

Article

Contemplation, Subcreation, and Video Games

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Abstract: This essay asks how religion and theological ideas might be made manifest in video games, and particularly the creation of video games as a religious activity, looking at contemplative experiences in video games, and the creation and world-building of game worlds as a form of Tolkienian subcreation, which itself leads to contemplation regarding the creation of worlds.

Keywords: video games; contemplation; subcreation; imaginary worlds; religion; world-building

1. Contemplation, Subcreation, and Video Games

At first glance, video games and religion may seem to have little to do with each other; perhaps they even seem at odds, the latter regarding what is serious and holy, while the former appears to be frivolous entertainment. But like any other medium, video games encompass a wide variety of content, which is both used and abused; and just as we would not reject the use of film or television for religious purposes, neither should the video game be rejected. Even painting and the idea of religious imagery itself was initially questioned. To answer this, during the Seventh Session of the Second Council of Nicaea, on 13 October, 787, the church fathers issued a declaration concerning the use of holy images:

As the sacred and life-giving cross is everywhere set up as a symbol, so also should the images of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, the holy angels, as well as those of the saints and other pious and holy men be embodied in the manufacture of sacred vessels, tapestries, vestments, etc., and exhibited on the walls of churches, in the homes, and in all conspicuous places, by the roadside and everywhere, to be revered by all who might see them. For the more they are contemplated, the more they move to fervent memory of their prototypes. Therefore, it is proper to accord to them a fervent and reverent adoration, not, however, the veritable worship which, according to our faith, belongs to the Divine Being alone—for the honor accorded to the image passes over to its prototype, and whoever venerate the image venerate in it the reality of what is there represented. (Tanabe et al. 2015)

We have moved from the painted image, to the photographic image, to the moving image, and now, with video games, to the interactive moving image.

Religious and theological ideas can be made manifest in video games, including the appearance of religion and religious iconography within video games and through the playing of video games as a potentially religious activity, especially contemplative ones that vicariously place the player in a different environment, as found in games like Cyan's *Myst* (1993) and *Riven* (1997), Bill Viola's *The Night Journey* (2007), Jenova Chen's *Journey* (2012), or David O'Reilly's *Everything* (2017).

2. Video Games and Contemplation

When Cyan's *Myst* was released in 1993, it was noted not only for its beautiful graphics but also for its relatively unusual style of gameplay; during the opening sequence, the player's character (the game is always from a first-person perspective, so the player's avatar is only implied) is left on a lonely island

without being given any objective or goal. The player then wanders the island, discovering messages, objects, machines, and locations, and must figure what to make of it all. Not only that, but the various places encountered each are quiet and still, with only ambient sounds (and occasionally ominous music enhancing the mood) and very little movement visually (only a few animated details, like a turning windmill or a flitting butterfly, to keep the visuals from seeming frozen). As a puzzle game, *Myst* is a very contemplative experience, though the player's thoughts will likely be about exploring the various locations, learning how to operate simple machines, and listening to occasional messages from non-player characters. Even so, the game promotes a thoughtful, quiet, careful approach to life that could easily be applied to areas of one's life outside the game. *Myst* became the best-selling computer game of all time, a title it held until 2002, demonstrating that contemplative games can be as popular as action-based games.

Other games have also been designed to create a contemplative mood and experience for players, such as video artist Bill Viola's *The Night Journey*, which has been touring as a part of art exhibitions in museums since its appearance at SIGGRAPH in 2007, and it has only recently been made commercially available in 2018. *The Night Journey* has grayscale imagery of a computer-generated landscape that is softened and filtered into a murky and motion-blurred slow-moving hypnotic experience (a 10-min trailer including gameplay video of *The Night Journey* can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zL1_twK2NDc). According to the game's website, the game's purpose is "to tell the universal story of an individual's journey towards enlightenment," and the following description is given:

The game begins in the center of a mysterious landscape on which darkness is falling. There is no one path to take, no single goal to achieve, but the player's actions will reflect on themselves and the world, transforming and changing them both. If they are able, they may slow down time itself and forestall the fall of darkness. If not, there is always another chance; the darkness will bring dreams that enlighten future journeys.

The interactive design of *The Night Journey* evokes a sense of the archetypal journey of enlightenment through the mechanics of the game experience—i.e., the choices and actions of the player during the game. The game design explores a challenging question: what is the game mechanic of enlightenment? How can we model such an intensely personal yet archetypal experience in a game? (<https://www.thenightjourney.com/>)

While Bill Viola is primarily a video artist, not a game designer, there are more commercial games that also deal with such experiences. Jenova Chen, a co-founder of Thatgamecompany, is known for more contemplative games and has led the team that created *Cloud* (2005), *flOw* (2006), *Flower* (2009), and *Journey* (2012). *Cloud* is about a boy in a hospital bed who dreams of flying. Players manipulate clouds while flying through the sky. As the game's webpage describes it, "Cloud is a game designed to remind the player of the natural beauty ignored in their daily life. A cup of sparkling water, waving leaves under the sun, blue gradient in the sky, infinite forms of clouds. It is a unique game; a relaxing, non-stressful, meditative experience" (<https://www.jenovachen.com/flowingames/cloud.htm>). In *flOw*, players steer a simple geometric organism, which can devour other smaller organisms and objects, enlarging it as it adds material to itself (or loses it). Due the abstract nature of the graphics, the actions are not violent or even aggressive but rather promote a quiet contemplative state, similar to that of viewing fish in a fish tank. *Flower*, a spiritual successor to *flOw*, has the player controlling the wind to blow flower petals around a meadow and was designed more with the player's emotional experience in mind than any objective or goal. Finally, *Journey* is about a lonely journey through a desert and to the top of a mountain and the spiritual growth that occurs along the way. Just as thatgamecompany was going bankrupt after releasing *Journey*, the game became the best-selling PlayStation Network game of all time (Takahashi 2013). Chen says he has received many notes of appreciation from players, and one, from Sophia, a 15-year-old girl who lost her father to illness, explained how it affected her:

Your game practically changed my life. . . . It was the most fun I had with him since he had been diagnosed. . . . My father passed in the spring of 2012, only a few months after his diagnosis.

Weeks after his death, I could finally return myself to playing video games. I tried to play *Journey*, and I could barely get past the title screen without breaking down into tears. In my dad's and in my own experience with *Journey*, it was about him, and his journey to the ultimate end, and I believe we encountered your game at the most perfect time.

I want to thank you for the game that changed my life, the game whose beauty brings tears to my eyes. *Journey* is quite possibly the best game I have ever played. I continue to play it, always remembering what joy it brought, and the joy it continues to bring.

I am Sophia, I am 15, and your game changed my life for the better. (Takahashi 2013)

Another contemplative game set in an expansive world is David O'Reilly's *Everything* (2017), which was designed to encourage the player to consider the connectedness of the universe. Players can "become" anything in the game, from plants and animals roaming the wilderness, down to bugs and even microbes at the microscopic end of the scale, as well as landmasses, planets, stars, and galaxies at the macroscopic end of the scale. As O'Reilly describes it, "*Everything* is a game about the things we see, their relationships, and their points of view. In this context, things are how we separate reality so we can understand it and talk about it with each other" (Muncy 2016).

While most of the contemplative games mentioned so far have been non-narrative ones, story-based games can also be designed to encourage contemplation, like Cyan's *Myst* (1993) and *Riven: The Sequel to Myst* (1997). In addition to being a quiet, atmospheric game of navigation and exploration, *Riven* is also the story about Gehn, a builder of worlds who has made a religion for the primitive islanders who live on his island and uses it to subjugate them and rule over them. The player, of course, knows nothing of this upon arriving at the island with only the scantest of directions as to what to do. Much of the realizations of Gehn's megalomania, his religion, and the situation of the islanders is left for the player to discover and gradually piece together as the player finds temples, equipment, machinery, and other clues as to what has been happening on the island. *Riven* is part of the larger story and world behind the *Myst* series of games, which includes the subject of world-building itself, or what author J. R. R. Tolkien referred to as "subcreation."

3. Subcreation and Video Game Worlds

Writing about authors and their making of imaginary worlds, Tolkien coined the term "subcreation" in order to make a distinction between the kind of *ex nihilo* ("from nothing") creation that only God can do and the creation done by human authors and artists, in which imaginary worlds are made using materials and concepts that are inevitably taken from the world we know, which Tolkien referred to as the Primary World (imaginary worlds are then referred to as "secondary worlds"). The term "subcreation" literally means "creating under," which refers to its reliance on Primary World. Subcreators can take existing concepts and ideas and rearrange their elements to create new creatures, beings, locations, objects, and ultimately, entire imaginary worlds.

The characters in the *Myst* franchise (which has extended to books, games, soundtracks, and beyond) are from the fictional D'ni culture, who write Descriptive Books that can describe a world and connected Linking Books that can allow a person to go into the world described in the Descriptive Book for that world. The world of *Riven*, for example, was written by the character Gehn, who feels entitled to rule the world. The games involve characters, and the player's implied character, going back and forth between these worlds, called Ages, as well as to D'ni, the name of the great underground cavern in the Primary World where the D'ni live (or lived, as the cavern is in ruin as the story begins). The Art of Writing, as the book-writing is called, is something that is guarded and carefully taught, since the worlds described in the books need to be consistent, stable, and hospitable to human life before anyone can safely visit them. Worlds which are hastily written or flawed can collapse, taking all

their inhabitants with them. Despite all the precautions, of course, these powers are inevitably abused by those who see this as an opportunity to dominate and control worlds.

Interestingly, the creators of the *Myst* franchise, Rand and Robyn Miller, who founded the company Cyan Worlds, are Christians and, like Tolkien, grew more concerned about the theological aspects of their world as it grew and developed. Early on, the Descriptive Books were said to create the worlds that were described in them, but the brothers realized that this seemed to result in *ex nihilo* creation, so they changed their mythology so that the worlds all already existed somewhere, and that the precise description of a world written into a Descriptive Book allowed it to connect with that world that matched its description, without actually causing the creation of that world. Thus, the writing of different Ages, or worlds, could still occur as it had in all their stories, but the explanation and theology behind it all would not contradict Christian theology.

The act of writing a description of a world and opening a portal that allows one to enter into that world is rather analogous to the very act of writing a video game, especially one which has an elaborate world that the player enters vicariously. In the games, players use a cursor shaped like a hand to click on an image in a linking book to enter an Age, and the very acting of pointing and clicking happens not just diegetically, but nondiegetically, as the player performs a similar action to “enter” the world of the game itself. Likewise, programmers who write video games must have code that produces a stable world that will run without errors destroying the player’s experience of the world. Thus, the making of video games is itself a form of world-building and a subcreative activity that can be used to reflect on the nature of the nature of what it means to create a world or for players to inhabit one.

Some games, like *SimCity* (1989) and other sandbox-style games like *Minecraft* (2011), involve world-building, inviting players to build cities, countries, or even worlds. In the genre of “god games,” players are given a godlike control over various events and processes; for example, in *Spore* (2008), the player controls the development and growth of species of creatures. Although these kinds of game experiences may sometimes only tenuously connect to what we normally may think of as religious content in games, a wide range of games either overtly or covertly use content, concepts, ideas, or situations that encourage contemplation and reflection on themes that are religious or spiritual in nature, and make players more aware of their role in the world, or of Creation itself. While novels and films can perform a similar function in one’s life, the interactivity found in video games creates a unique experience in which players can directly see the consequences of their actions, as they are forced to make decisions and contemplate outcomes. Due to their interactive nature, and the way decisions lead to consequences that can in turn lead to further decision-making, video games are an ideal medium for moral training, and can be written to demonstrate the difficulties faced in moral dilemmas, even limiting the time given to come to a decision.

In “The Incarnated Gamer: The Theophoric Quality of Games, Gaming, and Gamers,” Frank G. Bosman identifies five levels on which religion can be found in video games (Bosman 2017). There is the material level, the referential level, the reflexive level, ritual (an in-game behavior associated with religion), and the meta level, in which the experience of gaming is identified as religious. To these one could add a sixth level, the subcreational level, which is the experience of actually designing and creating a video game; this extends beyond the meta level insofar as it goes beyond the playing of a game to the making of a game. Some games, like the genre of “god games,” give the player control over a world, while others, such as the aforementioned “sandbox” games *SimCity* (1988) and *Minecraft* (2009), come even closer in what they allow players to do, actively allowing them to build and construct the worlds within the games, but these still do so according to templates and the fixed categories of objects and building materials already present in the game; the actual creation of games and game worlds themselves, without such preconceived infrastructures, is closest to true subcreation. While the average gamer does not get involved with video games to this extent, the availability of game creation software, player-created modding, and even the design stage that may or may not lead to the actual instantiation of a game itself, represents an experience in which a designer encounters

a number of fundamental questions about the design of a game world, which is also another form of subcreation.

First, the creation of a video game world is similar to that of imaginary worlds found in other media; it is called into being with words, like Creation itself. The computer code that makes up a video game world goes beyond the words of novel-based worlds in that the computer code that calls them into being does so through the algorithmic means provided by the computer rather than merely relying on the audience's imagination. Like literary worlds made of words and audiovisual worlds like those of film and television, video game worlds are accessible only indirectly, though video game worlds allow a degree of interaction that extends beyond merely imagining, watching, and listening, since it requires actions and decisions from the player. While all the same decisions found in the making of other imaginary worlds can be found in the making of video games, such as the geography of the world, its layout and design, the appearance and behavior of its flora, fauna, architecture, and other creatures and objects, and so forth. But the decisions and participation of the game world subcreator extend far beyond the involvement and participation mentioned in Bosman's fourth and fifth levels because the restrictions placed on the player by an already-existing game are absent from the game design process; the designer is free to begin to subcreate a world in whatever direction is desired.

The idea that human beings as subcreators imitate God's acts of Creation, as a way in which human beings are created in the image of God, is described in Tolkien's writings on subcreation (Tolkien [1939] 1964), and appears before Tolkien's work in Nikolai Berdyaev's *The Destiny of Man* (1931), in which he wrote, "God created man in his own image and likeness, i.e., made him a creator too, calling him to free spontaneous activity and not to formal obedience to His power. Free creativeness is the creature's answer to the great call of its creator." (Berdyaev [1931] 2009). While human creativity occurs in all the arts (and in industry as well), subcreation, the building of imaginary worlds, which includes video game worlds, is perhaps closest in kind to God's creation of the world, despite the inevitable incompleteness and relatively tiny stature of human-made imaginary worlds. Though they lack the scale or complexity of the real world, the subcreator's creative ambition can still be that of the making of an entire world, and an interactive one at that.

As a game world is built, the subcreator must decide to what extent the world will reflect an existing religious tradition, if it will reflect one at all. This reflection is embedded within the game engine and the world in subtle ways that may not be immediately obvious to players but only gradually emerge during the course of gameplay, as different actions and behaviors are carried out and lead to their respective consequences. How actions are connected to consequences are one way that a game's outlook is revealed and can describe an embedded ethics that inherently condemns or condones behaviors, leading to rewards or punishments. Consequences can also be short-term or long-term in nature, just as selfishness may seem to help an individual in the short term but become detrimental over the long term. The overarching powers behind the world, which oversee players' behaviors, enforce rules, and reward outcomes, may also be overt, in the forms of godlike characters (who may even be in the form of the player character), or simply a set of inherent rules that remain unpersonified, leaving them as a part of the background of a game world, where they are to be gradually learned through inference and deduction.

Designing a world as an exercise also makes a subcreator more conscious of the decisions that go into the design of a world; the way these decisions must balance and coexist with each other, and how they will collectively determine the experiences of the players who vicariously enter the game world. Even in a relatively simple form of a world, for example, the two-dimensional, low-resolution worlds of the games created for the Atari 2600, there are still many decisions to be made and many existing conventions that designers may choose to follow or to actively resist using. Most games, for example, have their difficulty level set ideally within the "flow" corridor of mental enjoyment between anxiety and boredom, as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and used in video game theories (see Juul 2005, p. 113), so that players will be challenged but will ultimately be able to prevail, mirroring the Christian belief, derived mainly from 1 Corinthians 10:13, that God will

not permit us to be tempted or suffer beyond what we are capable of enduring. Likewise, game designers populate their worlds with non-player-characters (NPCs), some of which hinder players while others help them, but neither of which remove the player's ability to make the free will choices which are necessary to gameplay; in cases when this is violated, for example, in the forced baptism scene in *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), there are complaints from players, both religious and nonreligious alike (see [Hernandez 2013](#)).

Finally, even the smallest details of a world, which include the designs of the artifacts of the world's cultures, can reveal much of the backstory of a world, and together, such details imply the outlook and developmental journey of the non-player-characters that inhabit a world along with the players' characters. Like other imaginary worlds, video game worlds are built with a past, a history, already in mind; we see the results of that history in ruins, buildings, cultures, legends, characters, and the overall situation in which the player-character finds himself or herself when the game begins. In the imaginary world tradition, often the main character is a savior figure who is given the job of "saving the world," and video games continue to carry on this tradition as it becomes especially appropriate in an interactive medium ([Wolf 2017](#), pp. 51–55). The world designer, then, is designing a fallen world, one where the consequences of sin have become manifest, similar to our own world. Even if the main character's saving of the world is one of military victory rather than moral renewal, the battle is almost always framed in terms of sides that are clearly those of good versus evil. Thus, the same challenges and crucibles that make our lives and deeds have merit and meaning are the same requirements for interesting video game narratives.

As game designers explore video game design possibilities, especially now that a number of contemplative games have proven that they can even be successful commercially, perhaps we will see more games exploring themes and issues that relate to spirituality and religion. And games involving world-building, as well as commercially-available software that allow players to create their own games and game worlds, will also serve to aid reflection and contemplation of the world we live in and what lies beyond it. For some time, imaginary worlds have been a mainstay of popular culture, and an interest in world-building continues to grow. As stated in my book, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012),

Subcreation is not just a desire, but a need and a right; it renews our vision and gives us new perspective and insight into ontological questions that might otherwise escape our notice within the default assumptions we make about reality. Subcreated worlds also direct our attention beyond themselves, moving us beyond the quotidian and the material, increasing our awareness of how we conceptualize, understand, and imagine the Primary World. And the more aware we are of it, the better we can appreciate the Divine design of Creation itself and our place in it. ([Wolf 2012](#), p. 287)

Video games, then, can be used to convey religious ideas and convey religious experiences, encouraging contemplation and reflection, provided they are designed with such goals in mind; and, of course, they can also be used to devalue these things, and promote negative attitudes towards them. Although they have come a long way in only a few decades, video games are still a relatively young medium compared to books, paintings, sculpture, and other media, many of which have long histories in the conveyance of religious content and ideas. Whatever one presently thinks of video games, and their increasingly prominent position in popular culture, they have a great potential to influence the minds of those who play them, for good or for ill. The relationship between religion and video games continues to evolve and needs to be explored in greater detail, especially by game designers who desire to create experiences for their players that will help them become better human beings who will, in turn, desire to build a better world.

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