

Video Games as Religious Education Curriculum

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Abstract

Thesis: Video games hold promise for situating players within a religious education curriculum that sponsors playful engagement with the ethical and the transcendent.

- At its best, video game curriculum integrates both narrative (explicit) and procedural (implicit) educational strategies.
- However, some evidence suggests that religious video game designers fail to understand either the full curricular potential of the video game medium or the implicit curricular significance of conventional video game procedures.
- As a case in point, this study considers the curricular incongruities of the religiously themed video games *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (2006) and *Catechumen* (1999)
- In contrast, the historic *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* (1985) introduces a well-integrated narrative and procedural strategy that might better support a religious education curriculum. The value of the *Ultima IV* strategy is clearly illustrated in the simplicity of its design.
- This study relies upon a literature-based method that includes video game theory, curriculum theory, and religious education.

Definitions

Religion is a cultural system (Geertz 1973) that encompasses myth, ritual, symbol, ethical reflection, and human experience in response to perceived transcendence and ultimacy.

Religious education (as an academic discipline) integrates the humanities and the social sciences in describing and prescribing curricular strategies for religious growth and development—particularly in the dual dimensions of ethics and transcendence. For example:

- Philosopher of education **Alfred North Whitehead** asserts that education is religious, artfully fostering a joyful spirit of discovery, a passion for learning, a sense of ethical duty, and a reverence for mystery and eternity ([1929] 1967).
- Educator **John Dewey** argues that the “common faith” within all education addresses the general concerns of human wholeness, imaginative self-expression, relational connection, and the aspiration for ultimacy ([1934] 1972).
- Curriculum theorist **Philip Phenix** asserts that at its best, education seeks transcendence—expressed in terms of hope, creativity, wonder, awe, and reverence (1975).
- Curriculum theorist **David Purpel** associates education with the ethical—expressed in terms of mutuality, ecological concern, hospitality, human dignity, peace, and justice (1999).

1. What are video games?

Video games commonly combine **story** elements with **procedures** (cf. Jenkins 2004; Murray 2005) into an integrative experience for players.

- Story:** Some—but not all—video games explicitly tell stories. Others provide a procedural environment within which a narratively-ordered player experience can emerge.
- Procedure:** All video games are managed and mediated by rules and processes by which players interact with the game world.



For example, Mario runs and jumps (procedure) while trying to rescue the princess (a thin story, but still a narrative experience).

2. Video games as curriculum



Video games teach *not only* through story and content (explicit curriculum) *but also* through procedures and processes (implicit curriculum). For example, Ian Bogost (2007) suggests that video game procedures present implicit arguments about how the world works. James Paul Gee (2007) suggests that video games present “cultural models” with which players interact through in-game action and reflection.

3. Religious education curriculum in video games

Following Whitehead et al., a religious education curriculum in any video game should aim toward the playful exploration of **ethical practice** and **transcendent aspiration**.

However, some explicitly religious video games fail to achieve these aims. Often, this **failure** is due to a **deep incongruence between story and procedure**.

For example, the stories of Christian religious video games such as *Catechumen* and *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* aim to mediate religious content. However, they ironically adopt conventional video game procedures that implicitly undermine and/or explicitly co-opt that aim.

On the other hand, the story and procedure of *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar* point toward a more robust religious education curriculum in video games, even though this was not its purpose.

4. Catechumen (1999)

The term “catechumen” refers to a candidate for Christian baptism. In ancient Christian tradition, catechumens were prepared for baptism through prolonged, cultural education. However, the first-person shooter (FPS) *Catechumen* departs from this tradition.



Instead, the player practices vigilantism on an ahistorical search-and-rescue mission to liberate Christian prisoners in Roman catacombs.

In the figure above, Roman centurions have been “blasted into belief” at the end of a sword while the Hallelujah Chorus resounds. By uncritically adopting conventional FPS procedures, *Catechumen*’s rhetoric ironically turns sacred text into a “power-up” commodity, conversion into coercion, and mission into violence. Thus, ethics are reduced to instrumentalist ends while transcendence is reduced to mere sensationalism.

5. Left Behind: Eternal Forces (2006)

In the real-time strategy (RTS) game *Left Behind*, the player assumes the role of a field marshal as apocalyptic conflict erupts on the chaotic streets of post-Rapture New York City.



Along the way, the player “recruits neutrals” one by one, training and deploying them for battle against the antichrist’s minions. By “fighting fire with fire,” *Left Behind* ironically departs from the ethical narrative of the New Testament book of *Revelation* which commends only prayer, worship, and resistance in the face of Empire. In addition, the conventional RTS procedure of economic scale and production reduces spirituality to a vulgarized commodity. For example, the player in the figure below has amassed enough Spirit points to effectively “purchase” a neutral unit, conforming it into an instrumental engine of production.



6. Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar (1985)

In contrast to *Catechumen* and *Left Behind*, *Ultima IV* subverts computer role-playing game conventions by introducing a moral economy into game play. Although game play begins with a standard quest for fortune and strength, the story gradually turns toward a narrative and procedural quest for moral perfection in compassion, honesty, honor, humility, justice, sacrifice, spirituality, and valor. The path to power is clearer than the path to virtue because the player’s “karma counter” is forever hidden throughout game play. Thus, many moral choices are subversive, unconventional, and even counterintuitive. As seen below, the player’s primary guidance comes in narrative form from Hawkwind the Seer—a spiritual director.



Although the game quantifies moral progress, the player receives only qualitative feedback. The hidden mystery of this moral economy simulates transcendence, placing the player within a contemplative “possibility space” of self-reflection, internal debate, and critical discernment (Bogost 2006, cf. Hayse 2010).

Conclusion

Religion is at least one part morality, one part mystery. Likewise, video games are at least one part story, one part procedure. Video games that pursue religious educational ends must honor *all* of these qualities. Miguel Sicart (2009) has theorized that when game designers quantify and display moral values, players enjoy less opportunity for meaningful ethical reflection. I agree, adding only that by *concealing* moral quantification—not by eliminating it—the possibility space for religious reflection may remain both rich and robust. The simulation of religion and the emulation of religious practice must maintain the tension of narrative and procedural hiddenness in order to inspire ethical discernment and transcendent wonder—an experience famously described as “seeing through a glass darkly” (1 Cor 13:11-12).

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