development of a multimodal approach to game analysis and to investigate meaning-making pathways in gameplay (see Carrillo Masso & Abrams 2014), we suggest that the study of religion and gaming can offer new tools and methods that can be applied to other areas of game studies. Overall, by highlighting what the integration of religion into digital games and gaming environments may mean and the larger cultural, social, and religious impact of such actions, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seeks to enliven discussion of the relationship between video games and religion.

4.   The Future for Religion and Digital Game Studies

This article and our forthcoming book *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* seek to draw attention to an emerging field of scholarship that combines the best elements of Game Studies and Religious Studies. We argue that studying digital gaming is not merely an end in itself, but a means of displaying and unlocking the meaning of religion in contemporary society as a whole. Digital games are not simply mirrors that reflect culture. Rather, they frequently eschew or alter, like a funhouse mirror, assumptions about religion. This means they have the potential to inform or interpret religious practice as it is reflected back at us, with a selectivity determined by the source. Digital games do not simply mediate religion, but they also "mediatize" it. Stig Hjarvard in "The Mediatization of Religion: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Religious Change" describes the concept: "the media have developed into an independent institution in society and as a consequence, other institutions become increasingly dependent on the media and have to accommodate the logic of the media in order to be able to communicate with other institutions and society as a whole." (see Hjarvard 2008).

It is important that Game Studies do not ignore the role played by religion in shaping gameplay. We seek call for scholars of serious games to also take seriously the place and

performance of religion in public discussions related to digital games. Although in writing about the Manchester Cathedral, Ian Bogost in "Persuasive Games: The Reverence of *Resistance*" defends Sony's use of the cathedral, he criticizes the corporation's response as a self-defeating statement, which while addressing gun violence, does not speak to how the cathedral plays into the game itself. Bogost maintains that the need "to defend the artistic merits" of the game "is now left to the critic. For my part, I think the cathedral creates one of the only significant experiences in the whole game, one steeped in reverence for the cathedral and the church, rather than desecration."[10] To make sense of this terrain, game critics and scholars need to consider the different layers of how religion shapes not just the gaming experience but also the institutional and public response to it. This nuanced and multifaceted investigation of religion in gaming offers game studies, a unified language to understand how religion informs gaming (see Anthony 2014). It also offers tools for deciphering the framing and impact of religious characters, themes, and moods.

Conversely, Religious Studies cannot ignore how games can and do shape faith practices. Despite the popular conception that religion and games do not mix, or at least do not mix well, this book shows how digital games have both intentionally and unintentionally become spaces to grapple with complex cultural histories, existential meanings, and religious narratives. Often, such interaction is intensified through "cultural feedback," which refers to how content from one culture is appropriated and reinterpreted by game developers in a second culture (see Likarish 2014), only to be reintroduced into the original culture in a recognizable, but discordant form. It should also consider the extent to which digital games may have a bias toward "mechanized religion," a kind of mechanical theology that sees gods as technologies to be manipulated for power (see Schut 2012). In either case, as the controversy surrounding *Resistance: Fall of Man* shows, gaming has become an important sphere for cultural discourse that cannot be ignored. As Manchester resident Patsy McKie from Mothers Against Violence maintained, the game is "something that needs to be taken seriously first by the Church but also by parents."[11]

For the Church of England this was a matter of ultimate concern. For Sony, the cathedral was just part of a game. The church wanted to ignore the game. Sony wanted to ignore religion. This lack of nuance may be partially due to the relative adolescence of the medium; indeed, film took quite a few decades to mature as a tool for art and expression. Nonetheless, we argue that a nuanced investigation of religion within Digital Game Studies adds to the public conversation something that is missing from much of the discussion concerning digital religious games: analysis of the games themselves, especially how religion plays out in them. We see the importance of exploring why

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10 Gamasutra, 2007 Persuasive Games: The Reverence Of Resistance, viewed 14 March 2013
    <http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/1689/persuasive_games_the_reverence_of_.php>.
11 BBC News 2007 Cathedral Row over Video War Game, viewed 14 March 2013,
    <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/manchester/6736809.stm>.

video games use religious structures such as churches and cathedrals as central narratives and the implication of reading religion through the processes of play. By emphasizing the diverse ways in which religion potentially shapes the gaming experience, we hope to make space for a broader conversation between the scholars of media and of religion and to encourage a rich interdisciplinary exchange.

Demonstrating how religion offers important cultural meaning-making resources and symbolic scripts that still play an important role in contemporary popular culture, and can provide an important apologetic for the place and attention to religion in digital games. Scholars have argued that what makes the connection between religion and games defendable is that both provide order-making activities and escapes from the everyday; religion and gaming provide similar tools and map out overlapping worldviews (see Wagner 2014). The study of digital religious games offers unique insights regarding the relationship between contemporary culture and the role of religion in society. As Zeiler (2014) demonstrates religious organizations and communities often utilize tools offered by popular media culture to enact and affirm their distinctive religious identities for global audiences. In a similar fashion, Masso and Abrams (2014) stress that religious groups may seek to present themselves in video game ecologies in order to establish or negotiate their role in the wider culture.

This article has sought to provide an overview of the growth of religion and digital game studies, highlight current themes and set out an emerging agenda for scholars engaged in this area. Scholars in Religious Studies have begun to explore how video games can be seen as religious texts, can be framed in relation to religious experiences, or can serve as an extension of religious practice itself. Media scholars have noted that many games employ religious characters, narratives, and symbols, which shape gameplay in distinctive ways and create representations of various religious and cultural groups that are worthy of in-depth study. We suggest careful attention to the study of religious narratives, rituals, and behaviors within gaming, as illustrated in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games,* can offer a fuller understanding of the social and cultural impact of the gaming experience on contemporary society. Focused reflection on how digital and video games inform or reform different individuals' and groups' understandings of the practice of religion also opens up new possibilities for academic and public discourse about religiosity.

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