

# Playing the Gospel of Video Games

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## **Abstract**

Even before modern technological era, there was a close relationship between religious education and technology. Religion has helped many people to understand new technologies and technologies have led to new understandings of religion, and even new forms of religion. Religious education can focus on a variety of sacred concerns including myth, ritual, symbol, scripture, doctrine and experience, and furthermore as Jeff Astley (Astley, 1994) says in a context can and does encompass indoctrination, personal formation, reasons and emotions. However these concerns tend to fall into two general categories the ethical one (or relational) and transcendental one. Nowadays a variety of video games explicitly aim toward religion. Video games researchers note that within video games, religion tends to suffer from a narrative and procedural incongruity. For example Michael Walthemathe suggests that video games provide a narrative and procedural platform for playful identity formation and ethical reflection, Ian Bogost (Bogost, 2007, p. 288) observes that religious video games are undermining their religious aims by adopting the conventions of mainstream video games genres without regard for their implicit procedural rhetoric.

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Also Harry J. Brown (Brown, 2008, pp. 104 – 107) notes that along with the promotion of an ethical concern for the weak, video games promote a reactive ethic of vigilantism and violence against all members of a given social class or oppositional alignment. So if video games once struggled for legitimacy as a cultural product, today the business of video games is booming, and increasingly the art of video games is turning to religious themes as not just inspiration but as central plot elements. We find moral decisions, invented religions, the power to create and experience virtual religious spaces and much more outcomes like these. Through a consideration of a list of popular video games this article proposes to show how video games teach their players the new gospel of cyberspace, where they can be what they want without effort and major consequences for the real life.

**Key Words:** Video Games, Religion, Religious Education, Technology

## **Introduction**

Nowadays religiously oriented video games have gained media and public attention. For instance evangelical Christians created *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, a video game based on a popular fiction series dramatizing the end of the world as told through Revelation.

Judaism has his own games superheroes as seen in *The Shivah: A rabbinical adventure of mourning and mystery*. The protagonist of the game, Rabbi Stone must solve the mystery behind a monetary gift related to a crime.

This trend was adopted by Muslim too, resulting in *Islamogamig*, which cultural critic Ed Halter describes as a diverse field, ranging from amateur projects by students, unabashed anti-Zionist propaganda produced by an internationally recognized terrorist organization, religious games designed to explore the complex realities of Middle Eastern history.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Campbell, 2010, p. 64.

In this paper I want to point out the link between religious education and video games. Also i want to show that video games started decades ago to replace traditons and cultures and tries to supply the human's spiritual needs.

### **What are Video Games?**

A simple Google search brings up the definition: “a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer program on a television screen or other display screen.”<sup>1</sup>

Popular website, Wikipedia, describes video games as “an electronic game that involves human interaction with a user interface to generate visual feedback on a video device such as a TV screen or computer monitor.”<sup>2</sup>

So a video game is a set of stimulating images that are manipulated by a user via some form of computer program. Usually these image manipulation has a goal to achieve, which revolves around a plot or story.

Many of the early video games, like Pong, were devoid of religion. In fact, none of them had any detailed narratives and complex actions. The earliest of games were found in the arcade, and were extremely limited by the technology of the time, and presupposition that video games were a secular, leisure activity for children. When the market opened up for computer and more complicated console games, the narratives and actions of the characters became more complex, as the designers were not as limited by the technology.<sup>3</sup>

In time games moved from two to three dimensional, the stories became deeper and longer in duration, also with completing the game the player learn some moral or religious lessons. Eventually from a single story path,

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1. Google: what are video games?

2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video\\_game](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_game), September 10, 2017.

3. Boren, 2016, p. 18.

video games branched off into games involving choices, which would influence how the character developed.

Most games fall within a particular category, others bridge different gaming styles and, thus, could appear under more than one category simultaneously and some of them pioneer new approaches to electronic entertainment.

It is easy to classify particular titles much more narrowly and, thus, create dozens of genres and/or sub-genres, but for the sake of the paper I will attempt to give a broader perspective of types of video games.<sup>1</sup>

Shooter: One of the oldest genres of video game is the classic shooter. It has roots in the early 60s with Steve Russell's Spacewar! Shooters are games that require the player to blow away enemies or objects in order to survive and continue gameplay.

They usually fall into one of two categories: horizontal, or vertical. However, like Spacewar, Star Castle, and Asteroids, there are shooters that are neither horizontal or vertical.

These involve moving around the screen and shooting in whatever direction necessary to keep from being destroyed. Other classic examples include Defender, Galaga, R-Type, Phoenix, Space Invaders, Tempest etc.

First-Person-Shooter (or FPS): This is an example of a sub-genre that has grown enough to become its own genre. In fact, because of the prevalence of these games, many people use the term "shooter" to refer to first-person-shooters.

These games are realtime fast-paced action games in which the player navigates an environment from a first-person perspective and, usually, blows everything and everyone away whenever possible.

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1. <https://www.thocp.net/software/games/reference/genres.htm>, September 10, 2017.

Though Wolfenstein 3D is regarded as the first successful example of this genre, it wasn't until the release of Doom that people began to recognize the true potential of this type of gaming. Doom enabled multiple game players to share in the same game simultaneously via modem and LAN.

This would become the standard of this genre, opening the game format up to multi-player deathmatches that would become so important to the format that some put little effort into story and the single-player experience in general (i.e., Unreal Tournament and Quake III).

Though this is a relatively new genre (since the early 1990s), it has grown in popularity. Examples of first-person-shooter franchises include Wolfenstein 3D, Doom, Duke Nukem 3D, Descent, Marathon, GoldenEye, Halo, Quake, and Time Splitters.

Adventure: Another of the first video game genres, especially from the computer platforms, was the adventure game. These were initially text-based games like Will Crowther's Colossal Cave and the original Zork games. However, as the power of the gaming systems grew, developers tried to tap into the visual capabilities of each consecutive platform.

The Atari VCS offered a game entitled Adventure. Roberta Williams began developing the King's Quest series for Sierra Online in an attempt to add interactive graphics and point-and-click functionality to the more puzzle-oriented traditional text-based adventure.

There has always been a strong following for this genre because of the challenge of puzzle-solving and the general lack of violence. This has also made it popular for many non-traditional gaming demographics. In recent years, LucasArts and Cyan have been known for their contributions to the adventure genre.

Other examples of adventure franchises include Gabriel Knight, Indiana Jones, Maniac Mansion, Monkey Island, Myst, Police Quest, and Syberia.

Platform: It is believed that the platform genre began in 1981 with the release of the games Donkey Kong and Space Panic. Games within this genre are usually identified by navigating environments that require timing and jumping in order to reach a destination while avoiding and/or disposing of enemies.

Many of these, like Donkey Kong, have a series of screens, each with its own individual pattern of challenges. As companies began to develop platform games for home consoles and computers instead of arcade machines (i.e. Super Mario Bros for the Famicom and Nintendo Entertainment system), they took advantage of the evolving processors and greater memory capacity by transcending individual screens and utilizing actively side-scrolling worlds.

This evolutionary step in platform games moved them closer to immersive stories rather than challenging puzzles. Platform video games continued to evolve as gaming became more 3D.

One of the greatest 3D platform games was introduced with the launch of the Nintendo 64 and was called Super Mario 64. Examples of 2D screen-based platform franchises include Bubble Bobble, Burgertime, Donkey Kong, Lode Runner, Mario Bros., and Space Panic.

Examples of 2D scrolling platform franchises include Bonk, Donkey Kong Country, Sonic the Hedgehog, Super Mario Bros., and Vectorman. Examples of 3D platform franchises include Crash Bandicoot, Pac-Man World, Spyro the Dragon, and the aforementioned Super Mario 64.

Role-Playing Games (RPGs): Evolving from pen-and-paper games like Dungeons and Dragons, RPGs are a special type of adventure game that usually incorporate three major elements:

1. A specific quest,
2. A process for evolving a character through experience to improve his/her ability to handle deadlier foes,
3. The careful acquisition and management of inventory items for the quest (i.e., weapons, armor, healing items, food, and tools).

Having said that, these games still have many variations and appearances.

**Puzzle:** In many ways, puzzle video games are not dissimilar from traditional puzzles. What they offer are unique environments that are not as easily introduced in one's living room.

For example, *Wetrix* enables the player to build up a series of walls that would be able to contain a deluge of water when it falls. Successful completion of a level involves capturing enough water. Other examples include *Tetris*, *Intelligent Qube*, *Puzzle Bobble*, *Puyo Puyo*, *Devil Dice*, and *Mercury*.

**Simulations:** By their nature, simulations are attempts to accurately re-create an experience. These can be in the form of management simulations like *SimCity* and *Theme Hospital*, or more hands on like *Microsoft Flight Simulator* or *Gran Turismo*.

**Strategy/Tactics:** Like simulations, strategy/tactics games attempt to capture a sense of realism for the game player to experience. However, these titles are often turn-based as opposed to realtime and they give the player a greater sense of specific control over a situation. Franchises that fall into this genre include *Ogre Tactics*, *Command and Conquer*, *Final Fantasy Tactics*, and *Worms*.

**Sports:** As you can imagine, sports games are those that simulate the playing of sports. Many of these have incorporated novel aspects beyond the games themselves.

For example, most football video games like the Madden series enable the player to create and customize teams and play them for an entire season. Furthermore, many sports games include management elements beyond the games themselves. There is quite a bit of variety in this genre for fans of the games, the players, and the behind the scenes responsibilities of owning a team.

**Fighting:** These titles pit player against player (usually 2 players head-to-head) and involve one triumphing over the other. Many of these games include a single player mode, but the real draw to this genre is the ability to demonstrate one's gaming prowess against a friend. Examples of franchises in this genre include Street Fighter, Soul Calibur, Mortal Kombat, Tekken, Virtua Fighter, Dead or Alive, King of Fighters, and Bloody Roar.

**Dance/Rhythm:** Dance Dance Revolution is probably the single largest franchise in this genre. Of the rest, many require a specialized controller like DDR, but several don't. This grouping of games is differentiated by the timed elements usually synched to music somehow.

Other good examples of this form include Parappa the Rapper, Bust a Groove, Gitaroo Man, Space Channel 5, Frequency, Beatmania, Para Para Paradise, Donkey Konga, and Eyetoy Groove.

**Survival Horror:** As the name suggests, these titles are an interactive evolutionary step of the horror genre. The main gameplay mechanic in these is to "survive" the environment that includes fantastic or supernatural elements that are very frightening and often disturbing. Many of these titles are rated mature because of they are not intended for younger audiences and often include graphic scenes.



Hybrids: It's important to recognize that many games are not limited to a single genre. Some are the combination of two or more game types. In fact, as gaming evolves, we see lines blurred between genres more frequently than not.

Since the introduction of 3D gaming, the action/adventure genre has grown dramatically. It is practically a catch-all category that incorporates 3D games with realtime combat and puzzle-solving in a fairly cohesive storyline. Many of these games are also first-person-shooters. Some are 3D platform titles. And most survival horror titles qualify as Action/Adventure games too. Another example of a hybrid is *Myst*. It is both an adventure game and a puzzle game. However, it is most certainly not an Action/Adventure game.

Even the number of game genres is so big, the video game market is dominated by a few subcategories of genres:

1. Multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) an RTS which contain two separate teams of equal numbers of players fighting to destroy prebuilt structures that appear in the same spot each time you start a new game.

A game last anywhere from 20 minutes to over an hour and the goal is to destroy the other team's structures and ultimately the opposing team's base. Destroying structures, killing minions and killing other players grant your character money, gold, or other types of in-game currency in order to buy items from your base to improve your firepower.

After a game is completed, all progress from that game is wiped out, and if you choose to start a new game, you begin from the very beginning, like the previous one.

The game is typically recorded in your match history. You can choose from a variety of playable characters, sometimes referred to as champions, all with unique skill sets. The amount of customization in MOBAs is rather limited, since all of the characters that you can play are premade.

After a game is completed, all progress from that game is wiped out, and if you choose to start a new game, you begin from the very beginning. The most widely played game in the world is League of Legends.

Professional League of Legends players form teams sponsored by large organizations like Coke, Intel and Nissan and the victors bring in cash prizes of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

2. The RPG are a category of games which controlled the market for a long stretch prior to the introduction and growth of online play.

These types of games will have more social or political commentary, or be more religiously driven than a MOBA because they focus the story, whereas MOBA on the gameplay. Even these games offer hours of content, they may not have as much replay value as a MOBA because RPGs offer no new content when played through again.

3. The massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) is the most extensive game, taking the longest time to develop, and requires regular maintenance of servers and gameplay updates.

The MMORPG takes place in an online environment. While is some guidance as to what the player should be doing in the game, you are free to explore the world, fight monsters, go on quests, follow the main story line, fight other players, ride animals (known as mounts), farm, mine, and so much more at your own leisure.

Like stand alone RPGs the MMORPG offers a level up system. Experience is gained from killing monsters or performing various other tasks.

The MMORPG typically has a storyline for the player to follow that, provides commentary about social, political, and religious issues. It also explores the notion of good vs evil, but will blend the notion in ways that may challenge assumptions of the player. The most notable game of this category is World of Warcraft (WOW).

Since his release in 2004 WOW had five expansions packs, each of them offering more content and religious and mythological lore, expanded the world, brought new characters and much more. In game the player have to chose a side as Horde or Alliance, which are two enemy groups.

After that the player must choose a race<sup>1</sup> between Orcs, Taurens (Minotaur), Undead (less bloodthirsty, stylized zombie-skeletons), Blood Elves (lighter skinned, pointy eared, magical humans with glowing eyes), Trolls, and Goblins (if he chose the Horde) or Human, Dwarf, Gnome, Worgen (Werewolves), Night Elf (blue skinned rather than light skinned like Blood Elves), and the Draenei (if he chose the Alliance).

After choosing a race the player is prompted to chose a class. There are eleven type o classes:<sup>2</sup> the paladin is similar to a warrior, except it wields the power of the light. It is played with either a sword and shield or a two handed weapon.

It can absorb damage for your team, deal massive damage with both the sword and light power, or can focus on healing its teammates with light power. The hunter is a

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1. <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Race>, September 10, 2017.

2. <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Class>, September 10, 2017.

ranged damage dealer wielding a bow or gun. The Rogue is an assassin wielding daggers and using the element of surprise. The priest uses faith based magic, to heal or deal damage. The Death Knight is a sword wielding class that harnesses dark magic to deal or absorb massive damage.

Mages and warlocks are ranged magic damage dealers that differ in their uses of magic: mages deal in fire, ice or arcane, while warlocks channel demonic energy. Shamans are the spiritual leaders of their tribes, and can heal, deal ranged magic or melee magic and physical damage. Monks are physical melee range damage dealers, damage absorbers or healers. The final current playable class, Druids, are nature loving shapeshifters.

After completing the basic beginner missions, the player must leave home to go out and become a hero and save the world.

Many of these story lines follow Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey story arc and weave religious symbols, themes, archetypes and teachings throughout their stories and often by mixing multiple religious traditions or mythological strands.<sup>1</sup>

### **Are Video Games Related with Religion?**

Despite the claims of seminal social thinkers of the nineteenth century- Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud who all believed that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society,<sup>2</sup> this has not come to pass.

Nowadays games are fueled by religious stories.

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1. Boren, 2016, p. 30.

2. Pippa and Inglehart, 2004.

They offer choices that will affect the player's character, they explore the notion of good and evil and the most important they offer out of body experience, whereupon the player will not realize that he or she spent eight hours in a world of fantasy.

Jason Anthony, a video game designer, "describes three particular kinds of religious games: catechistic games that point toward the sacred or are situated in a sacred context but are not themselves sacred; poimonic games in which the divine manifests itself through the game; and praxic games where playing the game is itself a sacred activity."<sup>1</sup>

There exist numerous religious symbols, in the form of churches, holy grounds or crosses and hidden in the form of discrete messages, direct parallels between religious icons and video game characters.

Video games are the next stepping stone for religion. Walter Ong suggests that religion began in an era of orality, was transmitted into visual form through manuscripts writings as well as print, and has now entered the world in a new way via electronic media.<sup>2</sup>

People are not becoming less religious, rather they are finding at once entertainment and spiritual fulfillment in a every day activity in a video game and not through conventional institution.

Some may say that games are authentic fakes: while they contain all of the physical aspects of religion, they ultimately fall short of being a real religion like Christianity.

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1. Anthony, 2012.

2. Ong, 1967. p. 46.

Yet, the experiences of the players, both inside and outside of the games, are very real. The virtual spaces that players engage in are created by humans.

This has a positive and negative effect for the overall argument surrounding video game religion: Something created by man does not hold intrinsic sacred value (in comparison to the Quran in Islam). But, its innate creation by man, like a skyscraper or a computer, is what makes virtual reality real, not fake.

Therefore, players are engaging in real activities with real consequences. Catherine L. Albanese outlines the four main components of a religion in her book *America Religion and Religion*. In it, she says that religions provide the four Cs: creed, code, cultus, and community.

CreeDs are the “explanations about the meaning of human life”<sup>1</sup>, codes are the “rules that govern everyday behavior,”<sup>2</sup> cultuses are the “rituals to act out the insights and understandings that are expressed in creeds and codes,”<sup>3</sup> and communities are “groups of people either formally or informally bound together by the creed, code, and cultuses they share.”<sup>4</sup>

It is easily to see that video games, nowadays fits Albanese’s theory about religion. They build communities around mean-making activities in online sacred spaces, follow rituals such as completing daily activities in game that in turn reward the player.

They are subject to the rules and laws that govern the game and, the it offers explanations for life after, as well as provides both real life and fantasy world meaning-making from their actions.

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1. Catherine and America, 1999. p. 8.
  2. Ibid.
  3. Ibid.
  4. Ibid.

The most recent addition to the gaming world is live streaming and videos. People record themselves playing games and stream the actions of their character along with their real life actions to a streaming website. The most popular of which is Twitch. While some may view the popular streamers as mere entertainers, it is undeniable that they have amassed a large followership that watches them religiously.

Some watch for educational reasons, some for entertainment; most important is the fact that people now spend time watching people play games rather than playing the games themselves.

'This relationship is like a church! The religious head leads the service, and the congregation follows along. The Twitch streamer, much like the religious head, engages with and leads his or her congregation of followers through the religiously inspired games. His or her viewers follow along and engage the streamer through the Twitch chat function. Live streaming has literally become a religious service for video games.

At the very least, this relationship is equivalent to the televangelists, preachers that broadcast their services over live television."<sup>1</sup>

### **Religious Education and Worship Service via Gaming**

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 readable conversation among academics, industry leaders, and community members, including the Digital Games religious education in the evangelical Christian tradition.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Boren, 2016, p. 52.

2. <http://www.mobygames.com/genre/sheet/religion>.

One of the most important key within religious games is to entertain while teaching players about about important aspects of religion and culture.

Christian video games deal with three aspects: first with the fate of the believer and his or her eschatological choices, second they focus on key moment in biblical history and third they tell diluted forms of gospel stories in a moralistic way.

Left behind: Eternal Force, a game that fits in first category of aspects, a real-time strategy type, 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."<sup>1</sup>

However, the video game FAQ acknowledges that Left Behind: Eternal Forces engages players in "distinct types of warfare"- physical and spiritual and it is an alternative for degrading moral values of today games.

It 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 the game features fictional battles set on the stage of an apocalyptic world and includes no intestines, no blood spatter, no severed limbs, no vulgar language, no sexual conduct, no morally reprehensible

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1. <http://www.eternalforces.com/features.aspx>.



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.<sup>1</sup>

As Mark Hayse argue the FAQ weakly differentiates between spiritual and physical warfare, between sanitized and gratuitous violence, for example, FAQ declares, “Christians are quite clearly taught to 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.”<sup>2</sup>

To succeed in *Left Behind: Eternal Life*, the player must accumulate large quantities of spirit points. However spirit point slowly decrease in time so to maintain a high level of spiritual points the player must frequently press the Pray key, that way a unit can belong to God if it has big amount of spiritual points, indicated by a green bar, or it can belong to evil if it has a loe amount of spiritual points, indicated buy a red bar. Recruiting and training are the aswer to the practices of personal evangelism and discipleship.

Through the gameplay, the player can scan the city for neutrals. Neutrals are people with a grey bar and they don't belong to God or evil.

A successfully recruited neutral will flash with divine power, granting a new uniforme, if player shoots a neutral by accident, his spirit points will drop dramatically.

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1. <http://www.eternalforces.com/faq.aspx>, September 9, 2010.

2. Hayse, 2010, pp. 3-4.

Bible Game the second type of Christian Games, is a trivia game to test gamers' biblical knowledge.

The Bible Game casts players as contestants on a game show with fast-paced, "beat the buzzer" action and a comical off-screen announcer as MC. 20 mini- and micro-games with 1,500 questions reinforce inspirational Old Testament teachings such as Jonah and the Whale, David and Goliath, The Tower of Babel, and many more.<sup>1</sup>

Multiplayer mode for up to 4 players encourages family members of all ages to play together, and provides a fun alternative for family game nights. Even the gameplay aim for recruiting kids, the saddest part is how it manages to ignore the core message of Bible in favor of trite Nouveau Christian catchphrases. Jonah: A Veggie Tales Game fits in the third category.

Inspired by the 2002 animated movie, the game tells the story of the prophet Jonah's sojourn to the city of Nineveh to deliver a message of repentance. Utilizing vegetable-based characters, kids five and up help steer Jonah on his God-given mission through a dozen sequential arcade adventures. Completion of each game unlocks the next one, as well as a clip from the movie that ties the story together.

Once unlocked, games can be replayed at anytime. In addition to Jonah (played by the character Archibald Asparagus) and Khalil, the half-caterpillar, half-worm, players employ the help of a lazy band of pirates, led by Larry the Cucumber.

Voiceovers by the movie cast bring the 12 games alive as Jonah and friends travel to Joppa, interact with pirates, encounter a giant whale with singing and dancing angels in its belly, cross a deadly desert, navigate cave mazes, and negotiate a cliff slide.

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1. <https://www.gamespot.com/the-bible-game>, September 15, 2017.

The moral of the story (everyone deserves a second chance in God's eye) comes to light when Jonah delivers the message to the lying, thieving, fish-throwing sinners of Nineveh.

Jonah: A VeggieTales Game features an innovative "egg-timer" that allows caregivers and parents to control the length of time the game will play before automatically saving and shutting down.

A "shutting down period" of five minutes allows game time to be extended through the use of a password and the system tracks each player's time individually.<sup>1</sup> But some Christian groups didn't stop here.

They incorporate the young learner's experiences of meaning in video games into the heart of a public religious rite of passage. In Exeter Cathedral Andy Robertson used a video game named Flower, during a service in 2012.<sup>2</sup>

The game was introduced by the young person's personal practice and the clergy then assisted in helping the learner practice religion through his interaction with the game.<sup>3</sup>

This individual religious learning experience was then shared with the wider community and welcomed them into the learner's personal experience.

Judaism has its own video game superheroes as seen in The Shivah: A rabbinical adventure of mourning and mystery. The title of the game, Shivah, refers to the real life Jewish ritual of a weeklong mourning of the dead.

Dave Gilbert, the creator of the game and founder of Wadjet Eye Games, is Jewish himself.

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1. <https://www.ebay.com/p/Jonah-A-VeggieTales-Game-PC-200230579530>, September 15, 2017.

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wREUXBf6fho>, September 16, 2017.

3. Gottlieb, 2016, p. 18.

Unlike other religious themed games which tend to incorporate preaching of their own gospels and morals, The Shivah does not preach the player to the Jewish faith. Rather, it is a typical adventure game with a Jewish twist.<sup>1</sup>

While the game lacks in visual splendor, the game makes up for it by strong and memorable storytelling. It also features a most unique protagonist. Russell Stone, the player character, is a rabbi. Rabbi Stone is going through a crisis: his synagogue is losing members, his faith is dwindling, and he is nearing bankruptcy.

To top it all off, he is now the primary suspect in a seemingly random coldblooded murder of Jack Lauder, a former member of his synagogue.

The reason for the rift between the victim and the rabbi appears to be thinly veiled, with several hints and suggestions, but nonetheless esoteric.

Obviously, it is up to Rabbi Stone to get the bottom of this mystery and unmask the killer behind this crime. The Shivah has received largely positive reviews. The A.V. Club awarded it a B and stated that "The Shivah fits a compelling moral conscience over a tight decision tree, and compared to sillier interactive fiction like Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney or Hotel Dusk: Room 215, its rewards are subtler, and more satisfying",<sup>2</sup> while FaithGames stated that it is "not only an excellent indie adventure game, but also one of the best examples of portraying faith through a game that I've ever seen"<sup>3</sup>.

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1. <http://www.adventureclassicgaming.com/index.php/site/reviews/842>, September 16, 2017.

2. <https://games.avclub.com/the-shivah-1798211167>, September 16, 2017.

3. <https://faithgames.wordpress.com/2006/11/02/review-of-the-shivah>, September 16, 2017.

In 2006, The Shivah won an AGS Award for Best Dialogue writing<sup>1</sup> and Gilbert won the Lifetime Achievement Award. The Shivah came 2nd in Game Tunnel's Sound award for 2006 and 3rd in their Adventure/Quest Game of the Year awards.<sup>2</sup>

Other Web sites states for The Shivah: "This game is not for everyone; no game is. But if you adore old-school adventure games; and you are willing to overlook antiquated graphics for the sake of a story with actual emotional impact. Then downloading the demos is a mitzvah".<sup>3</sup> And talking about mitzvah, there is a case when at a Reform synagogue used a game during a Jewish religious worship.

"At a Bar Mitzvah, the clergy and staff of the synagogue struggled to reach the child, until they tapped into his passion for Minecraft. Facing a variety of learning differences, the child was eventually able to have a Bar Mitzvah ceremony including a live video tour that he gave of a Minecraft design inspired by his Torah portion. He performed exegesis of the text through designing structures in Minecraft.

The rabbi at the synagogue describes how the community found this to be a deeply moving and meaningful experience for all involved, and cites the use of Minecraft as a key for an important moment in the life of the synagogue and the family."<sup>4</sup>

Islam does not forbid leisure or having fun in permissible ways, so a UK-based company named Abu Isa Games developed in 2006 the game Abu Isa's Quest for knowledge.

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1. <http://americangirlscouts.org/AGSAwards/awards.php?year=2006>, September 16, 2017.

2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Shivah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shivah), September 16, 2017.

3. Campbel, 2010, p. 63.

4. Ibid, p. 18.

According to their statements, the company focus only to provide educational and fun-based games which enable Muslims and non-Muslims to learn and grow their knowledge about Islamic Culture, Civilization and Science.<sup>1</sup>

The introductory story presents the narrative in a simple textual form: Asalaamu Alaikum, Peace be upon you, o student of knowledge. You have chose to embark upon Abu Isa's Quest for knowledge. Sadly one ancient manuscript of the Quran and eight other books of knowledge covering Ahadith and Fiqh have been stolen by a group of evil wizards.

Their plan is to hide these books from mankind unless someone meets their challenge and proves himself worthy of possessing the manuscripts through his knowledge. You have been tasked by the scholars to venture forth and recover these manuscripts. You must answer the questions which are posed to you to prove your worth, while leiminating as many wizards as you find in your path.

Remember, only your knowledge of the Deen will get you through. Begin in the name of Allah. The game utilizes a 3D boardgame pattern.

For every successful move on the board, the player need to answer a question about tenets of Islam such as "What is salat" or "How many pillars or beliefs exist in Islamic belief system?"

After collecting the required number of books of knowledge, the player can finally recover the manuscript of the Quran and win the game. Even the game focuses on practical subjects of religious education or encourage certain qualities such as patience or empathy among players, it lacks on puting players to face ethical problems through which the teaching of Islam could guide them.

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1. <http://www.darul-ishaat.co.uk/store/Abu-Isa-s-Quest-for-Knowledge-Know-the-Shariah.html>, September 16, 2017.

Also the Islamic knowledge and the action of recovering Islamic books are reduced in the game to answering trivia-style question, objectives and bonuses.

So according to video game scholar Liel Leibovitz "the human construct with which video games have most in common isn't television or literature or warfare but religion. It is a practice in rituals, ethics, moralities, and metaphysics."<sup>1</sup> And he claim further that religion is like a video game: "As it sets out to order the world, religion must first face a host of questions pertaining to the relations between the world's creator or creators and the creation, us meek mortals.

Religion must explain just what that said creator demands, and decide whether it believes we have the right to refuse. And religion does so, generally, by presenting us with a foundational story and a set of fundamental rules. The story explains the origins of the universe to us, its believers, and then dictates a list of expected behaviors: Don't eat pork. Take Communion. Pray five times a day. Hurt no living creature.

Recite these texts each day, each week, each year etc. As further motivation, religion offers a set of rewards for compliance, as well as various punishments for different magnitudes of transgression. And religion is sufficiently layered so as to welcome into its fold a host of believers, each willing to accept some but rarely all of its strictures.

Religion then, is exacting but modular, rule-based but tolerant of deviation, moved by metaphysical yearnings but governed by intricate, earthly designs. Religion is a game."<sup>2</sup>

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1. Leibovitz, 2013, p. 37.

2. Ibid.

## **The Dangers Beneath Video Games**

Most of the bad effects of video games are blamed on the violence they contain. Children who play more violent video games are more likely to have increased aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and decreased prosocial helping, according to a scientific study.

Also according to Dmitri A. Christakis of the Seattle Children's Research Institute, those who watch a lot of simulated violence, such as those in video games, can become immune to it, more inclined to act violently themselves, and are less likely to behave emphatically. This, however, is still hotly debated because so far, there is a lack of evidence showing that excessive use of video games leads to long-term desensitization and lack of empathy.

A 2017 study published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, for example, didn't find any long-term effects of playing violent video games and empathy.<sup>1</sup>

The American Psychological Association (APA) also concluded that there is a "consistent correlation" between violent game use and aggression, but finds insufficient evidence to link violent video play to criminal violence.<sup>2</sup>

It appears that there will always be violent people, and it just so happen that many of them also enjoy playing violent video games.

A 2017 study from the Université de Montréal suggests that playing action video games like *Call of Duty* may actually harm the brain. Most study participants mainly use an area of the brain called the caudate nucleus.

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1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5341328>, September 18, 2017.

2. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2015/08/violent-video-games.aspx>, September 18, 2017.



These players navigate through the game terrain using in-system navigation tools or on-screen GPS, relying on navigational “habit” instead of active learning. It appears that this causes an increase in the amount of gray matter in their caudate nucleus, while it decreases in the hippocampus.

Reduced gray matter in the hippocampus has previously been linked to higher risks of brain illnesses, including depression, schizophrenia, PTSD, and Alzheimer’s disease. However players who play games that requires players to navigate using spatial strategies like the 3D Super Mario games have increased grey matter in the hippocampus.

Games can confuse reality and fantasy. Academic achievement may be negatively related to over-all time spent playing video games. Studies have shown that the more time a kid spends playing video games, the poorer is his performance in school.

A study by Argosy University’s Minnesota School on Professional Psychology found that video game addicts argue a lot with their teachers, fight a lot with their friends, and score lower grades than others who play video games less often.

Other studies show that many game players routinely skip their homework to play games, and many students admitted that their video game habits are often responsible for poor school grades. Although some studies suggest that playing video games enhances a child’s concentration, other studies, such as a 2012 paper published in *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, have found that games can hurt and help children’s attention issues- improving the ability to concentrate in short bursts but damaging long-term concentration.<sup>1</sup>

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1. <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/ppm-1-1-62.pdf>, September 18, 2017.

Dr Philip A Chan and Professor Terry Rabinowitz, writing in the *Annals of General Psychiatry*, concluded that: “Adolescents who play more than one hour of console or Internet video games may have more or more intense symptoms of ADHD or inattention than those who do not.” This negative effect may lead to problems in school.

Apparently video games take not only people's attention but also every now and again their lives as well.

Peter Burkowski, a top student, entered in April 1982 in a popular Game room from Calumet City, Illinois, at 8:30 p.m.. Within fifteen minutes of playing *Berzerk* he made a highscore. Then he took four steps towards an adjacent machine, dropped a quarter into its slot and collapsed dead from a heart attack.

Chen Rong-Yu, a twenty-three-year-old, took a seat in the farthest corner of an internet cafe on the outskirts of New Taipei City, Taiwan on 13 July 2012.

He played almost continuously for twenty-three hours, stopping occasionally only to rest his head on the table and sleep for a little while. Each time that he woke he picked up his game where he'd left off. Then one time he didn't raise his head. In order to tell him that his time was up, a member of cafe's staff found him dead. In February 2011 a thirty-year-old Chinese man died at an internet cafe on the outskirts of the Beijing after playing an online game for three days straight.

In July 2011 a young British player, Chris Stanifoth died from a blood clot after a prolonged session at his Xbox video game console. In January 2015 a thirty-eight-year-old man was found dead at an internet cafe in Taipei, apparently after playing video games for five days straight.

Neither the American Psychiatric Association nor the World Health Organization has classified video game addiction as a psychiatric disorder in their respective diagnostic manuals. However, the American Psychiatric Association does not exclude the possibility of such a diagnosis in future editions of the DSM.

Similar to other addictions, individuals suffering from video game addiction use the virtual fantasy world to connect with real people through the Internet, as a substitution for real-life human connection, which they are unable to achieve normally.

Some suffering from video game addiction may develop an emotional attachment to on-line friends and activities they create on their computer screens. Those suffering from video game addiction may enjoy aspects of the on-line games that allow them to meet, socialize, and exchange ideas through games. Because some games requires a large number of players to log on simultaneously, for long durations of time, to accomplish a game's task, players may feel an obligation and loyalty to other players. This may further the individual's justification of his/her use and sense of relationship with other players, that are otherwise strangers.

Statistics show that men and boys are more likely to become addicted to video games versus women and girls. Recent research has found that nearly one in 10 youth gamers (ages 8-18) can be classified as pathological gamers or addicted to video-gaming.

### **What are the Warning Signs of Video Game Addiction?**

- Preoccupation with the Game. (Thoughts about previous on-line activity or anticipation of the next on-line session).

- Use of the Game in increasing amounts of time in order to achieve satisfaction.
- Repeated, unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop Game use.
- Feelings of restlessness, moodiness, depression, or irritability when attempting to cut down use of the Game.
- Gaming longer than originally intended.
- Jeopardized or risked loss of significant relationships, job, educational or career opportunities because of Game use.
- Lies to family members, friends, therapists, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with the Game.
- Use of the Game is a way to escape from problems or to relieve a dysphoric mood. (e.g. feelings of hopelessness, guilt, anxiety, depression.)

### **Additional Warning Signs for Children Include**

- Fatigue, tendency to fall asleep during school.
- Not completing homework or assignments on time.
- Declining grades, or failing classes.
- Dropping out of school activities, clubs, sports, etc.
- Isolating from family and friends to play video games.

Some of the games tends to move from a religious path to a political ideology. Special Forces, a FPS is a military game where players become armed memebers of the Islamic Resistance countering Israeli invasion of Lebanon and performing covert attacks on Israeli position and politician.

Another game company known for creating politicaly inspired games is Afkar Media. Several of games developed by this company were criticized for the way they retell historical events and empower Arab characters by representing them as freedom fighters.

Many computer games deal with World War II. Interestingly, as far as we know, the only games that explore the Holocaust are underground pro-Nazi videogames.

These games, while not extremely popular, receive sporadic media attention as they emerge, from their hideaways in the Internet. In one game in particular, which was available in many European BBS during the early nineties, the player was offered to take the role of a concentration camp administrator and had to coordinate mass murders.<sup>1</sup>

### **Does Playing Video Games Affect our Relationship to God?**

Video games fashion online sacred-space communities for its followers based on a set of shared system of beliefs and rituals in the same way that a religion does. Also video games provide people a subconscious spiritual outlet.

Some scholars think the reason why is a decline in the number of people who subscribe to organized religion, especially in America may be because people fulfill their spiritual desires through religious placeholders in the form of video games.<sup>2</sup>

“Digital games are not a superficial phenomenon peculiar to an uncharacteristic cultural activity. Rather, digital games are an important site into the exploration of the intersection of religion and contemporary culture that help us understand what religion is, does, and means in a changing contemporary society.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. Gonzalo, 2000, p. 172.

2. Boren, 2016.

3. <http://www.statista.com/statistics/246892/value-of-the-video-game-market-in-the-us>, September 16, 2017.

So it is a sin to play video game? From a Christian view if the game is filled with bad behavior we should not play it. It is said in Bible: "Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light. But when it's evil, your body is full of darkness.

Therefore, be careful that the light in you isn't darkness. Now if your whole body is full of light, with no part of it in darkness, it will be as full of light as when a lamp gives you light with its rays".

So what is expected to be seen in a game filled with all types of evil? Based on addiction, video games will become a idol.

Many people come home from school or church and start playing Madden, Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty. Many people camp all night for the new release of PS4's or Xbox's. But they would never do that for God.

Many people are not exercising or working because all they do is spent 10 or more hours a day playing video games. So isn't these taking us away from our relationship with God? The Bible said: "I have the right to do anything, but not everything is beneficial."

I have the right to do anything but i will not be mastered by anything. Does video games cause you to stumble? The things you watch and participate in does influence you. You might say when I play a violent game it doesn't affect me. You might not see it, but who says it isn't affecting you? You might not act it out in the same way, but it can lead to thinking sinful thoughts, bad dreams, corruptness of speech when you become angry, etc. It will always affect you in some way.

Do I believe that playing video games with friends is wrong? No, but we have to use discernment. We must pray to the Lord for wisdom and listen to His response,

not our own response. Use biblical principles. If the game you want to play is sinful and it promotes evil, leave it alone. While I don't believe playing video games is a sin, I do believe that there are way better things that a Christian should be doing in their spare time.

Things such as getting to know God better through prayer and in His Word.

In Muslim cyberspace there is a question related to video games: Are Video Games Haram? The answers varies from a relativistic to a fundamentalistic way.

On Islamhelpline blog the admin sustain that "the deen of Islam does allow some level of amusement or entertainment which are good and wholesome like spending quality time with family and friends, or some sport which benefits one physically, etc; but to waste a commodity as precious and invaluable as time on useless and worthless deeds which bring absolutely no benefit to oneself or others is absolutely discouraged in Islam.

Thus even though useless and worthless games like chess, backgammon, or games which involve dice are mentioned by name as discouraged and prohibited; the truth is that all such acts which bring oneself or others absolutely no benefit except killing or wasting time are discouraged in Islam."<sup>1</sup> On Quora blog<sup>2</sup> a blogger argues: "In my opinion, it is this specific attitude towards life that is the biggest challenge facing the Muslim world in moving ahead.

We are looking for someone to make every single decision in our lives. What progress can be made, and how can we move ahead when every step we take is like walking in a landmine of halal and haram."

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1. <http://www.islamhelpline.net/node/4067>, September 19, 2017.

2. <https://www.quora.com/Is-it-allowed-to-play-and-make-video-games-in-islam-Does-Allah-reward-you-if-you-avoid-something-haram>, September 19, 2017.

On the same platforma, another thinks: "Video games rewire your brain to make you lazier and to make you believe that success (a dopamine feeling in your brain) comes easy without work. Although playing for one or two hours at a time won't be considered haram if you do all of your responsibilities, video games are guaranteed to get you hooked on and more and more addicted, like any other drug.

Worship Allah swt, work hard towards your goals and doing good, help others, and one day if Allah swt wills, you will make it into paradise. Then, you can play any video game you've ever wanted on any console. You would even be able to first hand experience the game in person."

In Judaism the things are more relaxed. In an interview rabbi Owen Gottlieb, scholar, game designer and screenwriter believes that the future of Jewish education is in games- both video and analog, like card and board games. He states: "Well-designed games are complex learning systems that provide the player feedback, are oriented toward problem-solving, often require collaboration and place learners in a "flow" state, where they are neither bored nor overly challenged. Learning games are now being developed and researched by game scholars and designers for subjects including science, technology, engineering, art and math.

They are also used to teach history, civics and language acquisition. Video games allow researchers to gather a great deal of data on how learning is taking place and how changes in design relate to changes in learning. The games don't necessarily need to be "fun."

They need to be engaging. If a game is well designed, it is engaging, and people will play games for hours.



Personally, I am less interested in games for teaching facts only and more interested in games that teach critical thinking, present ethical dilemmas, compelling Jewish narratives and cognitive skills (all of which can have facts embedded within them).”<sup>1</sup>

So we see here an eclectic view which blend in a single pot religious education and video games, rejecting any consequences.

Rabbi Gotlieb was worried by just one think, the Jewish educators who take on games without learning skills in game design and without acquiring some basic literacy in games and games for learning.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis hopes to have challenged some of the assumptions about video games. As of yet there is insufficient data to prove that video games have a positive or adverse impact on society.

The fact that people are shying away from organized religion may be explained by finding spiritual fulfillment in video games.

So video games provides a spiritual outlet for people to enjoy, allowing gamers to really engage their religion. What is holding video games back from being a standalone religion is the societal norms surrounding video games: secular, leisure activities, and are only really played by children or teenagers.

This thesis hopes to have disproven these heteronormative assumptions and furthered the field of gamestudies by offering a religious studies perspective.

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