



*Routledge Studies in Religion and Digital Culture*

# **METHODS FOR STUDYING VIDEO GAMES AND RELIGION**

Edited by  
Vít Šisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler  
and Xenia Zeiler



# Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion

Game studies have been an understudied area within the emerging field of digital media and religion. Video games can reflect, reject, or reconfigure traditionally held religious ideas and often serve as sources for the production of religious practices and ideas. This collection of essays presents a broad range of influential methodological approaches that illuminate how and why video games shape the construction of religious beliefs and practices, and also situates such research within the wider discourse on how digital media intersect with the religious worlds of the twenty-first century. Each chapter discusses a particular method and its theoretical background, summarizes existing research, and provides a practical case study that demonstrates how the method specifically contributes to the wider study of video games and religion. Featuring contributions from leading and emerging scholars of religion and digital gaming, this book will be an invaluable resource for scholars in the areas of digital culture, new media, religious studies, and game studies across a wide range of disciplines.

**Vít Šisler** is Assistant Professor of New Media Studies at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. His research addresses critical approaches to the intersection of culture and digital media, namely the internet, social media, video games, the networked public sphere, and online communities.

**Kerstin Radde-Antweiler** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, Germany. Her research focuses on mediatized religion, mediatization theory, Pagan and Christian traditions, ritual studies, and actor-centered religious historiography.

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# **Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion**

**Edited by Vít Šisler,  
Kerstin Radde-Antweiler  
and Xenia Zeiler**

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# Foreword

I have always wondered why academia has not taken video games as seriously as they should. As a billion dollar business with massive social and technological impact, digital game studies should have as much prominence within universities as film studies, but it certainly does not. It feels as if there is a scientific paradigm in place that views digital games as only games. Perhaps it is because many of the people within the ivory tower don't play them. They may have distant memories of *Pong* and *Tetris* as interesting cultural artifacts and current views in line with popular impressions of video games as just violent expressions of discontent aimed at disenfranchised youth. However, the reality of the situation is much different. When the Sony Corporation released its first quarter results of 2016 and 78% of its profit (\$546 million) was generated from digital gaming, it was an indication that we should all be paying attention.

This current book is a great step in changing academic attitudes. One of the key issues digital games studies faces is moving from anecdotal descriptions to critical analysis. This can only be done with significant developments in theory and methods—methods being the priority and the groundwork that the theoretical analysis can then soundly develop from. *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion* provides key insight into methodological issues and the critical concerns academics face when they begin to explore the digital gaming realm. In some cases, traditional research methods may be adequate for finding religious narratives, symbols, and content embedded within the environment. In other situations, sound and solid methods such as deep ethnography can be developed and altered for this new environment. In other cases, new methods and approaches need to be developed for studying the gaming world. A prime example of this is the approach of “gamevironments,” which look to see how religion in games is produced, transmitted, consumed, and replicated.

As these methods develop, they provide researchers the tools they need to try and figure out what is going on here. Digital gaming has completely permeated our culture. Mobile devices, high-speed wireless internet, and incredible gaming platforms have altered society on such a massive scale that it is overwhelming.

By having sound methods, we can begin to try and assess the full cultural impact of this activity. This is not an easy task, but it is an essential one. New games and gaming platforms continue to provide different cultural experiences, the most

recent being the Nintendo Switch. Along with incredible games, the device operates in a number of different settings and situations, allowing for various forms of interaction. How does the Switch change our way of being? If you are not a gamer it won't, but I have always been a gamer and, take it from me, that new device has changed everything. We should probably try to figure out what that means, because there is a steady stream of new games and platforms on the horizon.

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June 1, 2017

# Acknowledgements

The idea for this book originally came about in the summer of 2014 at the International Conference on Media, Religion and Culture held in Canterbury, UK. The three years leading to its publication were filled with intense work and effort. However, it has been a work of passion. We would like to acknowledge the direct and indirect support we received from various individuals during the time we spent working on the project. We want to thank Gregory Price Grieve, Mia Lövheim and Heidi Campbell for their encouragement and continuous support of the project idea. We would also like to thank the contributors to this book for their insightful, inspiring texts. Finally, Marta Kolárová deserves special thanks for the great editing job she did on the manuscript.



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# **Introduction**



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# Level Up

## Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion

*Xenia Zeiler*

While it has been more than half a century since the first video games were released, their academic study took time to evolve. But at the latest since the 2000s, video games have become a serious field of research within the humanities. The steadily increasing interest in studying games is interconnected with the understanding that video games are a branch of popular culture and certainly with raising sales figures, which make games a major economic factor within the entertainment industry. In 2014, more than 1.7 billion people played games worldwide and spent 77 billion dollars on hard- and software (Burke 2014). In his famous manifesto, game theorist Eric Zimmerman (2013) goes as far as to declare the twenty-first century a “ludic century.” According to Zimmerman, the twentieth century was a century of linear, non-interactive information with the moving image (film and video) as dominant cultural form. In contrast, in the twenty-first century, information “has been put at play.” Media and culture in the ludic century are becoming increasingly “systemic, modular, customizable and participatory” (Zimmerman 2013). This means that games or “experiences very much like games” now replace linear media, and increasingly shape basically all aspects of a person’s life, such as leisure time, art, design, and entertainment (Zimmerman 2013).

Games open new forms of representations as well as communication and serve as platforms for negotiations and constructions—of society and culture in general, and of religion in particular. From classic video games such as the *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986) to more recent releases such as *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft 2014), religion plays an integral part in these games. Game authors increasingly use mythologies and belief systems as their referents, making tangible connections to the outside world (Šisler 2014). Games with explicitly religious content appear on the market, coming from diverse religious traditions and backgrounds and ranging from proselytization to education and cultural dialogue. As a consequence, games can reflect, reject, or reconfigure religious ideas and are a source for the construction of religious practices and ideas in modernity (Geraci 2012).

Campbell and Grieve (2014a: 2) argue that video games are an important space for exploring the intersection between religion and contemporary culture. They help us understand how people understand religion and what it means in a changing contemporary society. Echoing the notion of the “ludic century,” Campbell and Grieve contend that just as films helped to illuminate and expose the religiosity of

the twentieth century, digital games now depict the religious world of the twenty-first century (Šisler 2017: 127). At the same time, the study of religion and video games remains one of the most understudied elements in the study of religion and media (Campbell and Grieve 2014a: 2). Even though the research on video games and religion has proliferated in the last decade, yielding a number of monographs and edited volumes as well as numerous book chapters and journal articles, the existing research essentially provides rather anecdotal evidence on the subject matter and varies greatly in aims, subjects, and methods. As the field of video gaming and religion expands, the need grows to critically reflect on the issues of how to study this field in a more organized way, with suitable methods, and to systematize and develop adequate methodological approaches.

This volume is intended to contribute to filling this void, theoretically as well as empirically, by investigating possible methodological ways in which the intersections of video games, gaming, and religion can be studied. It collects, systematizes, and critically discusses the application of methods—including those established and widely used as well as innovative methods. We understand a method as a systematic, clearly defined, step-by-step technique, practice, or approach applied to analyze a sample of data in the light of a specific research question. Consequentially, each chapter in this volume focuses on one method, which is presented and discussed in a standardized format. After discussing the theoretical background and summarizing the existing research, a practical case study demonstrates in detail how the method specifically contributes to the study of video games and religion. A critical discussion highlights the benefits and limits of the respective method.

## The Study of Video Games and Religion

When looking at the existing studies, it becomes clear that the study of games and religion encompasses various “core” disciplines, such as religious studies, theology, and, more broadly, cultural studies. But disciplines beyond this scope—for example, education, psychology, sociology, and, of course, game studies—also take some interest in the interconnection of games and religion. Since the early 2000s, a number of extended publications (edited volumes, monographs, and special journal editions) account for the broad variety of foci. The first edited volume, *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Detweiler 2010), for example, stays relatively broad; it discusses several video games and included the perspectives of religious actors, game designers, and academics. Later, monographs had more detailed foci, and not surprisingly often took up new gaming genres or trends. A good example might be the focus on *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games* (MMORPGs), which prevailed in a number of monographs, including, for example, Bainbridge’s (2013) *eGods: Faith versus Fantasy in Computer Gaming* and Geraci’s (2014) *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*.

A number of more recent edited volumes and special issues in journals aim at a more comprehensive understanding of video games and religion. First and foremost, the groundbreaking edited volume *Playing with Religion in Digital*