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Jammin' in the Name of the Lord

by Lars de Wildt on 06/02/16 03:05:00 pm

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Last week I took part in a mini-[4Diversity] Game Jam on religion and games at the Campus Party in the Jaarbeurs in Utrecht. For those who don't know: the Jaarbeurs is a huge building, filled in this case with tech enthusiasts, programmers and entrepeneurs. Lectures on drones, hackathons, a Brazilian drum band… I'm going to be honest: these people were obviously tired and overwhelmed on the third day, because our jam attracted a total of two enthusiasts.

This left us all in a situation that was as hilarious as it was unexpected: instead of introducing and moderating the game jam, we got to take part in it. To make matters worse, I have no game jam experience. I cannot code in any language, I'm not very good at drawing – heck I'm not sure I'm even much of a writer.

Cut to a few days earlier, when I was excitedly preparing a powerpoint presentation to introduce the mini-jam. I'm a lowly academic, see? A faculty-dwelling, article-grinding PhD-grunt that works on the intersection between religion and games for a living. Basically, I get to dwell for years on a simple question: 'How come so many popular games feature priests, shamans, *leaps of faith* and Gods of war (or other), when we're supposedly in secular times?'[1] This meant that this 10-minute presentation was an excellent chance to put forward some of my findings, to an actual audience of designers no less! How can game designers use insights from the Sociology of Religion to start (as Bob Marley never meant it to mean) "jamming in the name of the Lord"?

Flash forward—or back? I'm at the jam, few people feel like spending the last 4 hours of a long day hunched over their laptops in a team trying to find out how to incorporate religion in a game. Instead, what happened was one of the more fun experiences I've had in months, dwelling outside of the academic dungeon.

The incentive of the introductory presentation, which I ended up tag-teaming with Jack Hoefnagel, is that religion is conventionally portrayed in video games as either empty reference (think of many JRPGs' happy cocktail of pantheons) or oppressive organization – and often a combination of both. Instead, we asked, could game designers incorporate a dynamics of religion that focuses on **the 'warmth' of religion on an individual level**: community, relationships, hope?

The result, I want to say, was inspiring. Group discussions revealed that, indeed, religion on a personal level is a story of values arising from the family unit. So much was expected, but what really loosened the discussion was that, yes, a belief in God or a sense of religious identity may inspire values such as selflessness, or altruistic care. But so did many secular ethics. And so we began.

For the next two hours, one team worked on a game emphasizing growth through sharing: no matter the goal, exchanging a symbolic gift meant that it grew. And so everyone's life was enriched through sharing what was essentially an elegant metaphor for love, personal relationships and fostering communities. Meanwhile, 'our' team – headed mostly by a valiantly coding Frank Hartman – worked on another metaphor. Here, the metaphor was of life's choices and phases buzzing by in the form of an endless runner: infancy, puberty, college life, working life and the deathbed each prompted their own ethical questions. Essentially: do I stop, give up some of my time and effort to help someone else; or do I go on egotistically? To refrain from turning this into a game design document, the visual metaphor was that of a snowball, accumulating size, but giving up some of it on stopping to aid another. The actual mechanics were based on a Jewish parable (that I actually got from *Fargo*…).

> *A rich man sees misery and decides to give up all his money, but there is still misery. He gives a kidney, but there is still misery. He donates all of his organs, dies, but there is still misery.*

Sustained moral altruism is knowing when to grow – the ball encounters holes in the road – and knowing when to give to others – the ball encounters gates…

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It isn't perfect. It doesn't offer the critical edge Thomas Buijtenweg recently wished for over on his own *Gamasutra*-blog. The games weren't even finished. But it is an excellent example of how two hours of jamming can offer interesting subversions of decades of mainstream gaming conventions. More so, it offers an insight into the practice of game design – when do ideas of and on religion *work*?

That, and simply loads of fun. Coming from my knowledge of *Final Fantasy*, *Civilization* and the solemn spiritual quest of *Journey*... Who knew you could have fun with religion?

[1] It's a bit more complicated than that.

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