Digital Watchmakers: Playing With the Sacred in Digital Games

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Abstract

With video games establishing itself as a multi-billion dollar industry, academia as a whole has been slowly looking at the medium as an object of study. The field of religious studies has also begun to take notice of it. At face value, this is a great way to observe concepts of religiosity in a fairly new medium. In spite of this, the same questions are being asked. The first is how are the narrative of games depicting religious motifs? Second is what can we learn through the social interactions of people within a digital space about religion? Finally, how are religious groups interacting with the medium through play and/or creation? Although these are great questions for the medium at hand, it is not addressing the one unique aspect of video games. This is the fact that they are interactive. Thus I intend to critique how the field thus far seems to view the medium, and further prove that the following questions need to be addressed. How are game mechanics and systems representing religion? What is the experience of the player interacting with those systems. Finally, what does this analysis say about the creators of games and those that play them.

Introduction

Video games are no longer just fun and games. Some games in fact could be argued to not be any fun at all. In spite of this, they still find ways to become more and more engaging regardless of fun. Thus we have now hit a critical point within the games industry where developers can create more complex games and thus more complex narratives. This creates an atmosphere in which games have finally reached the maturity in its art form to truly permeate popular culture. In fact they are slowly rivaling other mediums like comics, books and even movies. Therefore, their growing popularity forces the industry to create more and more games that reach all sorts of different audiences. It is because of this that I have had a growing interest in studying games as a reflection of culture. With games reflecting culture more and more, I have found that not so secretly, religion has been in games from the very beginning. This however often goes unnoticed by the public and is simply ignored. I then propose that we need to seriously look into games academically to see what games have to say about the culture of others and that of our own.

What can be derived from above is that I have an increasing interest in the relationship between religion and video games. From what I can tell, I am not the only one with this growing interest. However, in spite of the growing interest I have begun to notice that the type of studies do not vary from study to study. As it stands there are a few different types of studies in the field at the moment that ask one of the following questions. The first asks the question how is religion represented in the narrative of games? The second asks how do the social interactions between players create a religious discourse? Thirdly, how are games created from the religious perspective? And finally, how are religious groups interacting with video games?

The purpose of this project is to explore and critique the major works found within the field at the moment. Following this, I would like to propose that academics should begin asking the following two questions:

Questions:

• How are video games representing religion, religious elements, and spirituality in the various mechanics?
• What does the abstraction of religions say about those that create them and those that play them?

Analysis

Rachel Wagner
• Parallel of physical sacred space & digital sacred space
• Argues separation of digital ritual from sacred ritual is “earnestness”

Kevin Schut
• Argues that the abstraction of games into game mechanics is detrimental to the religions they depict
• Recognition of a functionalist lens in games

Liel Leibowitz
• Argues that games ultimately hold no meaning due to finite possibility
• Ignores authorial intent and the possibility of embodiment
• Transcendence

Critique

• Experience of abstraction of religious religion through participation

Conclusion

As it stands, academia has been paying attention to video games as a medium worthy of study. Although this is the case it has become clear that even though the intentions are well meaning, there seems to be a lack of understanding of what makes this medium unique. The fact that it is inherently interactive changes how we should approach the study of games. Much of the work done seems to analyze narratives of games that may hold religious elements. They also have focused on social interactions that are often found in games like World of Warcraft in which players that have passed are memorialized in the digital world by their friends. Even so, there is still a hole in the research.

The major works thus far have made some steps toward the analysis of the mechanics and systems found within games. However, I would argue that further steps need to be taken. They acknowledge that how we interact with the medium but have yet to put this interaction under the microscope. Furthermore, by not placing an emphasis on the systems that inherently make video games what they are, we are essentially missing the point. Through further analysis of these mechanics alongside narrative we are given a window into the world of the creator. Thus this can be extrapolated and learn not only more about the creator, but the society they live in. They themselves are influenced by cultural and societal norms that influence their conceptions of religion and further alter their perception of the phenomena.