

Robert M. Geraci. *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 348 pages. \$35.

Geraci's *Virtually Sacred* is approachable and provocative to those without even an introductory knowledge of virtual worlds and gaming. Using the fields of the history of religions, anthropology of gaming, and actor-network theory, as well as his own quantitative and qualitative research methods and participant observation, Geraci convincingly illuminates the real possibility that virtual worlds are not inherently absent of or from reality. Rather virtual worlds are frontier spaces where popular religion—faith and practices of the laity—emerges to reassemble and reorient religion and reality.

Often the Internet is conflated with virtual worlds to the effect that one dismisses virtual worlds as being no-places with no time and no sense of history (202). This, according to Geraci, is an ignorant assumption. Geraci utilizes Mircea Eliade's *axis mundi*, or center of the world, tempered by J. Z. Smith to highlight human actors who choose, create, affirm, and strategically orient themselves within a virtual world (203). The case studies that neatly divide Geraci's book into two halves are *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*.

World of Warcraft, a multi-player online role-playing game (MMORPG), exhibits new analogues for religious devotion that are found specifically in the virtual gaming community (62). These analogues and practices help the user re-enter conventional reality with a new sense of purpose. The second half of the book is a case study on *Second Life*, a virtual world designed to mirror our world but enabling users to exert more control than is possible in conventional reality, presents another life for religion, both traditional and novel.

While there are participants in virtual worlds who casually play, Geraci recognizes that there are many others who deem these spaces, through their investment and co-creation, virtually sacred. Those are the interlocutors for Geraci's project. Virtual worlds, scripted (*World of Warcraft*) or unscripted (*Second Life*), receive the "religious intentions" and interpretations of these users (212). Geraci uses a general definition of religion as "work" that "establishes the meaningfulness of human existence" (204).

At the beginning of his book, Geraci asserts "video games and virtual worlds are rearranging or replacing religious practice" as "designers, users, and the virtual worlds themselves now collaborate in the production of a new spiritual marketplace" (1). Ultimately, one may not be convinced that these case studies present enough evidence for a sort of technoevolution wherein religious practice in conventional reality is replaced by virtual worlds inhabited and transformed by religious consumers. However, Geraci is adept at imagining how virtual worlds provide "feedback loops" to practices in conventional reality and already are infiltrating the way we are religious (165).

Geraci's balanced in-depth analysis is a corrective to technophobia and technophilia in religious and philosophical discursive spaces. Geraci convinces this feminist scholar with research interests in embodiment that activities in these virtual worlds are in fact embodied, communal, and impactful on conventional reality, perhaps even more so than "watching a congregation on television or through a service streamed over the Internet in a video format" (119). One cannot participate in these worlds without acting. Here, they can "build churches, temples...offer theologies or design new practices" (166). Unfortunately, the same opportunities are not offered in some religious spaces in conventional reality today.

Geraci's interlocutors, especially in *Second Life*, are not passive consumers of religiosity. Rather, they are imaginative and engaged practitioners and meaning-makers. Christians,

Muslims, and the not-yet categorized religious find in this unbounded space the opportunity to create religious practices and nuance them in ways conventional religions with rigid hierarchies will not allow. Some occasional outlaws enter the space to torment and disturb the utopian play (146), but this is certainly not unique to virtual reality. Kimberly Knight's Holy Heretic Pub and the Virtual Hajj in *Second Life* enable those unauthorized to lead and participate in conventional religious spaces to have a voice. Geraci demonstrates how they are *actual* spaces "where ecumenism reigns and religious acceptance" and innovation "is possible" (132).

One could argue that throughout history, some ritual frames and spaces in Christianity have themselves acted as virtual worlds wherein participants engage with a sacred vision that is unlike the vision of conventional reality. Just as most participants of virtual worlds do not stay inside of them forever so too has the Christian tradition discouraged disengagement of the Body from the world (to varying degrees). Both the Christian tradition and Geraci's interlocutors often encourage reengagement with conventional reality with hope that the experience of the sacred/virtual reality will in fact have some transformative impact upon conventional reality.

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