#### **Special Issue**

# **Current Key Perspectives** in Video Gaming and Religion.

by
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Kerstin Radde-Antweiler,
and Xenia Zeiler

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# Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Owen Gottlieb.

Owen Gottlieb

#### How should religious study concern itself with video games?

Currently, I am concerned with two broad categories of inquiry: a) video game interventions in religious education, literacy in comparative religion, and the acquisition of cultural practice and b) video games as they relate to contemporary religious ritual.

Video games and contemporary Jewish religious ritual:

I am in the early stages of investigating how Jewish religious worship is incorporating video games and how the interpretation of video games is drawing from religious ritual. Two cases illustrate this intersection. One case is of a *Minecraft* Bar Mitzvah at a Reform synagogue. The clergy and staff of the synagogue struggled to reach the child, until they tapped into his passion for *Minecraft*. Facing a variety of learning differences, the child was eventually able to have a Bar Mitzvah ceremony including a live video tour that he gave of a *Minecraft* design inspired by his Torah portion. He performed exegesis of the text through designing structures in *Minecraft*. The rabbi at the synagogue describes how the community found this to be a deeply moving and meaningful experience for all involved, and cites the use of *Minecraft* as a key for an important moment in the life of the synagogue and the family. In another case an educator who is, along with his family, involved actively in the Jewish community discusses his son's *Minecraft* Birthday Party, inviting friends to play *Minecraft* together. The boy designed Minecraft Commandments, rules about how to play nicely with one another, drawing on his own knowledge of the Ten Commandments.

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In the former case, the public practice of religion, from exegesis of sacred text to public performance of that exegesis, occur through video game play and *Minecraft* design. The organized community, clergy, educators, parents, and staff worked together to incorporate the young learner's experiences of meaning in video games and *Minecraft* into the heart of a public religious rite of passage. The video game becomes a critical part of the acquisition of cultural practice, merging with the synagogue architecture through video screens and controllers. This is in some ways similar to Exeter Cathedral and Andy Robertson's use of the video game *Flower* in a service 2012 (Robertson 2012a, 2012b) (<a href="http://bit.ly/1PJAQjp">http://bit.ly/1PJAQjp</a> and <a href="http://bit.ly/1PuZUMn">http://bit.ly/1PJAQjp</a> and <a href="http://bit.ly/1PuZUMn">http://bit.ly/1PuZUMn</a>), and yet in the case of the synagogue, the game was introduced by the young person's personal practice and the clergy then assisted in helping the learner practice religion through his interaction with the game. This individual religious learning experience is then shared with the wider community and welcomes them into the learner's personal experience.

In the latter case, it is the language of religion that frames and bounds the modern video game play experience of *Minecraft*. *Minecraft* is understood as part of a wider world, which, like any other part, requires a clear agreed upon system of fair play. It is an environment that, just as the non-virtual world that requires social rules to maintain the social order and friendly play. The choice to frame the metagame, or the way *Minecraft* is played in a group, through religious language both demonstrates the prior religious frame, but also the means by which video games can naturally be incorporated into the order of a religious practice or understanding. In both of these circumstances, Huizinga's (1938) work in *Homo Ludens*, on game and ritual as well as the later interpretation of Huizinga on the concept of the Magic Circle by Salen and Zimmerman (2004) provide fundamental theoretical foundations for this inquiry.

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*Video games, religious education, and literacy in comparative religion:* 

I am interested in how game systems can enhance formal and informal learning environments in the areas of religion and culture. The bulk of my work is in how game systems can be used to improve formal and informal learning environments. In particular I have been investigating teaching history and more recently, religious legal systems. My game *Jewish Time Jump: New York is* a mobile augmented reality GPS game for teaching modern Jewish history on site in Greenwich Village. Players take on the role of time traveling journalists who land on the eve of the Uprising of 20,000, the largest women-led strike in U.S. history. They receive images and artifacts from the places they stand, but from over a hundred years in the past. They can take on disguises and roles as they try to find a story "lost to time." The game explores immigrant history, women's history, labor history and Jewish history. Game play includes examination of digital artifacts including primary sources and ephemera and players interact with digital characters from the time period. In *Jewish Time Jump: New York*, (Gottlieb 2015a) I sought to build a vibrant environment in which students could dig deep in the historical sources on site at the locations.

Today, I am working with a team to build a game currently under the codename "Purple" to teach medieval religious legal systems in the context of community. The game is a tabletop strategy card game to be adapted for mobile devices. Just as games are rule-based systems, so are religious legal systems (Gottlieb interviewed by Strauss 2012, Gottlieb 2015). In the case of this game, we are working on modeling a community and the various responsibilities in the community. Civil religious law dictates behavior among neighboring players, but players have the chance to decide how they behave, while knowing the law. They can follow the law or break the law, while trying to keep their

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family and community both afloat. Through the game system we seek to model the competing interests of individuals within a tightly bound community. Using researched historical and cultural milieus, the game is intended to provide a basis for deeper exploration of the time period, culture, and context of the law.

#### What methods and research questions do you recommend?

My research in games is most often centered on learning environments and the acquisition of cultural practice. I seek new learning theory and design knowledge to enhance formal and informal learning environments. Given the nature of the questions that I ask, I most often use design-based research (DBR). DBR is an umbrella category of research methods comprised of pragmatically selected mixed methods. DBR holds media and learning theory as suspect during a course of field iterations, data gathering analysis, and return to theory. For example, I will begin with learning theory and develop an initial pilot game which I will bring into the field and test with learners, gather data, analyze data, return to the theory and make changes and shifts to move closer to the learning goals. Then we repeat the cycle, working towards better learning outcomes and revision of the theory based on what I learn through observing learners.

Some of the kinds of mixed methods I use include participant observation (including video and audio), pre and post surveys, semi-structure interviews, review of server logs of player choices and movements, analysis of table talk, analysis of design artifacts (when learners participate in design workshops). Key to the outcomes of the research methods are providing warrants for claims and providing context, as each learning environment is unique. Hoadley (2013) states that DBR is particularly suited to highly contextualized settings in which people have agency.

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Because it is so challenging to develop engrossing games that also includes learning objectives, I have shifted towards particular aspects of religious civilization that are suited to games, namely laws. Elsewhere (Gottlieb 2015b), I have argued of the relationship between rabbinic literature and game systems. Particularly relevant to choice of methods is my need to both iterate the design artifact in the learning environment and to be able to observe and analyze the processes that learners go through during play.

#### Do scholars have to play a game to analyze it?

Do film scholars have to actually watch a film in order to analyze it? Should a philologist actually read ancient manuscripts? Should a sports writer covering baseball have at some point in the past actually played a game of ball? We expect scholars and critics of various media to fully engross in that media. We expect anthropologists to live and hangout among the people about whom they write. Not having played a game does not preclude discussing the game, but if the game is central to the argument or analysis, then a first hand knowledge of the gameplay is ideal. Analysis of a game from the scholarly perspective should expect at the least a deep understanding of the mechanics, procedures, and a variety of play scenarios.

There are cases in which film scholars cannot watch the films about which they write, because in some cases the films are lost forever, as is the case with many silent films. In those cases, scholars go to great lengths to recover photographs, scripts, on-set accounts. Similarly, many video games today can no longer be played. There are not functional emulators for many video game systems of the past, and even with emulators,

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such as in the case of digitization of pinball games and emulations 1980s arcade games for modern TV screens, these emulations do not reproduce the situated context in which the game was originally played. But exploring the game and its context is part of the job of the scholars of video games.

Do scholars writing about *Minecraft* need to mine and craft? I suppose the scholar could watch hours of others minecrafting and as a spectator, absorb a great deal (Fred Goodman (2011) has spoken eloquently about the power of spectating play as a significant learning experience). What play in the system provides is fast, haptic learning. In his keynote at the 2010 Games for Change Festival, Jaron Lanier (2010) spoke about the power of learning through haptics, using driving a car as an example. The tactility and force feedback he argued as markedly more efficient means of learning. Perhaps the scholar who builds in *Minecraft* with some scaffolding from YouTube videos would have a deeper understanding of the experience than a mere spectator. Certainly for scholars interested in games, learning, and the acquisition of cultural practice, such play is critical to scholarship. Perhaps the question could be refocused in this way: when is it critical that scholars play and when can scholarship be effective without first hand play? When emulators are not available? When deep spectatorship is a part of participant observation? When the scholar has played ten other games in the same genre and is only referring to the game in a long list of references? As for Minecraft, in particular, a system easily available today to access, along with relevant YouTube channels, I suspect it would be very challenging to effectively research and analyze behavior inside of *Minecraft* without ever having mined and crafted.

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