

Spotlight Session: “To win, you’ve got to think like a god” –

The Cultural Analysis of God Games, The Demonic and Religiosity in Virtual Worlds.

7th International Crossroads in Cultural Studies Conference "Of Sacred Crossroads", scheduled for July 3 to 7, 2008 in the Caribbean (University of the West Indies Kingston, Jamaica). <http://www.crossroads2008.org>

Organizers

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Session I: (7th July 9.00 – 11.00)

Chair: Sebastian Nestler, University of Klagenfurt, Austria

1. Markus Wiemker: “To win, you’ve got to think like a god”. An Introduction to Religiosity and God in Games

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God games are digital simulation games that cast the player in the position of an entity with divine or supernatural powers and place them in charge of a game setting containing autonomous mortals to be guarded and influenced. These games often adopt a bird's eye perspective, giving the player the impression that he or she is in charge of developing the virtual world. God Games and other virtual worlds create persistent, open-ended worlds that may even develop without the intervention of a player, whose interventions, however, appear as god-like, supernatural activities in the realm of the virtual gaming world. The following questions seem to be important to understand the cultural logic of God Games: Does this kind of games promote special kinds of religious activity and spirituality and how are real-life faiths, confessions, churches or sects related to these games? What kind of world can be created? Which norms, values and beliefs are suggested and supported in God Games? How are these worlds actually created by users? What motivates players to continuously populate these worlds for a long time? How do real-life moral or ethical values impinge on these

worlds? How can the relationship between game world and real-life world be described? Do virtual worlds have an influence on real-life opinions or activities?

2. Elonda Clay: Sims in the Hands of a Gaming God. God Games and Theories of the Apocalyptic

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This paper proposes a comparative view of the apocalyptic as simulated possibilities in the God game *The Sims* and in the dispensational themed first-person adventure game *Eternal Forces: Left Behind*. The open-ended narrative architecture of God games provides spaces for player performances of the "virtual apocalyptic imagination". The dynamics of virtual apocalypse reflect varieties of themes in which ultimate conflicts of good and evil, evolutionary struggles, or antagonist/protagonist are central to the survival or transformation of virtual worlds. These spaces also present perspectives on 'evil' in recognizable framing or communication systems of play. The framing of evil in gaming gives players the opportunity to influence and respond to simulated characters, settings, and events via problem-solving. Lastly, this paper raises larger questions of how video game controversies can become politicized sites of contestation for competing theories of the apocalypse in global public spheres.

3. Stephen Jacobs: Simulating the Apocalypse: The Theology of the *Left Behind* Game

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In 2006, after 5 years of development, the game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* was released. Based on the apocalyptic series of novels by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins this real time strategy game is set in a period referred to by evangelical Christians as the Tribulation, in which the final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil takes place. Whilst all real time strategy games have an ideological dimension, in most games this ideology is implicit, rather than explicit. This paper explores how the simulation of 'the end of time' in the game both differs from and is derivative of the narrative structures of the novels. In particular this paper is concerned with the ways in which the game has been designed to impart a clearly defined theology to gamers.

- Discussion -

Session II: (7th July 11.30 – 13.00)

Chair: Markus Wiemker, University of Technology RWTH Aachen, Germany

4. Reinhard Prosch: Conversion by Game Design: Evangelical Identity in *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*

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As one of the cornerstones of evangelical Christian identity, Bible prophecy belief inspired countless works of creative fiction within the emerging evangelical subculture in the course of the 20th century. Not later than with the phenomenal success of the *Left Behind* book series, its penchant for apocalyptic scenarios grabbed the attention of the press and revealed a thematic influence on mainstream entertainment. This paper combines cultural studies and game studies approaches for a comprehensive analysis of the computer game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*, the latest addition to the extensive evangelical media offering designed for disseminating the movement's ideas. A blend of 20th century American religious history, popular culture studies and introductory video game theory, the paper highlights the capacity of a new medium, firmly establishing computer games as potentially powerful rhetorical tools with a case study at the intersection of premillennial dispensationalism, ideological intermediation and persuasive games design.

5. Yitzhaq (Isaac) Hayut-Man: Play for the Peace of Jerusalem: God Games @ the Sacred Global Cross-road

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The *Jerusalem Games System*, is being developed from original ideas of Dr. Yitzhaq (Isaac) Hayut-Man, Israeli cyber-architect, Tirtsah Arzi, radio and book editor and Isma'il (Ishmael) Obyedat, Palestinian architect. It utilizes the rich physical and historical backgrounds of Jerusalem for a kind of "World of Peacecraft" Massively Multi-user Role Playing Game. Rather than personifying simplistic pagan world-making gods, these games system is based on classic mystical concepts of pilgrim's progress and divinity of participants immortal souls in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Passing through levels that correspond to actual features of the Old City of Jerusalem in its different periods, participants pass from tasks for their egotistical "animal souls" to compassionate tasks that reveal and exercise their "Divine

Souls”. Of particular interest are team development and “Human Reconstruction” tasks based on 4D and 5D geometry as means for higher/divine consciousness.

- Discussion -