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Religion in Digital Games Reloaded

Immersion Into the Field

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‘Playing God’ On God & Game

Frank G. Bosman

Within the context of videogames, the phrase ‘playing God’ refers often to the genre of the ‘god games’. In the *Encyclopedia of Video Games* (Mark Wolf 2012) Mark Hayse defines the genre as ‘a video game in which players assume an explicitly divine role in the emergent growth and development of a simulated life-system.’ In a broader sense god games however share some characteristics with other video games such as real-time strategy and simulation games ‘in which the players construct and manage the emergent growth of other systems such as cities, civilizations, neighborhoods and nations.’ Famous examples of the genre are the *Sim City* (1989-2013), *Civilizations* (1991-2013) and *The Sims* (2000-2014) game series.

According to Heidi Campbell (2014) god games have three distinctive features setting them apart from other game genres: they alter the conventional game rules (achieving state of immortality for the game avatar), they convey a particular religious notion (of an omnipotent and immortal god), and the induce an altered game experience in the players (feelings of absolute power and of ‘playing God’). God games, according to Agata Meneghelli (2007), simulate the divine experiences of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. The world lies in front of the gamer, to be ruled by the click of a mouse button. Steven Garner links the ‘god game’ to the theological idea of man as *imago Dei*, identifying God as a metaphysical ‘hacker’.

The metaphor of God as hacker incorporates into it the concept of God as creator of new things as well as a certain playfulness. A God who, in this particular imagery, is defined by being creative and enjoying it. (Gartner 2005)

Garner refers to the idea of humans as ‘created co-creators’ of God. Like God has created mankind in his own image (as the Genesis narrative describes, *imago Dei*), his creations can create other ‘things’ in their own image, and therefore (in a secondary fashion) in the image of God himself. Culture and technology at large, but recently robots and artificial intelligence in particular have been seen as products of the creative force of mankind. Philip Hefner (2003) has developed the metaphor of human beings as created co-creators as part of his work in examining the relationship

between technology and theology. By the use of technology man could be living out his unique possibility to create, to make something new, to be ‘a god’ in his own right.

Noreen Herzfeld (2005) however criticized this theological interpretation of god games and *imago Dei*, stretching the importance of the concept of relationship. Quoting the German theologian Karl Barth, Herzfeld interpreters *imago Dei* as ‘being in relation’ (with God and/or people). God games, in her view, ‘promote a preoccupation with the self, and with our own perfection, mastery, and control.’ She argues that god games are not that interactive or concerned about interactivity between players. With the rise of MMORPG’s as *World of Warcraft* it is to be seen if this argument still holds ground.

According to Hayse however, game series as *Populous* and *Black and White* (both by Peter Molyneux) explicitly explore the religious dimension of these god games. ‘In both series, players adopt divine roles as they seek to guide, direct, protect and prosper a simulated civilization, while opposed by over deities.’ Molyneux himself claims that his fascination with the concepts of good and evil stood at the beginning of his *Black & White*.

From the days of *Populous* I had been fascinated by the idea of controlling and influencing people in an entire world. I was also interested in the concepts of good and evil as tools the player can use to rule or change the world. (Molyneux 2013)

Heidi Campbell, writing about morality and god games, points out that while ethics and morality are an integral part of every religion, authors on videogames tend to neglect this aspect altogether.

God mode morality stands for the ludological evaluation of players’ decisions in terms of dualistic judgmental concepts like ‘god and evil’, ‘light and dark’, ‘spiritual and mundane’, and so on. (idem)

Seen through the eyes of the authors quoted above, the god game genre represents not only a specific ludological game mode, but is also narratologically linked to religious and theological concepts as ‘good versus evil’ or the *imago Dei*.

Within the emerging field of investigation on the interaction between video gaming and religion, theological inquiries and reflections are, as Heidi Campbell suggested, not among the popular topics to be discussed. Traditional or ‘classic’ Christian theological topoi like salvation, incarnation, sacrifice and Eschaton are nevertheless easy to be found in modern day video games, like the *Mass Effect series*, *Bioshock*, *Bioshock: Infinite*, *Master Reboot*, *Limbo*, *Brink*, *Fallout 3*, *Fallout 3: New Vegas*, *Metro 2033*, *Metro 2033: Last Light* and the *Diablo* series. The old narratives of the Christian tradition reappear in new and inventive forms and modes in modern video games. Can God be found in video games? And if so, how and where?

1 The symposium ‘Playing God’

On the 17th of October 2014, the Dutch academic research group ‘Moving Visions’ (traditionally focusing on the interconnection between film, religion and theology) has hosted a special symposium ‘Playing God’ on religion and video games, investigating the role religion and spirituality plays in modern videogame series. The lectures held during this symposium, are included in this issue of *Online*.

The title ‘Playing God’ was chosen because of the religious and theological associations surrounding the genre of the god games, as described above. Although none of the lecturers of ‘Playing God’ were actually on the genre of the god games (nor on individual games within this genre), the interconnection between religion as a social and anthropological phenomenon and videogames at large problematized by the god game genre, was at the heart of every contribution.

The 2014 release of a redesigned version of the first *Gabriel Knight* game ‘The Sins of The Fathers’ (originally from 1993 by Jane Jensen) is the starting point of Connie Veugen (Vrije Universiteit, the Netherlands) to reflect upon the game series protagonist. Although the protagonist of the *Gabriel Knight* game series (1993, 1995, 1999) is a modern hero, Gabriel’s journey contains elements we also find in other Hero myths. Furthermore, the series contains many religious elements, supernatural motifs, as well as a more than superficial link with the story of the Messiah. Using Wendy Doniger’s theory of the micromyth as a point of departure, Veugen analyzes all these aspects of the games, as well as at how they are interlinked.

Popular MMORPG’s, like *World of Warcraft* (2004-2014), are full-fledged ‘virtual worlds’ brimming with ancient religious narratives, magic and mysticism. Based on about 25 in-depth interviews, Stef Aupers (Leuven University, Belgium) and Julian Schaap (Erasmus University, the Netherlands) argue in their article that such self-enclosed environments provide the opportunity for self-proclaimed ‘atheist’ gamers to voluntarily play with religion, to freely experiment with religious identity without adopting a pre-defined set of religious values and to experience enchantment without necessarily believing. Having analyzed different types of religious experiments in online games, it is argued that ‘play’ is an epistemic category that transcends the modern dichotomy ‘believing’ versus ‘non-believing’; the ‘religious’ versus the ‘secular’ and ‘re-enchantment’ versus ‘disenchantment’, that is still prominent in the sociology of religion.

Peter Versteeg’s article (Vrije Universiteit, the Netherlands) is also concentrated on Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMO’s) of the fantasy type, which are set in virtual worlds where magic and mystical forces thrive and where powerful creatures wield their otherworldly spells. Focusing on the case study *EVE Online* (2003), Versteeg argues that the religious constellation of the game world is primarily that of a war between different gods and their adherents. At the same

time however, this background narrative of the game seems to have little to do with actual gameplay, which appears instrumental rather than narrative. Similar to participating in a religious performance, Versteeg continues, players can engage in MMO's with different grades of intensity and at different stages, ranging from pawn play to deep role play. The players, rather than following a narrative script, transform the virtual world into an interactive stage where they project their own narratives onto.

Tobias Knoll (University of Heidelberg, Germany) writes about 'agency' in the context of videogames and the dynamics between 'game agency' and 'player agency', which become even more relevant and interesting, when players are faced with choices colliding with or challenging their moral and religious worldview. In his article Knoll makes an argument for a further emphasis on the role of 'agency' within the field of religion and digital games as well as a more differentiated (yet still complementary) approach toward 'game agency' – the degree of agency provided by the game through game mechanics, rules, level architecture and narrative structure – and 'player agency' – the actual agency of the player in the context of the game.

I would like to thank all the lecturers of the symposium for their efforts, especially for editing their lectures into articles, as well as the editorial board of the *Online* journal for granting us literary hospitality.

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Biography

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