RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE IN VIDEO GAMES:

A CURRICULAR PROPOSAL

FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

by

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Abstract

The ubiquity and popularity of video games suggest a new medium for religious education. However, the capitalistic and militaristic architecture of many evangelical Christian video games undermines their potential for faithful religious education. Thus, these video games ironically propagate a curriculum of redemptive violence. Video games with religious educational aspirations call for a distinctively religious architecture that intertwines aspects of myth, identity, contemplation, discernment, revelation, transcendence, mutuality, and creativity.

Introduction

Video games rival the popularity of other media. In 2004, U.S. video game software sales totaled 7.7 billion USD, while U.S. box office sales totaled 9.5 billion dollars USD (Kerr 2006, 47-52). In 2007, U.S. sales of video game consoles, hardware, software and accessories totaled almost 19 billion USD (Riley 2008). Video game players represent a diverse demographic. Almost all American adolescents and about half of American adults report playing video games (cf. Lenhart et al. 2008a; 2008b). Media theorist Henry Jenkins suggests that this increased popularity now enables video game designers with the potential "of reaching a broader public, of having a great public impact, of generating more diverse and ethically responsible content, and of creating richer and more emotionally engaging content" (Jenkins 2005b, 187). Increasingly, video games are attracting the growing attention of the academy.[1] In summary, video games aren't just "kids' stuff" anymore.

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[1] See, for example, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Comparative Media Studies program (http://cms.mit.edu/) and The Education Arcade (http://www.educationarcade.org/), the University of Wisconsin-Madison GLS group (http://www.gameslearningsociety.org/), the University of Southern California Interactive Entertainment Program (http://interactive.usc.edu/research/games/), and the Georgia Institute of Technology Digital Media program (http://www.lcc.gatech.edu/graduate/dmphd/). The MacArthur Foundation currently funds a five-year, $50 million research initiative to study the intersection of digital technologies, learning, and the civic lives of young people (http://digitallearning.macfound.org/). In addition, several online associations

Video games are not all alike, but they still reflect some similarities. Taxonomist Mark J. P. Wolf identifies more than 40 video game genres (Wolf 2005, 295). Despite these differences, social scientists note that player experience tends to produce a degree of personal identification with the onscreen persona (cf. Turkle 1995; Turkle 2005; Gee 2007; Hawisher and Selfe 2007). Thus, many video game players imagine themselves as heroic figures on a messianic mission to save virtual worlds.

This study seeks to introduce a conversation between video games and literature with religious education and curriculum theory. Throughout this study, religion is understood as that which seeks to evoke a spirit of "duty and reverence"—ethical sensitivity and transcendent awe—for God and Creation (Whitehead [1929] 1967, 12). Curriculum (Latin *currere*) is understood as that which encompasses both a "course" to be run and the "running" of that course. Thus, curriculum signifies both content and process, both noun and verb.

The question "Can popular culture mediate religion?" divides scholars. Some commentators maintain that popular culture can evoke the transcendent (Babin 1970, 184-185; Hess 1999, 281) while mediating myth and meaning (Browne, Fishwick and Browne 1990; Mazur and McCarthy 2001). Others argue that popular culture tends to dilute or flatten religious tradition (Schultze 2001, 43; Hoover 2001, 56). Despite these criticisms, David Chidester wryly argues in his book *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* that "Even a fake religion … can do religious work" (2005, 219).

Can video games do religious work? Certainly, the evangelical Christian community thinks so. For decades, game designers have labored to leverage the power of video games for

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sponsor lively and readable conversation among academics, industry leaders, and community members, including the Digital Games Research Initiative (http://www.digra.org/), Serious Games (http://seriousgames.ning.com/), and the peer-reviewed online journal *Game Studies* (http://gamestudies.org/). SAGE Publications also produces a quarterly journal entitled *Games and Culture* (http://gac.sagepub.com/).

religious education in the evangelical Christian tradition.[2] This study considers two examples—

Left Behind: Eternal Forces (2006) and *Catechumen* (2000), both for Microsoft Windows.

Left Behind: Eternal Forces

This real-time strategy (RTS) game enlists the player as a field marshal who leads an

army into spiritual warfare against the antichrist's minions on the streets of post-Rapture New

York City. Along the way, the player recruits "neutrals" one by one, trains them for battle, and

sends them into combat. "Recruitment" is the game's euphemism for the practices of personal

evangelism and conversion. The video game website invites the player to "Conduct warfare

using the power of PRAYER and WORSHIP as more powerful weapons than guns."[3] However,

the video game FAQ acknowledges that *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (*LB:EF*) engages players in

"2 distinct types of warfare"—physical and spiritual.[4] At the same time, the FAQ purports to

offer an "alternative" and a "substitute" for "the degrading moral values of games like 'Grand

Theft Auto:'"

> LEFT BEHIND: Eternal Forces was developed to provide an alternative form of
> entertainment to those desiring more positive game content, while still engaging
> core gamers in battle. The difference is that our game features fictional battles set
> on the stage of an apocalyptic world. Our game includes no intestines, no blood
> spatter, no severed limbs, no vulgar language, no sexual conduct, no morally
> reprehensible conduct – such as cop-killing, prostitute-bashing, or other criminal
> behavior, no Bible-bashing believers, no Bible thumpers, no radical extremists
> killing in the name of God, no abortion clinic stalkers…

The FAQ weakly differentiates between spiritual and physical warfare, between sanitized

and gratuitous violence. For example, he FAQ declares, "Christians are quite clearly taught to

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[2] Numerous examples abound, as catalogued at the archival *Moby Games* website. Titles, game descriptions, cover art, and screen shots are catalogued at http://www.mobygames.com/genre/sheet/religion/ (accessed September 9, 2010).

[3] Left Behind Games: *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*: Features. http://www.eternalforces.com /features.aspx. (accessed September 9, 2010).

[4] Left Behind Games: *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*: FAQ. http://www.eternalforces.com/faq.aspx (accessed September 9, 2010).

turn the other cheek and to love their enemies. It is equally true that no one should forfeit their

lives to an aggressor who is bent on inflicting death. Forgiveness does not require absolute

defenselessness." Ironically, the FAQ goes so far as to imply that occasional killing is necessary,

though undesirable. It reads, "…unnecessary killing will result in lower Spirit points."

Successful game play in *LB:EF* hinges upon the accumulation of spirit points. Like most

RTS games, *LB:EF* allows the player's combat units to gather and stockpile points in categories

such as health, defense, strength, attack speed, and spirit. These statistics require ongoing

management in order to retain a combat advantage. However, spirit points slowly but steadily

atrophy over time—the existential predicament and inevitable outcome of a sinful nature. This

condition demands that the player frequently press the "Pray" key in order to maintain a high

level of spirit points. Units with low spirit points show a red bar over their heads, indicating that

they belong to evil. Units with high spirit points show a green bar over their head, indicating that

they belong to God. Units with grey bars over their heads are "neutrals" who are ripe for

"recruiting." Recruiting and "training" are *LB:EF's* answer to the practices of personal

evangelism and discipleship. Throughout game play, the player scans the city streets looking for

easy recruits with grey bars. A successfully recruited neutral will flash with divine power,

transforming from an unkempt vagrant or thug into a neatly trimmed white man dressed in a

sweater vest (figure 1). Apparently, uniformity is a divine virtue. If the player accidentally

shoots a neutral, then the player's spirit points drop suddenly and dramatically. This proves to be

only a minor inconvenience. By repeatedly pressing the Pray button, the player's spirit points

are restored, thus enabling the player to reengage the lost with evangelistic zeal.

Figure 1. "Evangelism" in *Left Behind*. First, the player prays before recruiting a "neutral" in order to increase his spirit score (left). Once literally "prayed up", the player locks onto the neutral with a mouse click (center). Resistance is futile because the neutral's spirit score is lower than the player's spirit score. Finally, the converted neutral becomes a "friend," appropriately dressed in conservative attire (right). All successfully recruited male friends look exactly alike, regardless of their original appearances. *Source: Left Behind: Eternal Forces*

Catechumen

The website for this first-person shooter (FPS) explains that the player is cast in the role

of a "Christian in training" during the reign of Nero for the following mission:[5]

> Choose from eight powerful spiritual weapons. Maximize your firepower …
> Find the lightning sword, the drill sword, the explosive staff and more.

> Encounter Satan's minions and banish them back to their evil realm … With
> your Sword of the Spirit in hand, you must confront the demons head on and
> show them nothing can overcome the power of the Holy Spirit.

> Restore your spiritual health by finding scrolls containing God's Word … you
> survive by faith. When your faith gets too low, pick up the many scrolls
> scattered across the lands to renew your faith and continue your journey …

> Rescue your captured brethren. Your mentor and some of his flock have been
> taken hostage by the Evil Roman Empire, controlled by Satan himself. The
> forces of evil and darkness will claim a great victory if (your mentor) does not
> survive! Take up this quest and fight for the Lord!

Irony runs thick in *Catechumen*. When encountering Roman centurions, the player

coercively "converts" them by shooting them repeatedly. Now on their knees, the disarmed

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[5] N'Lightning Software: *Catechumen*. http://www.n-lightning.com/catechumen.htm (accessed September 10, 2009).

centurions begin an endless loop of head-bobbing prayer (figure 2). *Catechumen's* greatest

irony, however, is concealed in its own name. A catechumen is one who receives the

catechetical instruction as preparation for initiation. If the video game is the catechist, then into

what form of faith is the player being initiated?

Figure 2. "Evangelism" in *Catechumen*. These Roman centurions bow before Christ—and the player—having been overpowered by a spiritual bolt from an angelic sword as the *Hallelujah Chorus* rings. *Source: Catechumen.*

Critical Approaches to Video Game Analysis

Scholars analyze video games from a variety of vantage points—humanities, social

science, design (Mäyrä 2008, 152-167). For the last decade, narratologists and ludologists have

been arguing about the proper method for video game analysis. Narratologists maintain that

video games should be interpreted in terms of explicit stories and narrative order. Ludologists

argue that video games should be understood in terms of implicit rules and procedures, or, "game

mechanics."[6] Some theorists combine these approaches, suggesting that video games are stories *and* rules, fictions *and* mechanics (cf. Juul 2005; Murray 2005).

This narrative and procedural totality can be referred to as a form of "architecture."[7] For example, Jenkins (2004) describes the stories and rules of video games as an integrative "narrative architecture." Video game architecture fundamentally shapes player behaviors and experiences. Lawrence Lessig speaks to this point:

> The software and hardware that make cyberspace what it is constitute a set of constraints on how you behave … They constrain some behavior by making other behavior possible or impossible. The code embeds certain values or makes certain values impossible (2006, 124-125).

In this light, video game architecture functions as a form of curriculum. Just as architecture shapes one's physical experience, so curriculum shapes one's educational experience. Sometimes curriculum or architecture stands out overtly and explicitly as a primary focal point. Other times, they remain subtly and implicitly unnoticed—exerting influence in quiet ways. Learning is constituted by explicit and implicit curricular experience. Similarly, video game play is constituted by explicit and implicit architectural experience. Teachers construct rhetorical and ideological arguments through curriculum. Similarly, video games mount rhetorical and ideological arguments through architecture.[8]

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[6] For a technical treatment of the ludology/narratology debate, see Marie-Laure Ryan's essay "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media," and Jesper Juul's article "Games Telling Stories?" in the inaugural issue of *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/).

[7] Law professor Lawrence Lessig famously describes cyberspace in terms of architecture (1999; 2006). He alternately correlates the architecture of cyberspace in terms of software code (1999, 12), a political structure (1999, 20), a law that orders behavior (1999, 59), a process of regulation (1999, 83), a constellation of sovereign spaces (1999, 198), a built environment (2006, 341) and an influential environment (2006, 345).

[8] Technologist Ian Bogost has written extensively on this subject. He contends that operations and procedures in video games "embody themselves in a player's understanding"—albeit subtly and implicitly (2006, 99). He also argues that "exploring the manifestation of game rules in player experience is perhaps the most important type of work game criticism can do (2006, 131). Elsewhere, Bogost describes this phenomenon as "procedural rhetoric"—the way in which video game procedures work together in order to mount persuasive arguments about aspects of value, truth, and reality (2007). He surmise, "This is really what we do when we *play* videogames: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game's controls" (2007, 43).

Video game architecture can function as a "religious architecture" to the extent that it emphasizes the ethical and transcendent. These qualities are reflected in a video game's use of story, its attempted construction of player identity, and its procedural logic of player action. Below, the religious architecture of both *LB:EF* and *Catechumen* are considered briefly.

Religious Architecture in LB:EF and Catechumen

The stories of both video games are overtly apocalyptic. They deal with dualistic themes. Good and evil forces play out their conflict upon a cosmic tableau of warfare, both physically and spiritually. The stakes in each story are literally life and death, not only for the player for others in the game. The role of sacred text in each story is peripheral, not central. Put another way, the story is framed primarily by an ideology, and only secondarily by scripture.

Player identity in both video games hinges upon power and control. Success in each game is a matter of strategic path finding, point accumulation, and domination of the opponent. The careful management of various economies—strength points, money points, weapon points, defense points, spirit points, etc.—guarantee player dominance. The player is a vigilante, a superhero, even a demagogue as in *LB:EF*. Mutuality and interdependence give way to absolute autonomy.

Player practices in both video games share some similarities. Although each game is steeped in a religious rhetoric of divine initiative, the primary agent in each game is the player. Any potential for divine intervention is almost fully subsumed by player agency. Real-time action trumps contemplative reflection. Competencies in combat and commerce overshadow competencies in discernment. In both games, statistical management and tactical maneuvering are as close as the player comes to discipleship and devotion. Scripture scrolls in *Catechumen*

function only as objects used to restore lost health points. In *LB:EF*, prayer functions only as a means to accumulate spirit points for dominating others.

A Religious Architecture of Redemptive Violence

Walter Wink claims that violence is the "ethos," "spirituality," "myth," and "religion" that "undergirds American popular culture" (1992, 13). Wink traces the development of this myth to the ancient Babylonian story of Marduk (the god of order) and Tiamat (the god of chaos). When Marduk defeats Tiamat, he dismembers her to create the world. Thus, Creation literally proceeds from violence, and human beings are fated to strive against chaos through violence. Within this framework, violence is a redemptive force. Wink writes, "Salvation *is* politics: identifying with the god of order against the god of chaos, and offering oneself up for the holy war required to impose order and rule…" (1992, 16). The myth of redemptive violence sees aggression as inevitable and necessary—even desirable—in order for the world to know peace.

Wink also argues that the myth of redemptive violence misappropriates religious culture as a means of indoctrination (1992, 22-30). His eloquence at this point deserves its own hearing.

> The myth of redemptive violence is nationalism become absolute. This myth speaks *for* God; it does not listen for God to speak. It invokes the sovereignty of God as its own; it does not entertain the prophetic possibility of radical denunciation and negation by God. It misappropriates the language, symbols and scriptures of Christianity. It does not seek God in order to change; it claims God in order to prevent change. Its God is not the impartial ruler of all nations but a biased and partial god worshiped as an idol. Its metaphor is not the journey but a fortress. Its symbol is not the cross but a rod of iron. Its offer is not forgiveness but victory. Its good news is not the unconditional love of enemies but their final liquidation. Its salvation is not a new heart but a successful foreign policy. It usurps the revelation of God's purposes for humanity in Jesus. It is blasphemous. It is idolatrous (1992, 30).

The myth of redemptive violence appeals to religious sensibilities in order to extend its ideology. Within this framework, aggression brings atonement, violence mediates virtue, and God's Reign is twisted into a Domination System (Wink 1992, 107, 154-154, 186-187).[9]

Games such as *LB:EF* and *Catechumen* ritualize vengeance. Chaos must always threaten the world, setting the stage for the advent of a vengeful savior. Otherwise, there is little reason to play. Domination is the savior's creed; redemptive violence is the path to victory; combat is a means of grace. Games like *LB:EF* and *Catechumen* do not offer victory through flight, nonviolence, or reconciliation. The architecture of domination is "hard wired" into the procedural logic of the game. Even if the player dies, recursive resurrection ensures eventual dominance. Resurrection neither promises nor inaugurates cosmic renewal. Sooner or later, points produce eschatological victory. Acting unilaterally, the player incrementally ascends to the rank of biggest bully on the playground. Wink describes this as "violent mimesis"—becoming that which is hated (1992, 195-208).

Richard Garriott's Ultima Series:
An Alternative Religious Architecture

The religious architecture of Richard Garriott's historic *Ultima* series sharply contrasts with *LB:EF* and *Catechumen*.[10] *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1985)[11] begins with a quiz that

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[9] Wink hospitably acknowledges that at the same time he first presented the myth of redemptive violence, John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett were "developing a similar thesis along other lines, and in far more penetrating detail (Wink 1992, 330-331n). Lawrence and Jewett describe their "myth of the American superhero" as a peculiar blend of crusade and crucifixion that produces a unique kind of "supersavior" (2002, 6-7). Supersaviors are those take it upon themselves to protect communities without practicing citizenship, to pursue justice through the practice of vigilantism, and to seize the seat of leadership without practicing mutuality (2002, 48). Like Wink, Lawrence and Jewett suggest that the theological archetype of the supersavior is widespread within popular culture mass media. Lawrence and Jewett suggest that videogames "offer a new style of mythic socialization with intense personal involvement … The interactive game experience now allows the participant to *be* a savior and to feel viscerally the pleasures of redeeming a situation from threat" (2002, 200). In their analysis of first-person shooter games like *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996), Lawrence and Jewett observe that the "firmly established traditions of this genre presume that your finger must always be on the trigger, that you must be ready to kill easily defined enemies, and that you will hesitate only for tactical reasons" (2002, 217).

paradoxically juxtaposes virtues (figure 3) and determines the player's in-game profile. The

player must seek enlightenment and practice discernment in order to usher the world of Britannia

into an age of peace. Superficially, *Ultima IV* functions as a conventional quest for wealth and

power. Subversively, the game secretly monitors the player's behavior in terms of compassion,

honesty, honor, humility, justice, sacrifice, spirituality, and valor. Without virtue, victory is

impossible, yet the path of virtue remains partially concealed. Only the player's spiritual

directors can offer faithful guidance toward self-transcendence (figure 4). *Ultima IV* is not

intended as formal religious instruction. Nevertheless, it provides a helpful counterpoint to

LB:EF and *Catechumen*. Although space does not allow much comment, *Ultima V: Warriors of

Destiny* (1988) can be read in part as a cautionary tale against retributive fundamentalism and

totalizing ideologies. Likewise, *Ultima VI: The False Prophet* (1990) can be read in part as a

prophetic parable about ethnocentrism and racial reconciliation.[12] The *Ultima* series does not

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[10] Garriott explores religious themes in his work, although he occasionally describes his interests as philosophical, not religious (Addams 1990, 40-42; Spector 1992, 367). He argues, "Games that treat religion realistically, weaving it into the game as it is woven into people's lives, can provide a richer and more realistic simulation … Spirituality lends the game world credibility and completeness. The search for meaning in life is universal, and a shallower life of conflict and treasure collecting will never match the strength of a game that includes ethical or spiritual underpinnings (Bub 2002).

[11] *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* is now available as freeware on the Internet. It may be downloaded at http://xu4.sourceforge.net/. An additional download called a "snapshot" eliminates a few crippling bugs in the freeware file. The user should understand that this freeware does not fully emulate the play of the original. For example, the clock speed runs faster when meditating at shrines, temporarily hastening the pace of the game's contemplative design. Nevertheless, the freeware version is largely faithful to the original experience of playing *Ultima IV*.

[12] *Ultima VI* initially pits the player against a demonic-looking clan of Gargoyles which, in previous installments of the game, have played a villainous role. This time, however, the player comes to understand that this race is not as it has seemed. As the game unfolds, the Gargoyles emerge as a noble race just like human beings, albeit the victims of suspicion and prejudice. One of the player's primary tasks is to practice mutuality and broker racial reconciliation. One player remembers his experience with the game:

> In Ultimas V and VI, (the designer) created a fearsome race of creatures called the Gargoyles. Throughout these games, you fought and killed them when you could, feeling good that you were ridding the land of a terrible enemy. But, by the end of Ultima VI, you discovered that the Gargoyles were really very civilized, and that you had been systematically, if unknowingly, destroying their world. To me, this is one of the most brilliant moments in computer game history, where I was given the opportunity to come face-to-face with my own ability to create prejudice, and how ignorance can create false impressions (DeMaria and Wilson 2004, 122).

attempt to capture the profundity of any single religious tradition, yet it seems a useful, mythical

platform for making meaning in light of ethical and transcendent aims—all religious concerns.[13]

Figure 3. The Virtue Quiz of *Ultima IV*. The player begins the game by responding to a series of contextual, ethical dilemmas. The abacus provides the player with cryptic, visual feedback that graphically organizes her relative moral profile. *Source: Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar.*

Figure 4. Seeking Spiritual Direction in *Ultima IV*. Hawkwind the Seer prepares to advise a hopeful player. *Source: Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar.*

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[13] Elsewhere, I have written at length about this series: *Religious Architecture in Videogames: Perspectives from Curriculum Theory and Religious Education* (Doctoral dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2009), and "Ultima IV: Simulating the Religious Quest" in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler, 34-46. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press.

Conclusion

Video games may still be in their infancy as a popular cultural art form.[14] Jenkins

(2005a) makes a strong case for this, arguing that it will take years for the medium to mature in

the same way that television and film matured over time. Meanwhile, educators and sociologists

and artists and religious leaders will continue to debate the potential meaning and actual

significance of video games. Perhaps video games offer more to religious education than new

media platforms for story telling and myth making. Perhaps video games may also offer a

palette with which whole worlds may be designed, full of complex systems for the simulation

and emulation of religious visions and concerns. At the same time, it seems likely that any

religious potential for video games will be deeply entangled with conflicting market forces and

industry conventions. This study has attempted to investigate the state of the art, with particular

attention given to scholarly and popular literature in the field of video game studies from the

light of religious education and curriculum theory. Further research before this new medium is

either sanctified or dismissed as an avenue for religious education.

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[14] For a compelling, autobiographical assessment of video games as evocative art, see Tom
Bissell's (2010) *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Pantheon Books).

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