

A dream statement
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Communities of faith can and must be led by people gathering together – “where two or three are gathered in my name” – but increasingly those communities will not be led by trained clergy, but rather will grow from the energies, needs and passions of people coming together in “networked communities” who are drawing upon diverse experiences to create “convergent practices” which “story their identities” in ways that “build authority” rather than assume it, and which stretch across “multiple sites” of engagement.

These are characteristics Prof. Heidi Campbell has identified as elements of “networked religion,” and they are emblematic of religious practice across multiple faith traditions¹. They are also characteristic of what researchers are observing in many other settings and institutions as well, and are perhaps particularly visible in the midst of spaces largely defined as gaming environments.

Thus people read Anne Lamott, for example, who is deeply steeped in a particular Christian community and Christian language, without ever entering a church. Or find themselves caught up in the novels of Diana Gabaldon and J.K. Rowling, grappling with deep questions of personal agency and community ethics, the nature of evil and the power of hope, without ever knowing the underlying stories and symbols upon which those authors have drawn.

The experience of “convergent practices” means that people have found their way into pondering profoundly theological questions through the music of Macklemore&Lewis, The Blackeyed Peas, Jeremy Messersmith, Missy Elliott, Hozier – all the while eschewing any connection to explicit religious traditions. The longing for making promises within community at the start of a marriage has meant that there is a large market for free and rapid ordination conferred online absent any study, and similarly there is a growing market for grief support groups and funeral rituals which draw on claims of transcendence without any specificity of tradition.

So what ARE the things theological educators and theological education have to offer the world? What are the resources and claims which arise within religious community which might best be shared in the world as it is emerging around us? What is it that we can name, what are the symbols upon which we can draw, which can speak to experiences which otherwise have no name? or which can only be spoken of in hushed or embarrassed voices? I think a game design might help us to explore these questions, and unlock the potential of religious communities in the world as it is emerging around us.

How do we “story our faith” in ways that help to resist the fierce individualism which is rapidly becoming toxic amidst broken economies and devastating climate consequences? How do we “story our faith” in ways that invite people into exploring what might be seen as esoteric to them? How do we “story our faith” in ways that invite engagement across difference? We must ask these questions in as wide and deep a set of contexts as we can find. If we are correct in believing that the more diverse the knowers, the more robust the knowing, then surely we must be inviting not only laypeople in the communities which we serve

into this conversation, but we must stretch ourselves into those spaces in which multiple generations, multiple cultures, are already gathered – that is, in gaming spaces — and we must seek and listen for the Holy Spirit in the midst of those communicative practices.ⁱⁱ Jane McGonigal has written:

WE CAN no longer afford to view games as separate from our real lives and our real work. It is not only a waste of the potential of games to do real good—it is simply untrue. Games don't distract us from our real lives. They fill our real lives: with positive emotions, positive activity, positive experiences, and positive strengths. Games aren't leading us to the downfall of human civilization. They're leading us to its reinvention. The great challenge for us today, and for the remainder of the century, is to integrate games more closely into our everyday lives, and to embrace them as a platform for collaborating on our most important planetary efforts. If we commit to harnessing the power of games for real happiness and real change, then a better reality is more than possible—it is likely. And in that case, our future together will be quite extraordinary.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is not too late for theological educators to enter into such profound play, and this may just be a path that the Holy Spirit has been inviting us into for some time.

Let's build a massively multiplayer online game which invites shared exploration of these questions. Let's work with game designers who can help us to design spaces in which we can collaborate with people all across the globe, lay and ordained alike, together, to figure out what we might truly miss in a world without churches. If we woke up tomorrow and there were no churches, anywhere, what would we do? What needs would go unmet? What resources could we still dig up to help? Where would we find the most pressing urgency for theological voices and practices? If we knew the answers to these questions we might have a much better grasp on what to do in theological education to meet such needs.

I can imagine game play that might invite spiritual directors to chime in with ways to companion the “spiritual but not religious.” We might have game play that invites people to create short digital stories of their own faith experiences to share with people. We might have game play that helps people to dig into biblical texts, and “level up” as they go more deeply into the Hebrew and Greek. We might have people sharing stories and pictures of their innovative ritualizations. I don't know enough about game design – I just like playing games! – to know how to do this, but I think that if we could find some seed funds we might be able to partner with a game designer like Jane McGonigal (who has her own deep Buddhist spiritual practice), to build something that would not only be absorbing and energizing to experience, but would also help us crack open the challenges facing theological education.

ⁱ Campbell (2012).

ⁱⁱ I have written elsewhere (Hess, 2014c) about how a view of the social Trinity matches up well with the “create, share, believe” form of faith emerging in the midst of digital spaces, but I would emphasize here that it is the *communicative* nature of the social Trinity which so aptly emerges in these contexts.

ⁱⁱⁱ McGonigal, Jane (2011-01-20). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Kindle Locations 5773-5780). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition.