Playing with Religion in Digital Games

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Playing with Religion in Digital Games promises to explore digital gaming "as a field filled with potential for new insights into the place, presentation, and impact of religion within popular culture," and makes the bold claim that games "reflect and shape contemporary religiosity" (p. 2). In this anthology, the essays are truly interdisciplinary: the authors hail from the worlds of journalism, game design, computer science, media studies, religious studies, and history. This wide range of disciplines creates a somewhat uneven collection of interest, most likely, to an academic audience. The essays make up three sections entilted "Explorations in Religiously Themed Games," "Religion in Mainstream Games," and "Gaming as Implicit Religion." Of the three, the second is perhaps the most useful for its potential readers, but only the last section shows a clear awareness of the problems inherent in making claims about the meaning of religion in digital games.

Three chapters in part 1 focus on the ways various games portray Jewish, Hindu, and Japanese religious ideas. Jason Anthony's "Dreidels to *Dante's Inferno*" aims to develop a "unifying language" for all types of religious games and "help create a higher level of sophistication in games that engage religious" content (pp. 43–44). I find Anrhony's piece troubling

because it misrepresents and even trivializes religious and mystical experiences, especially when he discusses "theoptic" games, games that "have players explicitly assume the role of a divine god." Anthony implies that spiritual practices like deity yoga and the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola are nothing more than acts of the imagination. He does admit that having a god as an avatar is "rarely" the same as "engaging the divine." On the other hand, he concludes that if the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises are ever "gamified . . . they might define the potential of this category" (p. 43). The idea that one could "gamify" an intensely mystical experience—one that takes place in a rigorous retreat under the careful guidance of an experienced spiritual director—suggests the author's lack of understanding of religious experience.

Part 2 (again, perhaps most useful section of the book) contains essays that discuss how games manipulate and interpret religious ideas, given the influence of the culture and the religious ideologies of players. Vit Šisler compares representations of Islam in American-made and Arab-made games and shows that genre determines how the game portrays religion, reminding us that culture always shapes rule systems. Other chapters address the use massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) make of medieval religious symbols as infrastructure (chapter 6), how evangelical Christian gamers interpret and interact with overtly violent games (chapter 7), and how and why companies revise religious symbols when they release games in new markets (chapter 8).

The final section of the book (which might have worked better at its beginning) looks at games through the lens

of "implicit religion." The usefulness of this analytical concept is the subject of an on-going debate, and most of the authors demonstrate an awareness of the need for caution. Rachel Wagner's chapter 9 concerns play, not video games *per se*, and offers a good discussion of the complexity of defining religion. She draws careful parallels between order-making activity in game play and the construction of religious world views, and she concludes that comparing games and religion can help us learn to "play" in more mature ways. Two of the other three chapters show similar scholarly restraint. The weakest chapter in this section, chapter 10, attempts—poorly—to uncover the "spiritual efficacy" of digital games, but chapters 11 and 12 make crucial points. First, although games can present "religious worlds," these are not equivalent to religion experienced through acts of faith. Second, the systematic nature of game rules and programming leave us with a "mechanized . . . impoverished vision of what religion means to believers" (p. 273).

Playing with Religion in Digital Games succeeds in demonstrating that religion in digital games is an important topic. Nevertheless, this anthology would have benefited from a consistent and nuanced definition of "religion" across all the essays. Some of the individual essays offer no definition of "religion"; some consider any reference to magic, cultish behavior, "gods," "demons," or ghostly beings sufficient to make a game "religious"; and others take pains to clarify their own operational definition of religion. It is unfortunate that a few of the essays make comparisons between religious concepts and gaming that trivialize the religious, such as the concept of salvation as a "lev-eling up" in chapter 6. Most of the essays also overlook (or show a lack of awareness) that the use of religion in digital games tends to be quite derivative and something of a trope. Peter Likarish (chapter 8) does note that one reason religious ideas have become more prevalent in games is that they offer fresh controversy—violence and sex have been "done" so many ways in games that they are losing their ability to generate polemic.

In the end, we must always remember that digital games are primarily commercial products. The major concern for most developmers is not whether a game remains "true" to a particular religion, for example, but instead whether it will sell. As veteran game writer Darby McDevitt laments in a 2010 *Gamasutra* article, "A Practical Guide to Game Writing": "Game play must come first—this is the Golden Rule." Religion is only one among many elements manipulated to keep game play interesting; it behooves scholars to use caution in attributing great significance to its presence in games. Analysis of religion in video games perhaps tells us less about religion or contemporary religiosity than it does about the ways in which developers recruit cultural ideas into the service of making money.

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