



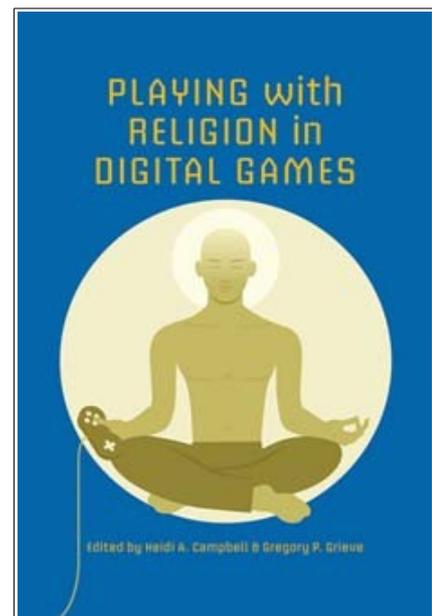
Reviews

Playing with Religion in Digital Games, edited by Heidi A. Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve. Indiana University Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis, 2014, pp. 301, \$30.00; ISBN 978-0-253-01253-1. Language: English.

Contrary to the popular belief that religion and video games belong to different cultural dimensions and ‘do not mix well’ (p. 17), the collection of essays *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* demonstrates that in recent years religion has become an important part of the digital context. Moreover, its presence in digital games has great potential for understanding the place and the role of religion within popular culture. The reviewed volume investigates in an innovative and interesting way the multidimensional ‘alliance’ of digital gaming and religion. Furthermore, it offers a space for discussing the nature of ‘play’ in the context of notions of ‘religious participation and spiritual searching’ (p.2).

Playing with Religion in Digital Games consists of twelve chapters divided into three thematically oriented sections that focus on different aspects of the interrelation between religion and digital games. Since chapters selected for the volume are written by scholars from different disciplines, countries and areas of research, the compilation offers a comprehensive insight into what is so far an understudied area of how religious symbols, representations, and narratives may be used in the context of video games.

In a detailed introduction, the editors contextualize problems involved in scrutinizing the intersection of religion and games. This entanglement, they argue, has thus far been neglected by game studies for various reasons, including perceiving games and digital environment as secular and unreal, as well as the assertion that digital gaming is mere entertainment and, thus, contains no cultural value. According to Campbell and Grieve, however, studying the interrelations between religion and digital games not only reveals the substantial cultural implications of gaming, but also sheds light on complex processes in contemporary societies. As the essay demonstrates, ‘digital games are not simply mirrors that reflect culture’ (p. 16),



but, rather, spaces where cultural and religious identities are (re)interpreted and (re)negotiated.

In the first section, entitled ‘Exploration of Religiously Themed Games’, the contributors discuss how digital gaming influences religious identities and the implications of including various religious narratives in gameplay. The first two chapters of this section attempt to develop methods that could be applied in the analysis of religion in the digital environment. Jason Anthony offers a seminal seven-dimensional typology of video games, which could serve as a universal classificatory schema bridging past, present, and future digital games. In their essay on the ‘meaning-making pathways’ (p. 52), Isamar Carrillo Masso and Nathan Abrams develop a multimodal approach, which combines semiotics with critical discourse analysis. This analytical tool enables them to uncover how Judaism and questions of beliefs, behaviors, and ethics are portrayed in the game *The Shivah*. Other chapters in this section, which are also based on individual case studies, investigate how religious traditions, symbols, and rituals are embedded in digital games. In this context, trans-media storytelling is viewed as an alternative space, where religious identities can be mediated. Digital games do not only enable players to find individual and communal religious experiences, often beyond traditional forms of religiosity (p.11). Games that allow for playing ‘as a god’ also provide new perspectives on the divine (p. 39).

The second section, ‘Religion in Mainstream Games’, focuses on religious strategies and characters employed in mainstream games, and their impact on the gaming experience. Vít Šisler explores the ideological and symbolic dimensions of audiovisual, narrative, and procedural elements used to represent Islam in American video games. In turn, Rabia Gregory analyses how medieval religion influences narrative strategies in fantasy games. They argue that the way religion is used in digital games depends on current value systems and power relations in global cultural exchange (p. 130). Sammy Luft examines how gaming is approached as a culturally relevant social practice on Christian (Evangelical) online chat rooms. The last chapter of this section, ‘Filtering Cultural Feedback: Religion, Censorship and Localization in *Actraiser* and Other Mainstream Video Games’, explores the question of the ‘localization’ of games. By analyzing how the content and the language of games are adjusted to national standards, Peter Likarish demonstrates that changes are often a result of ‘arbitrary and capricious decisions’ (p. 174). In fact, his study raises many important questions, for instance, to what extent inclusion or exclusion of religious contents is a justified marketing practice, and not mere censorship.

‘Gaming as Implicit Religion’, the final section of the volume, examines the ways in which digital games enable, or even encourage, religion-like practices. This is perhaps the most exciting part of the book as it covers a considerably understudied area: the contributors investigate both religion and digital gaming as meaning-making practices. Indeed, the authors of all essays in this section emphasize the fact that religion and digital games are similar in many respects: they not only fulfill the same psychological need of creating a systematic world out of chaos (p. 200), but also require people to follow a ‘predetermined set of rules’ (p. 193, p. 214). Furthermore, according to Rachel Wagner and Michael Waltemathe, both religion and video games are ways of escaping from contemporary life viewed as ‘paramount reality’ (p. 239). Kavin Schut, in turn, claims that even though there are some similarities in experiencing religion and video gaming, due to their ‘mechanistic bias’, digital envi-

ronments provide rather limited – demystified and impoverished – understanding of religion (p. 256). Finally, in his very interesting contribution on the ‘religious effectiveness of digital games’ (p. 13), Oliver Steffen develops a polytheic model that enables the analysis of games for the embedded ludological structures (“God Modes”) which, due to implicit religion, are spiritually effective and can influence a player's consciousness (“God Moods”).

Overall, the edited volume demonstrates that religion and digital games are deeply intertwined. By approaching this entanglement from different perspectives the book *Playing with Religion in Digital Games* offers the reader multifaceted and nuanced insights into religion and digital gaming. Various analyses of the incorporation of religious symbols, characters, and narratives into gameplay demonstrate that digital environments, hitherto considered to be utterly secular, may become an important space for religious discourse. There are, however, some methodological and theoretical shortcomings – only chapters One, Two and Ten attempt to provide general theories and methods, which could be applied to analyzing religious digital gaming as a new field within game studies. Nevertheless, dealing with a relatively new area of research, the volume should be considered a crucial step towards finding a suitable language to describe complex relationships between religion and digital games.

MAGDA DOLIŃSKA-RYDZEK is a PhD Candidate at the Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, Justus Liebig University in Giessen (Germany), where she is working on a dissertation about the idea of the Antichrist in post-Soviet Russia. She holds a bachelor's degree in Eastern European Studies from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan and a master's degree in European Studies at the University of Lodz. [magda.dolinska@rydzek.pl]