VIDEO AND ROLE PLAYING GAMES

Although it is often assumed in the social sciences that 'serious' religion and 'frivolous' play are different, even incompatible, domains, this chapter deals with the elective affinity between both. On the one hand, role playing – particularly in online video games – allows individuals to informally experiment with religious identities, worldviews, rituals and experiences. The invocation of a temporal 'magic circle' of play and a willing suspension of disbelief that underlies the act of role playing, can provide an important epistemological strategy for players to meaningfully engage themselves with the supernatural without necessarily converting to a religious position. Religious role play, in other words, permits opportunities for individuals or groups to experience religious or spiritual enchantment beyond the binary of belief or disbelief. Moreover, the salience of play is not unique to role playing in (video) games as playfulness – a willing suspension of life's 'ordinary' boundaries – is also a key ingredient in a plethora of 'serious' religious traditions, rituals and ceremonies.

Theoretically, the affinity between play and religion has long been established. The German playwright Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) conceptualized play as an essential human activity that harmonizes two seemingly conflicting human properties: rational thought and sensuous desire. Building on this notion, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945) argued in his seminal study *Homo Ludens* that social, rule-based play precedes culture and that all social and cultural institutions – including religion – initially sprung from human play, as play allows for a (temporary) transcendence of everyday life to higher spheres. Contemporary warfare, philosophy, the arts, religion; according to Huizinga they are essentially all rooted in playful practices. In the historical development of these societal domains towards regulated, organized

and rationalized institutions in modern society, Huizinga argued pessimistically, the vital element of play became threatened. And yet, it remains difficult to epistemologically separate play from 'non play' in most forms of social activity – despite the fact that, to most people, they feel clearly detached in everyday life.

Particularly Huizinga's formal definition of play as a 'magic circle' that is strictly separated from 'real' or 'serious' life, has recently become the staple of discussion in disciplines as diverse as the sociology of religion, cultural studies and game studies. Notwithstanding its alleged autotelic nature, it is now often argued that the 'magic circle' of play spills over to everyday life, including the religious and spiritual domain. 'Serious' religious ceremonies (such as collective prayer in a Mosque, a Buddhist divination, or the Eucharist ritual in the Roman Catholic church) and spiritual practices (such as a Pagan initiation ritual), only work because all participants accept the rules and guidelines set for these – in essence, playful – ceremonies. Without the collective acceptance of this constructed magic circle, these rituals would lose their ultimate meaning and transcending potential. Moreover, esoterical groups, Pagans and New Age seekers, are found to often develop a spiritual career from playful engagement to serious belief.

Religion, then, is not easily separated from the act of play since play is part and parcel of religious ritual. And vice versa: in recent studies it is often demonstrated that the boundaries of 'non-serious' play in (video) games, entertainment and popular culture are porous as knowledge gained within the activity seeps into everyday life and changes (religious) worldviews. Classical authors such as anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, already demonstrated that playful activities like the Balinese cockfight are a form of 'deep play' that mediates issues related to masculinity, social- and cultural identity.

Similar points can be made about the playing of video games, particularly the popular

genre of Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games. Many of these games are not just 'magic circles' in a functional sense, but full-fledged virtual fantasy worlds infused with religious narratives and tropes about supernatural deities, transcendent spirits, animated objects, mysticism and magic. These games, then, offer players the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in a world of religion without necessarily converting to a particular tradition; through role playing they are motivated to experience enchantment without belief and freely experiment with religious narratives, roles and identities within the boundaries of the 'magic circle'.

Interestingly, such religious experiments often spill over to 'real' life. Just as players of *Monopoly* might learn about the workings of market capitalism and beneficial attitudes towards it, (role) players engaging with religious content in (video) games negotiate religious meanings beyond the realm of play. Players of various (non-)religious backgrounds often enact religious performances in games that contradict their offline denominations and, by "playing the religious Other", develop empathy towards their perspective on the world. Religious role-playing thus ads to relativism and religious reflexivity amongst players – it is an unstable, open-ended form of meaning-making that is not restricted to the game since it impinges upon offline worldviews. Some players intentionally pursue religious meaning in the games that they play, approaching them as a 'spiritual supermarket' packed with potential meaning to excavate. Evidenced by the construction of 'fiction-based' religions such as Jediism, Matrixism and – perhaps most famously – Scientology, (video) games are, by some, considered as religious sources that are subjected to religious bricolage.

With the decreased belief in the historical accuracy of various religious texts (e.g. the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran), fictitious texts of popular culture have ironically become an equally valid source for individuals to construct ultimate meaning. This makes (role) playing

(video) games a fertile topic for the study of religion and spirituality in allegedly secularized

Western society.

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HEADWORD LIST

Culture; Hyper-Real Religion; Individualization; Media; Reenchantment and Disenchantment

FURTHER READINGS

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