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BOOK REVIEW

# Gods in and of the machine: morality, divination and meaning in digital religion and games

**Playing with religion in digital games**, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2014, 301 pp., $85.00 (hardcover), $15.00 (paperback), $29.99 (ebook), ISBN 978-0-253-01253-1



'Playing with Religion in Digital Games' is a collection of essays exploring the relationships between religion and video games, and the sociological and critical relevance of conceptualising these connections. The diverse chapters are united by the implicit postulate that two globally dominant cultural forms – religion and digital play – are bound to intersect, and that these different intersections will yield cultures, communities, practices and new ways of understanding both belief and games as individual social forms. There is no weak chapter, and here I will address each in turn focusing particularly on commonalities and recurring themes, especially on the relationship between religion on the one hand as a way of life, a form of embodied behaviour, and a set of beliefs that shape one's life-world, and on the other as a set of rules, edicts, norms, and therefore fundamentally a *system* of action. This tension plays out in numerous ways across the games considered in this work, and demonstrates a number of compelling conceptual points: how are embodied experiences such as religion transferred from analogue to digital life? What do these things look like in digital form, what are their limitations, what is lost, and what is reified and transformed into something else? This transition between qualitative, analogue life experience and its inscription into a quantitative, material, digital medium is implicitly at the heart of this collection, and forms the basis of many of its most compelling analyses.

The book begins with the editors' reflections on religion, games, and a summary of the work. They propose that the role of religion in digital games has been overlooked due to games being considered young people's entertainment, games being seen as relatively trivial entertainment, technology being seen as primarily 'secular', and the apparent unreality of virtual worlds (pp. 2–3). They respond to these challenges, identifying emerging themes in a growing body of religion-games scholarship, and conclude by proposing the value both to games scholars of considering religion, and to religious scholars of considering games. After this expansive introduction, the collection begins with a broad overview of research in the intersection between religion and *play* as a whole, upon which any engagement with religion and *video games* must be constructed. In this opening contribution dedicated to developing a typology of religious games, Jason Anthony argues that religious games in history have been used in four primary ways, 'as educational elements; as festal elements in public or private rituals; as divinatory methods; and occasionally, as orthodox forms of worship in and of themselves' (p. 27). Each of these, in its own way, can be found reflected in the present day in video games, and Anthony's chapter does an excellent job of addressing examples from each of these domains. As he notes, games 'have historically played meaty roles at the center of cultural explorations of meaning' (p. 44) – as, of course, has religion – and the contemporary blurring of these in new and unusual ways is a strong invitation for scholarly engagement. Across a wide range of examples, Anthony's opening chapter sets an ambitious scale for the work, and outlines many of the most crucial questions in this domain.

The second, third, fifth and seventh chapters each focus on a particular religious tradition and either the digitisation of its sacerdotal norms, its representation and portrayal in spaces of digital play, or both. The second chapter is authored by Isamar Carrillo Masso and Nathan Abrams and explores representations of Jewish identity through the game *The Shivah*, arguing that although the experiences of this identity players can experience are inevitably limited by the technical and design constraints of the game, play experiences of this sort represent a middle-ground between 'hagiography' and 'demonization' (p. 61), a normalised form of a religion through which religion is treated as one aspect of characters' lives and identities without fully determining those lives. The third chapter is authored by Xenia Zeiler and explores the 'negotiations of Hindu authority and identity in gaming contexts' (p. 66), considering a major Indian video game release which drew on Hindu mythology and subsequently became the site of significant debate, considering how such issues of religious truth and representation are brought to the attention of audiences in countries where Hindus are not majority – in this case, the United States. The fifth chapter, authored by Vít Šisler, considers the relationship between portrayals of Islam in video games and ongoing trends in current affairs and contemporary global political discourse, noting particularly the growth of video games dealing with representations of 'the Middle East, Islam, and Muslims' (p. 109), whilst video game producers in the Muslim world are producing their own content to counter these discourses. He explores the representation and self-representation of these groups, arguing that these are offered to the player across audiovisual, narrative and procedural (rule systems affecting how the player plays the game) layers, describing a complex relationship between game genre, prior media forms (such as rolling TV coverage) and the mathematical encoding of Islam into these games in diverse mechanical ways. The seventh chapter is authored by Shanny Luft, and examines the apparent conflict between deep 'evangelical' Christian religiosity and the play of violence or otherwise transgressive games, showing that religion is integral to their play of these games and the behaviours they exhibit during their play, and their interpretations of game content. He argues that 'Christian gamers distinguish themselves through efforts to make their gaming practices adhere to the communal and ethical standards of their religion' (p. 165), showing us how digital cultures and behaviours are heavily informed by the 'real', and that cultural signifiers are not lost in the transition to the supposed disembodiment of the digital. These four chapters therefore highlight both commonalities and distinctive elements of digitised real-world religions with diverse ideological associations and commitments, and point towards the importance of a case-by-case understanding of these questions.

The fourth chapter, by Brenda S Gardenour Walter, explores the classic game studies notion of the *magic circle* – the boundary between a game and the activities that constitute the game, and the outside world beyond it – as not just a ritualistic space, but as potentially an actively spiritual one. She argues that players can experience 'spiritual transcendence through the experience of horror' (p. 90) in games where horror and religion intermingle, such as the *Silent Hill* (1999–2012) and *Fatal Frame* (2001–2015) series, in which supernatural elements are central. This chapter considers the role that genre plays in the depictions of religion(s), and how elements of genre and elements of religious practice can be transformed in digital game spaces to create new quasi-spiritual experiences. The sixth chapter, by Rabia Gregory, considers the purposes to which religions in games can be put, specifically medieval religions and religious practices, iconographies and concepts. She utilises Umberto Eco's notion of neo-medievalism, 'a repurposing of medieval imagery to represent contemporary values and problems and to engage contemporary audiences' (p. 135), in fantasy games, arguing that medieval religious elements are increasingly popular in games because they allow for the easy narration and construction of a game world, make other game elements (such as the fantastical or the magical) appear reasonable and appropriate, and 'cloak the technological infrastructure' (p. 146) behind

digital games. This 'allows players to step easily into virtual realms' (p. 149), and shows how the use of historical religious concepts can be applied to the creation of compelling contemporary digital worlds.

Chapters eight and eleven share a concern with controversies over the use of real-world religious content in digital games. Chapter eight, by Peter Likarish, explores how different versions of the 'same' game in different contexts will have religious content altered or entirely removed. He argues this is because 'if many followers come to understand [religious] beliefs as dogma, their incontrovertible nature renders them ill suited to the interactive narrative of video games in which a player's actions may undermine or circumvent religious proscriptions' (p. 171). Such censorship is consequently a common trend in digital playable media where games are released in multiple geographical-cultural contexts, and such sensitivities, he demonstrates, are important for understanding the social impact of digitising religions. Meanwhile, one of the most sociologically intriguing elements of the collection is a case related in the 11th chapter, by Michael Waltemathe. It relates the case (p. 238) of the use of Manchester Cathedral in the United Kingdom in the game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006) which generated extensive controversy by allowing the firing of weapons in a *virtual, digital* version of a real-world building with religious significance. As he asks, 'does the cathedral retain its religious character despite the discrepancy between the working in the virtual building and the working in the real building?' (p. 251), and this compelling question and the real-world impact of a digital space forms the crux of this strong chapter. Both of chapters are therefore concerned with questions of offence, proscription and censorship, and make a significant contribution to understanding the transformation of religious beliefs and spaces into digital play.

The ninth chapter, by Rachel Wagner, explores the notion of 'playing in earnest', when people 'give themselves over to a predetermined set of rules that shape a world view and offer a system of order and structure that is comforting for its very predictability' (p. 193); the 10th chapter, by Oliver Steffen, seeks to understand 'the basic structural elements of games that generate religiosity or spiritually relevant experiences in players' (p. 215); and the 12th chapter, written by Kevin Schut, explores the use of religions as machines and systems (p. 256), or as strategic tools, which removes much of the meaning of religion and reduces religion to something with a simpler, more pragmatic function (p. 262). The shared content between these chapters exists at the intersections of morality and meaning – the meaning to be found in taking games seriously or not, and how games can create (or prevent) a particular kind of moral or meaningful experience – and with morality *systems* in games, unpicking the relationship between morality, religion and (digital) play. Central to this commonality is the notion of rules and moral systems, systems of rules with moral content and edicts of morality that come to take on the appearance of rules, whether in non-digital, traditional religion or play, or within a digital context. As Wagner puts it,

> rules tell believers how to live [and] articulate who can make authoritative decisions in the day-to-day world, and why. Rules dictate how sacred texts are read. […] Rules are at the root of many of the most common features of games, and rules are a key basic feature of religious practice, especially ritual. (p. 194)

Exploring these links further is beyond the scope of this review, but this concern with rules, systems, morals and meaning, suffuse these discussions, and when read together these three chapters explore these concepts in depth.

*Playing with Religion in Digital Games* sheds a crucial and often overlooked light into the role of religions in games, whether as a fictional element, a game system, a thematic or narrative component, a reflection of the real world, or a pedagogic tool. Chapters range from the sweeping and theoretical to the specific and empirical. The only other volume of this sort I

know of is 'Religions in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds', edited by Philippe Bornet and Maya Burger and published by Pano Verlag. However, this volume seems to be unique in focusing specifically on how religion plays out in the realm of *digital* games, and lays the foundation for future study of this area that focuses not just on the games themselves, but their wider social, cultural and even political impacts in the world beyond virtual playful spaces.

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