

Why games and gaming might be the best place way and place in which to consider the meaning and purposes of theological education: A reflection

Mary Hess / Luther Seminary / June 2015

For the last 15 years I have been on the faculty of an ELCA seminary in the upper Midwest. At the same time I have been a very active lay member of a local Roman Catholic community. This is the “situatedness” from which I reflect in this essay, and these are the places and experiences which give me passion for the work of theological education. My research and writing has focused on shaping faith and learning in the midst of digital cultures, and during that time period I have watched as digitally mediated spaces have moved from being something only young people inhabit, to a ubiquitous part of everyday life for nearly everyone in the US, let alone in other spaces around the globe.

There is no longer any way to remain “offline” entirely – people without ready access to the net find themselves without access to a whole host of basic necessary infrastructure, everything from phone numbers (phone books having gone the way of VHS tapes), to employment (the vast majority of job applications require some form of online access), to government electronic benefits (access to SNAP, health exchanges, unemployment benefits and so on, is primarily online), and so on.ⁱ

I have written at length elsewhere about specific challenges to theological education that arise from these dynamics, and noted both resources and dilemmas that exist in the midst of learning with these spaces.ⁱⁱ Here I want to take a turn that might appear to many readers to be audacious to the point of irrelevance, or perhaps whimsical to the point of the trivial. In what follows I invite you to consider what we, that is theological educators and theological education, might have to learn from game design and gaming communities.

Why game design and gaming? Perhaps statistics such as these offer one reason:

- 69 percent of all heads of household play computer and video games.
- 97 percent of youth play computer and video games.
- 40 percent of all gamers are women.
- One out of four gamers is over the age of fifty.
- The average game player is thirty-five years old and has been playing for twelve years.
- Most gamers expect to continue playing games for the rest of their lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Compare that with Pew’s data, which suggests that less than half of millennials attend church regularly, and fully one in four adults under age 30 are “unaffiliated” with any religion.^{iv}

When an entire generation of people find themselves drawn into games, and when digital video makes games immediately accessible in one’s personal space while yet having global reach and possibility, it is worth paying attention. Jane McGonigal, one of the key scholars in this arena, has written a bestselling book entitled *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the*

World. This is the book that woke me up to the possibilities, and that challenged me to set aside at least some of my own skepticism to enter her argument.

She writes, for example, that:

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.^v

I can perhaps sense some of your responses to her words, given how often I have heard them from other people: “surely it’s not appropriate simply to give people what they want?” “isn’t her claim that ‘reality is broken’ a reason to run away from digital games, rather than toward them?” “wouldn’t this mean that theological education would become a consumer-led tar pit, rather than a prophetic spring of refreshing water?” “there can’t possibly be anything remotely generative, not theologically at least, about digital games!” These are some of the more polite responses I have heard. But the more I talk with people who are deeply involved in digital games, particularly alternative reality games, the more I have become convinced that there is something important occurring there.

There is quite a lot of research, for instance, that notes the ways in which playing games can increase cognitive capacity, support pro-social behavior, elicit wonder in the face of difference (rather than resistance), improve mindfulness, and so on.^{vi} The MacArthur Foundation has funded a decade’s worth of such research, and compiled it into a series of quite persuasive books engaging K12 educational contexts.^{vii} But what about graduate education? And particularly graduate education in a theological context, pursuing theological and biblical ideas, and seeking to educate pastoral leaders?

I have often been asked, “what is theological about games?” At this point my answer is “quite possibly everything!” Consider McGonigal’s answers to the question “what are gamers virtuosos at?” She highlights four dynamics:

- (1) Urgent optimism
- (2) Social fabric (weaving a tight fabric)
- (3) Blissful productivity (optimized to do hard meaningful work)
- (4) Epic meaning^{viii}

Let’s consider each of these in turn for their theological relevance. How much more urgent can optimism be, for example, than an optimism that can see the “already not yet” in the midst of global despair? An optimism which argues that God turns upside down all the power structures that we see in the world? How much more urgent an optimism, than one which confesses that God “knit me together in

my mother's womb?" (Psalm 139) and asserts "Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them" (Luke 12:27). Or confesses an understanding that death is not final, that we are baptized into death precisely because we are thus drawn into eternal life?

Or what about social fabric? Imagine how tight a social fabric is being woven in a community that values the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the child. Or that understands that those who mourn, those who are weak, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness must be at the center of our concern? That tight social fabric begins to be woven in the Hebrew Bible with a commitment to justice that is not so much about weak notions of fairness, but rather strong notions of right relationship, not of justice as judgment but justice as deep and holistic relationship. We hear it in Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1-10), and it echoes again in Mary's joyful song to Elizabeth in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), "God has thrown down the rulers from their thrones, but lifted up the lowly. The hungry he has filled with good things; the rich he has sent away empty."

When it comes to a notion of "blissful productivity, optimized to do hard meaningful work" – the nagging suspicion that the "Protestant work ethic" is a bleak way to be in the world can be replaced by Frederick Buechner's affirmation that vocation is where your deep joy and the world's deep needs intersect.^{ix} Blissful productivity can be understood as woven deeply into what we mean by vocation if we understand that word holistically. I believe that blissful productivity can be described as a heart felt response to God's grace poured out into the world, and a hope and care that extends beyond what can reasonably be imagined to be possible.

Blissful productivity is also clearly in evidence in the ways in which children throw themselves into games – for that matter, into all that they do. What glorious blissful productivity can be observed in watching young children learn as they play! That's their job, to learn all that they can, to soak up all that is around them, and to immerse themselves in figuring out who they are. I can't help calling to mind, then, those stories in Matthew (19:14) and Luke (18:16) where Jesus admonishes his disciples and urges them "to let the little children come to him," and reminds them that they need to become like children to enter the Kingdom of God.

Finally, epic meaning. Honestly, I'm not sure I can imagine a story more epic than that of God's relationship with God's people over eons. The creation story itself is epic, and the ongoing story of Eve and Adam, of the human family, of the Tower of Babel, the flood, the exodus, Daniel, David, Jonah, Ruth and Naomi, Hannah and Sarah, the prophets, all the way up through the community of outsiders following Jesus, into our very lives today.

McGonigal argues that these four factors — urgent optimism, weaving a tight social fabric, blissful productivity optimized to do hard meaningful work, and epic meaning – together build super empowered hopeful individuals. I know there have been points in time when that has been true for those who name themselves followers of the Christ. But I'm not so sure it's true now? At least not so much in North America? Certainly theological educators and administrators of theological schools rarely claim to be "super empowered and hopeful." Which is partly why I think her observations about gaming are so pertinent to our work in this project.

Where have these factors gone in our practices as Christians? Gandhi is quoted as saying that he liked the Christ, it's Christians he wasn't so fond of. I wonder how it is that a faith which once led – and certainly in other parts of the world, still leads – people into deep engagement with mending the social fabric, and with a hope and joy that transcends even the most dire circumstances – I wonder where that has gone here in large chunks of North America?

As I've read more deeply in the gaming literature, two things have occurred to me. First, that part of what is so powerful about games is that we "hold lightly" to the things we're doing there – they're "not real" in some sense, and we both worry about that with games, and we revel in it. We choose to play, and in playing we don't obsess so much with what we're doing, we simply delight in the process. Where is our playfulness in religious community? Can we learn to "hold lightly"?

I believe that our theological commitments point us in that direction, and perhaps our challenge is to reinvigorate this side of our confessions, to find a way in which we can be playful in religious community. The Lutherans I live and work with believe deeply that God's grace is so active and so present in the world that we can *lean into* it, that we can rely on God's overwhelming love to hold us, to free us into taking the risks necessary to mend the very ruptures in our social fabric that we have also produced.

Neuroscience is actually confirming something of this dynamic. There is a lot of evidence that people who believe in a transcendent God, and who are involved in religious community, have better outcomes on a lot of measures – less anxiety, more social connection, etc. etc.^x Perhaps there is something to attend to here. Perhaps in believing in God, and in a hope beyond death, we are able to "hold lightly" to this life. Certainly there is in Buddhist thought a set of practices aimed at helping us not to "cling" to ephemeral realities. And there is in Hindu thought a deep conviction of the Holy in each of us – I think of the Hindu saying that "our job is not to seek for Love, but rather only to seek and find within us the barriers to Love." So perhaps playing, perhaps the joy of games, is about choosing to "hold lightly" in a way that frees us to become more deeply engaged. This is the kind of paradox of which Parker Palmer is so fond as he describes optimal learning environments.^{xi}

The second thing I would note about my own enjoyment of games is that there is fun to be had in the "do over" section of them – indeed, games that have turned that function off, games in which when you "die" you are done with the game, are usually not very much fun. I'm not a very good strategist at games, I just like to play my way through them multiple times until I figure out the right order in which to solve a given puzzle. I've had hours of fun, for instance, in the iPhone game "Tiny Thief," just trying possible actions over and over, or prior to that, in "Angry Birds."

So what is it about being able to be freed up to explore and to experiment and to make mistakes that helps us here?

Certainly in religious community we have deep convictions about the role of repentance and forgiveness. Further, we confess that death is not the end. This is not a trivial confession, not a simple reflection of the "do overs" we explore in games, but the deeper belief that God promises us life beyond our brokenness.

There is much in Christian thought that points to honestly admitting that, as human beings, we screw up. We mess up all the time. But for every moment that

“the law” of which Paul speaks in the various epistles condemns us, God’s promise saves us. We are both, in the Lutheran language, *simul justus et peccata*, simultaneously saint and sinner.

So maybe there is something that games can remind us of here, too: that if we take our urgent optimism, expend it in the service of a tight social fabric, throw ourselves into a kind of all-in productivity, we may end up not only living the “epic adventure” of which McGonigal speaks, but living more deeply into God’s mission in the world. And when we screw up, when we inevitably hurt ourselves and each other, we can rest assured in the promise of God that *love will win out in the end*.

I am convinced that we need to work against *the problems*, not against *each other* – that’s the essence of what scholars like McGonigal are talking about, when they explore the power of alternate reality games, and I’m convinced that that is the essence of the Gospel as well.

I often note the changes that digital cultures have sparked by talking about three shifting dynamics: authority, authenticity and agency.^{xii} We’ve moved from a place where institutional authorities could command our attention and automatically earn our respect, to a time in which authority has to be earned and structural roles sometimes make such trust in authority very hard to come by. Further, when we speak of authenticity it is most often in personal, even individual, terms. Certainly in middle class white culture what is perceived as “authentic” is nearly always determined by one’s personal experiences. That didn’t used to be the case in religious communities. All you have to do is think about how a liturgy professor defines “authentic worship” vs. how young adults might do so today, to perceive the shift. “Agency” has to do with whether you can make a difference, whether you can make something happen. Part of what the game design literature has invited me to consider are the possibilities present in games and game-making for engaging all three of these changing dynamics.^{xiii}

When McGonigal writes about “super empowered hopeful individuals” as a kind of counterweight to Thomas Friedman’s notion of “super empowered angry individuals,”^{xiv} I believe she is talking about agency, and she’s offering us concrete examples of ways in which the best of games and game-making invite us into hopeful engagement, into collaborative empowerment, into a kind of agency which can even invite a recognition of God’s agency (although that is not her assertion but rather my own).

I think we have just that one simple thing to remind ourselves of, and everything else can flow from there: God chose to Incarnate as a way to carry God’s promise of love and life to all of God’s creation. God became flesh. And in doing so God chose the most humble, vulnerable of human beings in which to enter time and history: an infant, born in a stable.

Surely from that moment of joy we can take both comfort and hope and carry them into the spaces of which game designers speak. There is deeply authentic joy present in games, we need to embrace that joy rather than be afraid of it, or dismissive of it. When McGonigal talks about how games help us to learn collaboration, she is inviting us to experience the kind of awe that comes from such collaboration. I love her definition of collaboration, that it involves “cooperating, coordinating, and co-creating” and that people playing games get to practice shared

concentration, synchronized engagement, mutual regard, and collective commitment (to which, she adds, they create reciprocal rewards).^{xv}

I think that this is what religious community has been about, at its best, through the centuries. Maybe it is time to think about religious practice and belief more like play, and less like burden or obligation? Maybe instead of complaining about how families are choosing to take their kids to soccer games on a Sunday morning instead of to religious education, we might ask what is drawing them to those games? And what kind of bigger, more epic, more cooperative, more collective and more co-creating games might we draw them into, in religious community?

I do not in any way want to trivialize or ignore the brokenness of our lives together. In a world of the Ebola virus, of systemic racism manifesting itself in the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice (to name only a few), of vast economic inequalities and violence, we must see deeply the reality we inhabit. But it is not enough to see them – we need to embrace and engage them, and we need the “emergensight”^{xvi} of which McGonigal writes: the ability to thrive in a chaotic, collaborative environment seeking hope and *just* change. She tells numerous stories in her book of people who experience the joy of this kind of collaboration. I am convinced that this could be a profound example of the vocation of which Frederick Buechner speaks, the joy that comes from putting your gifts to use in service of meeting the world’s deep needs.

We ought not to fear games or game-making, because we can trust that God will already be there. We can trust that God will meet us in our joy, and in our brokenness, and that God has promised us an epic adventure into which we can invite others.

So what is my own proposal for “theological education between the times”? I propose that we need to activate the largest and widest net of people we can, to explore what it might mean to carry faith into the future. We need to take seriously a “world without churches”^{xvii} and begin to ask ourselves how the Spirit might continue to manifest in our midst in such a world. We need to imagine and explore as wildly and freely and playfully as we can, and **a massively multi-player online game could be just the space in which to do so.**

Consider, for instance, the set of questions that the faculty at Luther Seminary have been exploring off and on for the last decade:^{xviii}

1. The nature and priorities of God’s mission: Who is God and what is God up to in the world?
2. Luther Seminary’s evangelical imagination and identity: Who is Luther Seminary? What is Luther Seminary going to be in the future?
3. Luther Seminary speaks of itself as a biblical, confessional and missional seminary. What does that mean? Is that who we are? If so, is that what’s needed at this moment in God’s mission?
4. Luther Seminary has evolved into a center of learning with many educational processes and networks of teaching and learning: How multi-dimensional do we want to be? How many dimensions of learning and resourcing can we sustain?
5. Seminaries are often isolated from the consciousness and contexts of society. How do we get and stay in touch with the whole of God’s world? How to we engage those who are doing ministry in that real world?

6. The prioritization of Luther Seminary's resources: What's most important? How much can Luther do at once?
7. The state of the church: How do we rightly respond to the diminishing vitality of many congregational and denominational forms? What's happening? What's missing? What new needs are emerging? What new structures are needed?
8. Where are the existing vibrant, resilient congregations: What's faithful? What's effective? How would we know?
9. The diminishing numbers and shifting character of candidates for ministry: Who is coming to seminary? Who isn't coming? Who do we want or need in Christian public leadership?
10. The need to re-educate pastors already serving: What do existing pastors need to know and want to know to lead the church in this globalized, secularized society?
11. The changing expectations and lifestyles of students: Are our educational patterns out of sync with students' consciousness and lives? What about their new "ways of learning?"
12. The demands and stress placed on seminarians: Are our students using their time efficiently? Should students be paying for the bulk of their education? Are our students working too much?
13. Unsustainable costs: What does a faithful, effective, efficient teaching and learning center look like? How are seminary courses best taught? How are scholarship and research best accomplished and supported?
14. The future of denominational support: Can and how will ELCA church-wide and ELCA synods rework their priorities? What will this mean for how theological education is funded? What will this mean for how this seminary intersects with denominational priorities for ministerial formation and call processes?
15. The rising debt of graduates: Can we offer theological education less expensively to qualified candidates?
16. Possible reduction of ATS requirements for the M. Div. by 2012 (from 90 credits to 72): What do we think about the reduction? If it occurs, what does it mean for us?
17. Issues in the Seminary's present curricula: How and when do we address the changes needed in our curricula? What about non-credit requirements? Do we need a major curricular revision?
18. Ineffective personal, communal, and vocational leadership-formation: Are we equipping healthy servant leaders? How do we get leaders ready for the challenges and stress of 21st century ministry?
19. The discoveries of high-impact, technology-supported, active learning: Can students learn better, more quickly?
20. Possible new models - congregationally-based, congregationally-partnered theological education - weekend seminary and others; What models make sense? Where and who are our most able "teaching congregations?" "Is a weekend seminary feasible?" Who else might be our partners in educating Christian public leaders

We have been asking these questions for years – but we have stayed almost entirely within churchly contexts – and in doing so we have walked ourselves into a set of closed doors which we have not easily been able to open, let alone walk through. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands if not millions of people have found ways to explore their faith outside of traditional institutional frameworks, while yet drawing on some of the same databases of Christian meaning.

What gives me hope in the midst of all of the statistics of decline? The energy and playfulness of people coming together in projects which have a shared vision for the future. What brings me to despair in the face of that hope? The reality that most

of these projects have little or nothing to do with what we have traditionally understood as “communities of faith.”

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 which persist will not necessarily be led by professionally 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 Heidi Campbell has identified as elements of what she labels “networked religion,” and they are emblematic of religious practice across multiple faith traditions^{xix}. 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.^{xx} Let me return to the words of McGonigal which I shared at the beginning of this essay:

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.^{xxi}

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.

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ⁱ At the same time as digital access has become all the more necessary, rates of access – particularly to high speed broadband – have increased at a glacial pace, putting the US at 31st in the world in terms of average download speeds, and 42nd in the world for average upload speeds. This places the US behind countries such as Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Uruguay, Lesotho, Belarus, and so on. (<http://theweek.com/articles/449919/american-internet-slow>). My summer DMN students from South Korea regularly complain about how slow and how expensive this access is. In the US we no longer have simply a “digital divide” between those who have computers and those who do not, those who can get to the net and those who cannot, we have multiple divides which include those who have ready access to high speed broadband and the devices necessary to benefit from it, and those who do not — and one of those divides separates the US from most democratic market economies.

ⁱⁱ See in particular Hess (2014a and 2014b), as well as Hess (2005) and Hess (2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ McGonigal, Jane (2011-01-20). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Kindle Locations 265-270). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition. Note that she is not arguing that ALL games do this, because there are clearly some games with disastrous content and practices, but on the whole games generally accomplish these things.

^{iv} Pew data: <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

^v 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.

^{vi} See, for instance, Ito, et. al. (2010), Gee (2007, 2013), Jenkins (2008), Rheingold (2012), not to mention all of the science made accessible here: <http://janemcgonigal.com/learn-me/>

^{vii} See, for instance, <http://www.macfound.org/programs/learning/>

^{viii} Transcript of a TED talk by Jane McGonigal in February of 2010, http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world/transcript?language=en.

^{ix} Easily accessed here: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/140448-the-place-god-calls-you-to-is-the-place-where>

^x McGonigal notes a lot of this research at her site (<http://janemcgonigal.com/learn-me/>), and there is a good collection of it at the Religious Education Association's 2011 meeting site (<http://www.religiouseducation.net/rea2011/resource>).

^{xi} Palmer (2007), and his paradoxes of learning design.

^{xii} See, for example Hess (2010, 2014c, 2015).

^{xiii} See Carnes (2014), Campbell and Grieve (2014), Hoover and Emerich, eds. (2011).

^{xiv} Friedman (1999).

^{xv} McGonigal, Jane (2011-01-20). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Kindle Location 4385). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition.

^{xvi} McGonigal, Jane (2011-01-20). *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Kindle Location 4542). Penguin Group US. Kindle Edition.

^{xvii} Here I am pointing to the possibility of creating a game like 'world without oil' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Without_Oil)

^{xviii} This iteration comes from this site: <https://sites.google.com/a/luthersem.edu/contemporary-consciousness-and-cultures/>

^{xix} Campbell (2012).

^{xx} 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.

^{xxi} 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.