

## Article

# Video Gaming Faith: Playing Out Theologies of Religions

Gregory D. Jones, Jr. 

Theology Department, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, USA; jonesg3@duq.edu

**Abstract:** Modern religious plurality invites religious and non-religious people to navigate four interreligious dialogical problems: (1) the inability to fully articulate faith, (2) the lack of persuasive religious language, (3) the reality of violence among the religions, and (4) the liquescent “truth” of modern times. How can plurality be framed for people whose sense of relationality is shaped by their participation in virtual worlds? One answer emerges in this autoethnographic consideration of how video gaming “plays out” fresh understandings of the interreligious encounter and relationality. Adopting a Christian perspective, the first section summarizes the major theologies of religions. These theologies correspond with video-game experiences of interreligious cooperation and contest found in playing out the enrichment and diminishment of (1) Christian spirit in *Spiritual Warfare* (NES), (2) human connection in *Final Fantasy VI* (Super NES), (3) sense of salvation in *Final Fantasy X* (PS2), and (4) symbiotic sacredness in *Journey* (iOS). These play experiences clarify a concept of expansive relationality among religions that is termed *shared contest*. The conclusion advances a *contestant theology of religions*; God removes every obstacle to including all in the company of God’s people, and God provides a *playground* of cooperation and contest for each religious tradition.

**Keywords:** video games; interreligious; *Spiritual Warfare*; *Final Fantasy*; *Journey*; Nintendo; Square; *Xenogears*; Sony PlayStation; RPGs



**Citation:** Jones, Gregory D., Jr. 2022. Video Gaming Faith: Playing Out Theologies of Religions. *Religions* 13: 944. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100944>

Academic Editors:  
Marinus Iwuchukwu and Stephen Mark Heim

Received: 8 August 2022

Accepted: 4 October 2022

Published: 10 October 2022

**Publisher’s Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

We are standing in the Cathedral in the country of the peaceful and religious country of Nisan with a diverse group of adventurers. The cavernous main hall is dimly lit by suspended candles and a ray of light that shines down from a stained-glass window adorned with Nisan’s Cross of Light. We hear the Nisan Orthodoxy, eight nuns led by Sister Agnes, sing their beautifully haunting hymn, “The Wounded Shall Advance Into the Light” (Asestir 2021). The nuns, dressed in blue habits, face an altar. As we look above the altar, we see a sculpture of two angels, masculine and feminine, with one wing each, reaching out to each other as they are suspended in mid-air. A torch radiates the space between them. Marguerite Fatima, the young Holy Mother of Nisan, explains how this altar depicts Nisan’s sense of human relationality:

Did you notice that the two great angels only have one wing each...? According to a legend handed down in Nisan... God could have created humans perfectly... But then, humans would not have helped each other... So that is what these great single-winged angels symbolizes... In order to fly, they are dependent on one another (Squaresoft 1998).

In Nisan, the life of faith involves a discourse of diverse views and interpretations. Yet, this cathedral is not found on any modern map; the aforementioned experience is from Square’s video game *Xenogears*. This is a role-playing game, or RPG, which Techopedia helpfully defines as “a genre of video game where the gamer controls a fictional character (or characters) that undertakes a quest in an imaginary world” (Techopedia 2020). *Xenogears* is notable for granting gamers a participatory insight into the nature and practice of religion. This experience in a video game cathedral resonates with academic conclusions about religious plurality. Both contexts teach that (1) all religions are not the same, (2) no religion

is immune from criticism, and (3) one religion must figure out a way of sharing the same space with another religion (Migliore 2014, pp. 317–18).

This article considers how video gaming can contribute something new to the theology of religions. It incorporates the aforementioned theological conclusions and video-game insights to advance the following thesis: video gaming clarifies the interreligious encounter as a space of playful cooperation and contest that incorporates assertiveness, compassion, and openness. This *playground* is possible according to the proclamation of the good news that “there is no encumbrance on God’s side to including all in the company of the redeemed” (Migliore 2014, p. 344). Daniel Migliore’s precise description of God’s freely given (though costly) gift renders the human response to this grace as the interreligious encounter that involves enriching and diminishing relationality among people of different religious traditions. Enrichment describes the strengths and weaknesses of one religion cooperating with the strengths and weaknesses of another. Diminishment involves the very existence of one religious tradition’s strengths and weaknesses contesting those of another tradition. This article considers this relational exchange through a lens of play. The player-focused approach sees video gaming as an experiencing of this interreligious relationality (Irizarry and Irizarry 2014, pp. 224–48).

This article’s player-focused approach adopts the Christian viewpoint to answer the question of cultivating interreligious relationality among people who spend much time in virtual worlds. This player-focused approach follows the path of scholars who articulate the meaning of their deeply personal, yet meaningful interactions with video games. My approach follows examples such as Hayse’s (2010, pp. 34–46) description of the personal religious quest that he undertook in *Ultima IV*, and the individual insights contributed in “Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming,” which is the roundtable discussion of Heidi A. Campbell, Rachel Wagner, Shanny Luft, Rabia Gregory, Gregory Price Grieve, and Xenia Zeiler (Campbell et al. 2016, pp. 641–64). These scholars offer diverse vantage points for the same conclusion: the individual player generates the action and the meaning of the video-gaming experience. My approach is also influenced by Kutter Callaway’s approach in “Wii are Inspired,” which is his personal reflection that situates the embodied experience of playing the Nintendo Wii “within a larger theological framework, conceiving of it in terms of the energizing presence of God’s Spirit in the world” (Callaway 2010, pp. 75–89). Callaway explains:

I operate with the base assumption that, rather than an anomalous [phenomenon], my particular experience is representative of a broader, more ubiquitous reality. That is, video games are a pervasive cultural form that both reflects and constructs the contemporary cultural imagination, serving as a primary locus of meaning making and identity formation . . . Yet the question I want to press in this investigation is more than simply anthropological or sociological; it is explicitly theological. Namely, how might we speak theologically concerning video games, not simply as cultural products, but as concrete forms of life that are intrinsically related to the deep-lived passions and desires of contemporary persons (Callaway 2010, p. 76)

Similar to Callaway, I want to situate my own video-gaming experience within a theological framework. Unlike Callaway, the larger theological framework I have in mind concerns the various Christian responses to other religions, or theologies of religions. Usually, Christian theologians of religions consult the Bible and draw from their own traditions and doctrines to defend or explain their stance toward differing faiths. Yet some theologians also embrace the insights of extrabiblical sources, such as S. Mark Heim, who develops a theology of religions inspired by Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in his book *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*. This article follows Heim’s move to embrace biblical and extrabiblical sources, by considering the various theologies of religions through the lens of *Xenogears* and other video games.

Due to this article’s personal and reflective nature, I use the term *autoethnography* to convey how I situate my experiences of playing video games within the framework of the

theologies of religions. This qualitative research method endured both enthusiasm and suspicion over the last two decades, in its spread across the social sciences (Creswell 1999, p. 3). Christopher Poulous recognizes that the autoethnographic method will continue to spread, and helpfully defines it as “an observational, participatory, and reflexive research method that uses writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis (i.e., action, performance, accomplishment)” (Poulous 2021, pp. 4–5). Put another way, autoethnography is the “discovery” that emerges during the process of writing out one’s memories and observations of their personal experiences (Poulous 2021, p. 4).

This autoethnographic form of discovery resonates well with the insights I gained as I wrote out my theological interpretations of my memories and observances of playing particular video games in several areas. First, adopting the autoethnography’s observational nature, the “data” in this article is drawn from my memories of playing video games, which are reinforced with information from instruction manuals, transcriptions of video-game dialogue, notes taken while replaying these games, and footage from “video game longplay” YouTube videos. Incorporating such materials minimizes the risk of the “lack of memory” that may reduce the reliability of an article based on personal reflection (Hunt and Junco 2006, p. 372). Second, I adopt the autoethnography’s participative nature by discovering the theological meaning of these video-game memories through the process of writing about situating them in the framework of the theologies of religions, rather than just engaging in what Laurel Richardson calls “a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project” (Richardson 1994, p. 516). Third, I adopt the autoethnography’s reflexive nature by drawing on not only my video-gaming hobby, but also, my academic responsibilities in theological study and education. Rather than sacrificing one for the other, the reflexive approach enables me to use my hobby knowledge to build up academic knowledge and vice versa, consistent with John W. Creswell’s (1999, p. 19) insistence that “knowledge is written in a personal, close up way; and knowledge evolves, emerges, and is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied.” Fourth, I adopt the autoethnography’s contact with others by establishing a correspondence between the views of theologians who represent the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and Trinitarian theologies of religions and my video-gaming experiences of playing *Spiritual Warfare*, *Final Fantasy VI*, *Final Fantasy X*, and *Journey*. Overall, this article is more of what Leon Anderson (2006, p. 378) describes as the “analytical autoethnography” that emphasizes “analytic reflexivity” and “commitment to theoretical analysis” to illustrate a broader cultural and theological meaning, and less of what Ellis and Bochner (2000, pp. 743–50) describe as an “evocative autoethnography” that adopts a self-narrating style to illustrate broader cultural and theological meaning. In these ways, my personal theological reflection attempts to maintain rigorous standards, while acknowledging and welcoming the necessary means for validating qualitative research.

Included in this analytic autoethnography is my conviction that it is important to cultivate a positive Christian stance toward other religions, considering that its geographical center is shifting toward African, Asian, and South American contexts where this type of theological and ethical agility is the ingrained cultural experience. My observation emerged after reading Diarmaid MacCulloch’s *A History of Christianity*, which he concludes by acknowledging how the gradual “collapse of traditional European Christendom” parallels the trend of indigenous, immense, and influential Pentecostal churches emerging in Ghana and South Korea (MacCulloch 2009, pp. 1006–12). Laycock and Mikles (2021, p. 118) describe this shift back to the lands of its origin as the “browning” of Christianity, which is reinforced by Stephen Prothero, who provides the map that illustrates the geographical change in Christianity’s “center of gravity” (Prothero 2020, pp. 286–89). In the caption under the map, Prothero explains, “the world Christian population moved north and west from Jerusalem into Europe before moving sharply south in 1900 and jumping into North Africa. Since 1970, as Christianity has boomed in Africa and Asia, it has been moving sharply south and east” (Prothero 2020, pp. 286–89). Prothero provides further empirical data to illustrate this shift, sharing that “the overwhelming majority (61 percent)

of the world's Christians [call] Africa, Latin America, or Asia home" and "there are more than twice as many Protestants in Nigeria as in Germany (the home of the Protestant Reformation) and more than twice as many Catholics in Brazil [as] in Italy (the homeland of Roman Catholicism)" (Prothero 2020, p. 287). Daniel L. Migliore (2014, p. 228) considers the theological dimensions of this shift, echoing the notions that "in terms of sheer numbers, the 'center' of Christianity has shifted from Europe to North America to Africa and South America . . . its voices will doubtless make a new and distinctive contribution to Christian witness and theology in the twenty-first century." Yet, even with the awareness of the historical, geographical, and theological developments of Christianity, the fact that this article is written by, about, and for Christians does invite the valid criticism that it is irrelevant for non-Christians. Yet, this article discerns theological meaning in an activity that has not been assigned much theological value by religious institutions. This move aims to connect with both religious and non-religious gamers who experience profound spiritual moments in the untraditional avenues of inhabiting the virtual worlds of video games.

This article advances an autoethnographic account of playing video games, which means that its conclusions should not be generalized to represent all Christians or gamers. Regardless, it illustrates how play experience—particularly video gaming—contributes a fresh vantage point for any Christian or non-Christian approach to interreligious relationality. The video-game experiencing of interreligious relationality is not confined to the major Christian theologies of religion, nor is it limited to the videogame examples covered in this article. This article can be a launchpad for future Christian and non-Christian considerations of video-game interreligiousity, via empirical and reflective research.

This article unfolds through a structure similar to how gamers view the angels above the altar of Nisan Cathedral. The first section summarizes claims and objections to the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and Trinitarian theologies of religions, as if these were ways to interpret the activity of the two angels reaching toward each other. The second section explains how video-game experiences can illustrate the aforementioned claims and objections of the different theologies of religion, which is an explication of relationality. The third section describes the space between two or more religious entities as *shared contest*. The conclusion calls for a *contestant theology of religions* and spotlights areas for further research to develop this understanding of playful cooperation and contest in the interreligious encounter.

## 2. Summarizing the Theologies of Religions

Does the sculpture of the paired one-winged angels in *Xenogears*'s Nisan Cathedral depict (a) one human distancing themselves from another's position, (b) one human helping another to fly, (c) humanity hovering independently yet alongside of one another, or (d) humanity flying together? These different interpretive choices helpfully open up the discussion concerning the theology of religions. Interreligious dialogue scholar Jacques Dupuis defines theologies of religions as studies of various traditions in the context of salvation history and their relationship to the Christic mystery and the Christian Church (Dupuis 1997, pp. 8–9). If Dupuis played *Xenogears* and witnessed this scene, he might discern the Christian response to other religions, whether it involves distancing, support, coexistence, or harmony. These interpretive choices are explicated in the following evaluations of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and Trinitarianism.

### 2.1. Exclusivism: Assertive Distance

Exclusivists emphasize distance from other religions by prioritizing the assertion of the Christian identity over compassion and openness toward other religions. Carl Braaten, an evangelical Lutheran exclusivist, has a genuine concern for other religions, but a primary intent to convey Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation. Revelation is distinguished from salvation when Braaten says "God reveals himself in many ways" (Braaten 1997, p. 395). He also makes a striking point:

[The Christian faith] makes a particular claim to truth: the all-fulfilling future of humankind and of the world's salvation has already arrived in Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew of Nazareth. Any church that either ceases to affirm the ultimacy of this event in the history of salvation or attempts to place alongside it other events of equal validity will fall into idolatry and apostasy. Just as the church in the third century could name and refute the heresy of Arianism, and just as the church in the twentieth century struggled against the apostasy of the Nazis' Aryan doctrine, so the church of the twenty-first century will be called upon to escape the deluge of neo-Gnosticism that places Jesus reverently into a pantheon of spiritual heroes (Braaten 1992, p. 15).

Braaten's claim is an assertion of the Christian faith that is grounded in historical attempts to preserve the institutional Christian identity. Such a defense preserved Chalcedonian belief from the overemphasis of Jesus's humanity. It also preserved the kingdom of God from being conflated with a human empire. This honest distance from the homophonal "christianities" of Arianism and Aryanism prevented institutional Christianity from becoming a "supraconfessional philosophy of religion to which no believing community adheres" (Braaten 1992, p. 10). Here, exclusivists intend to preserve the scandal of the Gospel, in order to avoid the theologically correct faith that all faith traditions can affirm, and the puppet faith which defies a human agenda (Braaten 1992, p. 10).

While exclusivism provides a history of clarifying Christian belief and activity against distortions and manipulations from within and without, it still does not overcome the conflation of Jesus Christ with institutional understandings and ideas about him (Migliore 2014, p. 320). This is objectionable, because Jesus's identity and activity are not the church's sole possession. Rather, Jesus is the ground for the church's existence. He is present beyond church walls, in connection with all of humankind and creation. If Braaten and the exclusivists only notice the distance between the Nisan altar angels, then they miss the meaning of the hands that are reaching toward one another. Thus, we turn to the inclusivists, in order to bridge this gap in understanding.

## 2.2. Inclusivism: Compassionate Support

Inclusivists emphasize support for other religions by prioritizing compassion over assertiveness and openness, in order to bring others into the Christian identity. As a middle position, the inclusivist emphasis occurs in varying degrees. Cold inclusivism exits out of exclusivist assertiveness; warm inclusivism veers toward the entrance into pluralist openness. Karl Barth represents cold inclusivism. Some scholars (Paul Knitter and Alan Race) call Barth an exclusivist. Yet, the exclusivist Braaten parts ways with Barth. He even provides key insights into understanding Barth's cold inclusivism. He writes:

Barth thinks that Christians have taken human unbelief and godlessness too seriously. For the most part, Christians have been too skeptical, pessimistic, and humorless. Barth says . . . "we are summoned to believe in Him, and in His victorious power, not in the invincibility of any non-Christian, anti-Christian, or pseudo-Christian worldliness which confronts Him. The more seriously and joyfully we believe in Him, the more we shall see such signs in the worldly sphere, and the more we shall be able to receive true words from it" (Braaten 1992, p. 60).

Braaten invites scholars to detect the note of wisecracking humor that lies at the core of Barth's assertion that religion (even Christianity) is unbelief. Barth satirically includes all religions as practices that are judged by God. Failing to recognize this call to not take any religion too seriously (which underlies his controversial responses to other religions) results in alarmed responses to Barth as a "disturbing," "unyielding approach to non-Christian faith" that is "the product of the ivory tower" (Race 1982, p. 16). Yet, Professor Barth opposed the all-too-serious Aryanism. Further, he gradually developed a prayer and hope in God's will for all to be saved. He writes:

There is no good reason why we should forbid ourselves, or be forbidden, openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect and therefore the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that final threat, i.e., that in the truth of this reality there might be contained the super-abundant promise of the final deliverance of all men. To be more explicit, there is no good reason why we should not be open to this possibility... of an apokatastasis or universal reconciliation (Barth 1956–1975, vol. IV/3.2, pp. 477–78).

The older Barth exits out of exclusivism; he insists that everyone is good enough to be saved, even if no one is automatically safe from being sent to hell (Braaten 1992, p. 61). Barth grants salvific value to God's nature and activity to the detriment of human religiosity, in the spirit of Romans 3:4.

Cold inclusivism is witty, yet somewhat irresponsible; it does not adequately address the historical damages that Christians have dealt to traditions that they have not taken seriously enough. Thus, Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck moves to assess, rather than condemn, religion. Lindbeck intends to pay careful attention to every religion's self-description in order to "purify and enrich their heritages, to make them better speakers of the languages they have" (Lindbeck 2009, pp. 47–48). Meanwhile, the warm inclusivism of *Nostra Aetate* describes an embrace of other religions. It explicates how Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, in their own ways, provide "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men" (Paul VI 1965, n. 2). Vatican II encourages Christians not just to intend to understand, but to actively enter into "dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions" as part of the witness of Christ, "in whom men may find the fullness of religious life" (Paul VI 1965, n. 2). Karl Rahner extends this compassion further; he insists that Jesus Christ is freely at work in other world religions. This means that all people can be included into the saved people of God, to the extent that they are faithful to the knowledge of God that is made known to them in their own traditions. Rahner walks past Barth's disparagement of religion, Lindbeck's intent to understand religious otherness, and Vatican II's exhortation for dialogue. He affirms that Christ can bring the people of different religions into a saving relationship with God (Rahner 1961–1992, vol. 18, pp. 289–95).

Inclusivists open the way for a compassionate Christian response to the people of other religions, but do not overcome the lack of an explicit affirmation of their salvific value. Migliore explicates these key objections: Barth and Lindbeck do not provide decisive courses of actions toward other religions; Vatican II remains silent about salvation for people of other religions; Rahner, lacking concrete Scriptural support, imposes a foreign identity on those he labels "anonymous Christians" (Migliore 2014, pp. 321–25). The inclusivists focus on the hands of the Nisan altar angels reaching toward each other, but miss their one-winged bodies that pluralists notice.

### 2.3. Pluralism: Open Coexistence

Pluralists emphasize the coexistence with other religions by prioritizing openness to salvation beyond Christian assertiveness and compassion. Philosopher John Hick attempts to establish a theocentric, rather than Christocentric "universe of faiths" in which Ultimate Reality is the "sun" that is shared and orbited by all religions (Hick 1993, pp. 130–32). Hick's pluralism explicates the coexistence of religious traditions as a map in which one faith is located alongside another. He anticipates that "such names as 'Christianity', 'Buddhism', 'Islam', 'Hinduism', will no longer describe the then current configurations of men's religious experience and belief," but instead, the future convergence may "obsolete the sense of belonging to rival ideological communities" (Hick 1993, p. 146). Hick sees coexistence as a human reality that is gradually overtaking religious distinction and conversion.

Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann also develop this constellation of religions. Both insist that other religions improve, correct, and complete Christianity. Tillich considers interreligious dialogue to be essential to the life of faith, especially for the sake of insulating a world religion from a seductive "quasi-religion," such as Aryanism or Fascism (Tillich

1963, pp. 1–25). Here, Tillich calls out Hick’s religious coexistence, Barth’s cold inclusivity, and Braaten’s exclusive assertiveness:

Does our analysis demand either a mixture of religions or the victory of one religion, or the end of the religions altogether? We answer: None of these alternatives! A mixture of religions destroys in each of them the concreteness which gives it its dynamic power. The victory of one religion would impose a particular religious answer on all other particular answers . . . For the question of the ultimate meaning of life cannot be silenced as long as men are men. Religion cannot come to an end, and a particular religion will be lasting to the degree in which it negates itself as a religion. Thus Christianity will be a bearer of the religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity (Tillich 1963, pp. 96–97).

Tillich’s pluralism arises out of his conviction that religiosity is an enduring part of human experience, whether or not the religions coexist, compete, or collapse. Moltmann shares this optimism, but describes a more expansive dialogue and reception of the other. He writes:

The fellowship in dialogue of the religions would be misunderstood if it went under the slogan: religions of the world unite against growing irreligious secularism or anti-religious Communism! [Rather], inter-religious dialogue must be expanded by dialogue with the ideologies of the contemporary world. Together with them, it must ultimately be related to the people who are living, suffering and dying in the world today (Moltmann 1993, pp. 161–62).

Moltmann’s conclusion encapsulates the pluralist’s openness to religious and ideological others. However, objectors note that this openness “leads to thin generalities that fail to represent well any particular religious tradition” (Migliore 2014, p. 328). The pluralists value the two Nisan angels, but struggle to discern that the angels are not identical. The Trinitarian approach reconciles these differences.

#### 2.4. Trinitarian Theology: Harmonic Relationality

The Trinitarian theology is a stance that extends the relational activity of all the Persons of the Trinity toward a positive response to other religions. Jesuit theologian Jacques Dupuis, American Baptist theologian S. Mark Heim, and Presbyterian scholar Daniel Migliore each advance a key idea: every religion participates in God’s revelatory power and salvific value via Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Dupuis insists that God is the *agapeic* source of salvation (Dupuis 2002, pp. 190–94). In this untamed relationality, the Father’s revelatory and salvific activity is never separated from the Son and the Holy Spirit. For Dupuis, this means that “God saves with two hands” (Dupuis 1997, p. 300). In light of this relationality, Dupuis describes Jesus Christ as the “universal, constitutive Savior,” instead of “unique and only Savior,” in order to emphasize the Father as the source of salvation, and also to embrace the possibilities of other figures playing salvific roles in other religions (Dupuis 2012, pp. 79–80). Here, Jesus does not replace the Father or obsolete other religious traditions. Rather, the Holy Spirit, in relation with the activity of the Father and the recognizability of the Son, extends God’s salvific work to the people of other religions through their traditions (Dupuis 1997, pp. 242–44). Thus, Dupuis’s Trinitarian theology of religions does not exhaust nor restrict God’s self-revelation to Christianity. This move positions Christians to engage in a harmonious dialogue with the people of other religions.

If Dupuis explicates an *agapeic* theology of religions, then Heim advances a “relativistic” theology (Migliore 2014, p. 330). Heim, along with Raimon Panikkar, is convinced that the Trinity is not just “the unique property of Christianity,” but is rather, “a junction where authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet” and “a reconciliation of their apparently irreducible concepts of the Absolute” (Heim 2001, p. 149). Heim believes that the Trinity is a tri-revelatory ground in which Christianity can meet all other religions. Seeing God as the Father is a meeting point for another religion’s general revelation through creation; seeing God as the Holy Spirit is an access point for another religion’s universal activity and

presence; seeing God as the Son is an access point for another religion's hidden revelation that points to an eternal truth (Heim 2001, pp. 134–36). Heim's relativistic theology is further distinguished by his plural sense of salvations. Heim anticipates "distinct religious ends" for different religious traditions, rather than a convergence into an eschatological kingdom of God. Migliore draws from Heim and Dupuis to advance a *non-obstructed* theology of religions. Here, the Trinity frees God and Christians to have a relationship with other religions. He writes:

God is not a prisoner of any metaphysical scheme, including the scheme of eternal double decrees or the necessity of a universalist logic. While never arbitrary, God's grace is free; while freely given, God's grace is costly. Theology and the church have no authority either to declare that God must save all or that God can save only through the ministry and witness of the church. What the church is called to proclaim is the good news that there is no encumbrance on God's side to including all in the company of the redeemed (Migliore 2014, p. 344).

Migliore's conclusion helpfully encapsulates the Trinitarian view that God grants all religions the freedom to participate in revelation and salvation through Godself. However, enriching relationality is only one side of the coin of the interreligious encounter; it overlooks four obstacles. Dupuis briefly notices the first oversight; people struggle to explicate their own faith (Dupuis 2002, p. 384). Second, other religions do not always want to harmonize with each other, especially if they are on the weaker end of an "asymmetrical relationship" with other traditions (Dupuis 2012, p. 123). Third, religious people do not relate to others with total openness, because human beings have finite relationality (Segundo 1976, p. 159). Fourth, a direct jump from initial contact to religious harmony does not always occur. If Trinitarians see the sculpted Nisan altar angels of *Xenogears* depicting a relational pathway to God, they miss the arm of each angel that remains withdrawn and non-relational. The next section turns toward video-gaming experiences to process these overlooked relationalities.

### 3. Video-Game Experiences of Interreligious Relationality

The theology of religions ranges from exclusivist assertiveness to Trinitarian harmony. What new insights can video gaming bring to this ever-developing spectrum? To be sure, a full description of the theological value of video games exceeds the scope of this article. Speaking from personal experience, I can say that video gaming allows us to play out different types of relationality without incurring real-world consequences on ourselves or others. Although I cannot speak for all gamers, I can reliably envision the ways in which diverse gamers can play out ways of life that exaggerate or contrast their real-world experiences. A police officer can play out a life of crime in *Grand Theft Auto 3*. A convict can bring peace to the city in *Streets of Rage 2*. Men can play out Lara Croft's treasure-hunting exploits in *Tomb Raider* or the galactic bounty hunting of Samus Aran in *Metroid*. Women can play out the heroic journey of Link in the *Legend of Zelda* games or the gritty tale of Solid Snake in *Metal Gear Solid*. One can watch many YouTube longplay videos and visit Twitch channels featuring diverse individuals racing against each other in *Mario Kart*, fighting one another in *Tekken*, or matching wits in *Tetris* in a non-hurtful way. Video gaming holds together an enriching relationality that affirms identity with a diminishing relationality that depletes identity.

While all gamers do not share my personal experience, I can speak for those gamers who know what it is like to cooperate with others and contest them at the same time. This expansive relationality resonates with Trinitarian theology; video gaming incorporates assertiveness, compassion, and openness into an interpretive approach toward the other. Yet, unlike the Trinitarian approach, which emphasizes an enriching relationality with the other, video gaming affords space to process and express the diminishing relationality with the other. My gaming experiences of processing diminishment allow me to envision how other gamers similarly do not jump over the points between an initial encounter with the other and a final harmony with them. Instead, we can process the potential in-

between points of bewilderment, disappointment, anger, and re-envisioning as part of the game. Here, play theologian Courtney Goto's concept "holding lightly" helpfully describes this ability of being together that opens up "deeper discourses" with the other through playfulness (Yale Youth Ministry Institute 2017). Play allows me and similar gamers to "hold lightly" the diminishing relationality with the other without fully committing to it, and it points toward the possibilities of enriching relationality in a more convincing way than presuming it will occur. One can hold together enrichment and diminishment by thinking of them as opposites interplaying on a *playground*, since play experience is grounded in a unified sensibility of distinct dimensions of reality. Roger Caillois brings clarity to this abstract notion; he describes the four unified dimensions of play experience as *agon* (immersive competition), *mimesis* (ritualized simulation), *alea* (risky activity), and *ilinx* (dazzled senses) (Caillois 2001, p. 12). For me and similar gamers, play experiences are a playground of four dimensions in which the four experiences of diminishing relationality are held lightly and inclined to an enriching relationality.

Caillois grants me the language to characterize my memories of video gaming as particular play experiences whose (1) immersive competition holds potential bewilderment when the other appears strange to us, (2) ritualized simulation holds potential disappointment when the other does not want to be like us, (3) risky activity holds potential anger when the other blocks the path to our goals, and (4) dazzled senses hold potential re-envisioning when the other changes our thinking. Crucially, gamers who share my vantage point learn that the encounter with the other is not a linear journey to harmony. The following section considers how several video games play out the enriching and diminishing relationalities of each theology of religions.

### 3.1. *Spiritual Warfare: Video-Gaming Honest Distance*

*Spiritual Warfare* is a 1992 Nintendo (NES) action-adventure game from Wisdom Tree. This game is the Christian *Legend of Zelda*; gamers control a young bow-tie wearing believer who finds his community overtaken by sin and evil spirits, and thus, must journey through the city and into an evil underworld to defeat the devil itself. The instruction manual promises that players will "see just how the fruit of the Spirit can impact the lives of others and ultimately win an entire city to God" (Wisdom Tree 1992, p. 2). Indeed, gamers throw short-distance pears (meekness), zig-zagging pomegranates (love), powerful apples (patience), spread-shot grapes (joy), and wide-ranging bananas (faith) at opponents. When the fruit touches these "unsaved souls," they are shocked to the core of their being, lose their clothes, knives, clubs, and equipment, and they are covered with red robes as they bow in repentance and new life (nesguide 2007). Further equipment includes "vials of the wrath of God," which function as a spiritual dynamite that can convert stronger enemies or uncover hidden areas in the game. Sometimes, a red devil pops out of a converted soul, and it must be destroyed with more fruit. More often, the converted souls leave behind "spirit points" to collect, which serve as the game's currency for obtaining stronger fruit to convert more souls, especially the Bosses of each area. Additionally, spirit points enable the "pray" ability which restores one unit of health per 10 spirit points. When Bosses are defeated, they yield pieces of the Armor of God which grant distinct abilities, such as reducing the damage taken from enemies or granting the strength to move heavy rocks. Also, a helpful, yet sporadically appearing guardian angel asks five Bible questions and awarding a perfect score with spirit points and health. Further, there are Christian helpers in the city who stand motionless, yet give advice about where to find items, or where not to go (such as the city's bar, which results in the loss of one piece of the Armor of God). This all occurs to the tune of an endlessly repeating 8-bit medley of exclusivist anthems such as "Jesus Saves," and "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand." I interpret the game mechanics of *Spiritual Warfare* as encouraging the conversion—rather than the destruction—of enemies. The game also features practices which assert Christian identity against opponents who would obscure or threaten it.

From my vantage point as a Christian gamer, *Spiritual Warfare* uses *spirit currency* to play out exclusivist relationality. Spirit points grant the means to deal with a bewildering other in an immersive journey of converting. I discern the disappointing difference of the other in the ritualized simulation of losing health points when being touched by the unsaved souls. I also envision how gamers who share my vantage point can process anger in risky activity, by hurling fruit (of the Spirit) at residents who wield knives and clubs. *Spiritual Warfare* also dazzles the senses with its depiction of spiritual realities, exhibited by the whimsical transformation of converts. Thus, video gaming the assertive distance of exclusivism is an interplay between (1) preserving Christian identity from being depleted by others and (2) healing another's identity by placing it into the Christian community.

### 3.2. *Final Fantasy VI: Video-Gaming Compassionate Support*

If exclusivist gamers play out assertive distance as the enrichment and diminishing of *Christian spirit*, then inclusivist gamers play out compassionate support as the enrichment and diminishing of *human connection*. *Final Fantasy VI* (FFVI) is Square's 1994 Super Nintendo RPG that was released as *Final Fantasy III* in North America. I vividly remember this gaming experience of bringing together a large cast of diverse characters to form a united front against the power-hungry Empire. FFVI's gaming experience is that of being torn between multiple sensibilities. The game plays out the story of these characters seeking out a sense of connection in a world where the new ways of technology, industrial cities, and imperialism are at odds with the old ways of magic, medieval castles, and spiritual dimensions. The events of the game are set up by an ancient conflict among three gods known as "The Warring Triad," who transformed humans into magical beings called "Espers." Eventually, the Triad realizes that their conflict is destroying the world, and they turn themselves into statues, which the Espers use to create a new "middle" dimension where they can live peacefully, away from gods and humans. In the present day, Emperor Gestahl's Empire found a way to access the Esper World and drain their energy to power their technology. Some characters—such as the villainous Kefka, the brainwashed Terra, and the emotionally repressed Celes—serve the Empire. However, Gestahl's ambition of world domination is contrasted by the Returners' opposition. Kefka's rise to power and descent into insanity results in the World of Balance transforming into the World of Ruin. FFVI's plot allowed me and similar gamers to inhabit each character's experience of division and loss. Terra is half-human and half Esper. Locke is a treasure hunter, but he lost the love of his life. Similarly, Setzer is a gambler who is haunted by the death of his fellow risk-taker. Celes is an Empire general who also supports the Returners; Cyan is the loyal knight and sole survivor of the kingdom of Doma, which was poisoned by Kefka. Shadow abandoned his companion as a mercenary for both the Returners and the Empire. Gau is a feral orphan who was forced to grow up in the wilderness called the Veldt. The close-knit Figaro brothers are forced apart due to the loss of their father, the king. Even Kefka, the game's villain, is marked by this division and loss; he appears to be the clownish comic relief, but is a man who was made into a weapon of war who fully embraces destructive nihilism and greed. I remember not only guiding these complex characters across the different lands and dangers of FFVI, but also playing out their human connections. FFVI's party of characters gradually form friendships and relationships with each other. This brings a sense of strength and healing to their experiences of division and loss. It also simulates the power of human connection. In the 35–60 h that it took me and similar gamers to complete FFVI, we spend that time strengthening and getting to know virtual characters who gradually become like friends and family.

I contend that FFVI's sense of human connection is most powerfully felt in the game's final confrontation with Kefka, who stole the power of The Warring Triad and ruined the world. Kefka is a unique villain in gaming history; he embraces destruction, despair, and despotism because he enjoys it. He stands poised to destroy everything, as a "monument to non-existence." The evil clown-god laments, "Why do people rebuild things they know are going to be destroyed? Why do people cling to life when they know they can't live forever?"

Think how meaningless each of your lives is" (Squaresoft 1994)! A defiant member of the party counters, "It's not the net result of one's life that's important! It's the day-to-day concerns, the personal victories, and the celebration of life... and love" (Squaresoft 1994)! One by one, others counter Kefka's nihilism with their sense of human connection. Terra "[knows] what love is," because she learned it from the other characters (Squaresoft 1994). Locke "celebrates life and the living" (Squaresoft 1994). Cyan guards the memory of his family in his heart. Shadow's time with the party has taught him about friendship and family. Edgar and Sabin's brotherhood is healed because of their camaraderie with the group. Celes's relationship with Locke makes her feel accepted for who she is. Setzer's airship connects him to friends past and present. Gau has found a new family in the Returners. The party's conviction of human connection is what counters and overcomes Kefka's embrace of division and loss.

From my vantage point as a Christian gamer, *FFVI*'s experience of human connection plays out inclusivist relationality. I discern the bewilderment of the other in *FFVI*'s immersive experiences of identities divided between an old and new way of life. I can also envision how gamers who share my vantage point experience the disappointing difference in ritualized simulations of conflict between the Returners and the Empire; the Empire's imperialism challenges the party's sense of connection, while adding members to the Returners affirms that sensibility. The risky activity of encountering Kefka's nihilism allows contact with the anger that results from division and loss. This final boss encounter provides a vivid form to the conflict of enriching and diminishing relationality. The party battles through four tiers of nightmarish, religion-mocking depictions of Kefka's final form. The battle unfolds to the tune of a classical musical score ("Dancing Mad") that features four distinct movements of Kefka's operatic descent into lunacy and despair (Sangnoksung 2015). *FFVI* dazzles the senses by unfolding its plot through a series of awakenings. The game starts with Terra waking up from being brainwashed by the Empire. The middle act starts with Locke waking after Terra's Esper powers erupt. The last act starts when Celes awakens a year after Kefka ruins the World of Balance. Thus, video gaming the compassionate support of inclusivism is an interplay between (1) personal connection with others and (2) divided identity and loss.

### 3.3. Final Fantasy X: Video-Gaming Open Coexistence

The inclusivist *FFVI* plays out the compassionate support through the diminishing *trellochoresis* (crazy dancing) and enriching *perichoresis* (relational dancing) of human connection. Similarly, I experienced the pluralist *Final Fantasy X* (*FFX*), released in 2001 for PlayStation 2, as a playing out of open coexistence as an enrichment and diminishment of the *sense of salvation*. In *FFX*'s virtual world of Spira (a different world from *FFVI*, yet also divided by magic and technology) sin and the afterlife are not just religious ideas about a closeness or distance from salvation—they are visceral realities. The immense, whale-like flying monster called "Sin" unpredictably destroys towns and technological society, in order to ensure that humanity coexists with nature without dominating it, as generations once had in the past. Unlike the steampunk world of *FFVI*, Spira rejects machinery as evil. Sin's looming presence reminds them of the mistaken "Machina War" of the past. Yet, the dread of Sin's destructive power also involves the potential for salvation. Every ten years, a powerful magic user called a "summoner" appears and defeats Sin. However, summoners are required to sacrifice their lives in order to defeat Sin. Further, Sin always reappears and restarts Spira's cyclical history of dread, sacrifice, and salvation.

The Church of Yevon interprets the meaning of this cycle in order to tranquilize the residents of Spira and preserve the church's global theocracy. Several characters navigate a world which largely believes that obeying the teachings of Yevon will cause Sin to disappear. However, the party gradually learns that Sin is nothing but a human creation; it is the weapon that was secretly built by the man named Yu Yevon to end the tragic Machina War. Sin's power established the Yevon religion of magic and nature communion, and defeated the technological Al Bhed culture. The Al Bhed society survives, but they are shunned, due

to their use of machines. Further, Al Bheds actively resist Yevon by kidnapping summoners, in order to prevent them from sacrificing themselves. Meanwhile, most people in Spira remember Yu Yevon as a heroic martyr, but they don't realize that he created Sin, which embodies their concept of dread and evil, and a diminished sense of salvation.

Meanwhile, *FFX*'s "Farplane" enriches the sense of salvation by bringing the people of Spira close to the afterlife. When the people of Spira die, they are sent to the Farplane, which is an accessible location in their world. Just as real-world people visit cemeteries to remember their loved ones, the people of Spira visit the Farplane, where they still faintly discern those who have died. This is a vivid pluralist concept. First, it is the "death destination" open to everyone in Spira. Second, it is not a place of reward or torment—it just *is*. Third, it allows the living to access the afterlife without a need to fulfill any requirements. The Farplane functions as the shared spiritual dimension that is comparable to what Panikkar and Heim describe as the junction where authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet. The Farplane does more than provide a universal death destination that is experienced in the same way by all people; it is the access point to the spiritual dimension that can be experienced through diverse religious stances—either with the belief of those devoted to the Yevon religion, or with the skepticism of those who embrace Al Bhed's technologism. Further, the Farplane allows for a diversity of religious ends, but only allows those ends to be discerned in its singular location. As such, the Farplane is a shared concept, whose meaning is cultivated amidst the connections of diverse groups of people, living and dead. In this way, *FFX* allowed me and similar gamers to play out a pluriversal afterlife that features the coexistence of the living and the dead.

From my vantage point as a Christian gamer, *FFX*'s open coexistence plays out pluralist relationality. I discern the bewilderment of the other through immersive interactions with theocratic Yevonites and Al Bhed techno-outcasts. I also recognize how the experience of disappointing difference plays out through the Al Bheds' rejection of Yevonite religion, which is countered by the Yevonites' bigotry and resentment of the Al Bheds and their machina. I can envision how gamers who share my vantage point engage in risky activity via their confrontations with the monstrous Sin, who is *FFX*'s embodiment of monstrous anger toward the other. The Farplane dazzles the senses of gamers who believe in separate destinies for different religions. Thus, video gaming the open coexistence of pluralism is an interplay between (1) the dread that deadens the sense of salvation and (2) the assurance of afterlife that quickens the sense of salvation.

### 3.4. *Journey: Video-Gaming Harmonic Relationality*

The previous sections feature personal theological reflections on how particular video games involve the interplay *between* enrichment and diminishment. Meanwhile, my consideration of Jenova Chen's *Journey* concerns the interplay *among* these different relationalities, which nourish each other, rather than diverge. *Journey* plays out harmonic relationality through *sybiotic sacredness*. In my *Journey* journey, I appreciated the parallel experiences of viewing others and being viewed by others with a sense of the holy, rather than ascribing sacredness to any external image, concept, or event. Any concept of the sacred required me to make a claim of its holiness along with the person I was playing with, and vice versa.

*Journey* memorably begins with the red-robed, faceless figure in a vast desert, traveling toward a mountain in the distance (IAmSp00n 2012, 0:30–1:30). When two different players get close to another on their travels, both of their robes glow, which signifies the sacredness of others. The two travelers meet and help each other not with words, but rather, through musical notes. Similarly, background music accompanies the traveler as he or she treads, floats, and rides the winds over a sepia desert, a dark valley with vacant ruins, and a foreboding snow-covered mountain with strong winds. As the mountain grows colder, snowier, and impossible to navigate, the traveler faints from exhaustion. Six mysterious figures dressed in white resurrect the traveler, who goes on to reach the top of the mountain. The ending is an ecstatic scene of flying over peaks, clouds, pools of cascading water, and into letters of light that guide the traveler into a resplendently bright crevice at the top

of the mountain, whose contents are shrouded in light. However, the end of the game is an epic rewind that shows glimpses of other travelers headed toward the mountain, and a return to the starting point in the desert, with an option of playing again. Thus, I experienced *Journey's* beginning and ending as a symbiotic sacredness with other travelers. Jenova Chen explicates this in-game experience with a reflection on his motivation:

The goal was to create a game where people felt they are connected with each other . . . A lot of games today have a list of quests, places to go, items to collect and rewards to receive . . . We just ignore each other. So in order to make players care about each other, we have to remove their power, and remove their tasks (Smith 2012).

Here, Chen says that removing a gamer's power and tasks is the diminishing relationality that nourishes a coerced, but valid, enriching relationality of caring for other players. Chen grants the language that helps me to describe how *Journey's* symbiotic sacredness plays out the harmonic relationality of Trinitarian theology, by reversing diminishing relationality onto the player. Rather than encountering a bewildering other, my fellow traveler and I became baffling, faceless, wordless, armless figures who are shrouded in red robes. Instead of feeling the disappointment of another's difference, we could not traditionally express ourselves and relate to others. This powerlessness allows me and my fellow traveler to be the object of each other's disenchantment. Likewise, *Journey* casts us both as strangers who are viewed as risks and sources of frustration for not being able to speak a common language or accomplish a task. As a red-robed foreigner, I inherently challenged the other player to re-envision relationality and vice versa. From my vantage point as a Christian gamer, *Journey* turned me into the other. I can envision how this video gaming of harmonic relationality is the interplay among the experience of the sacred and the identity of the other for other gamers who share my vantage point.

This consideration of video-gaming experiences that hold together enrichment and diminishment contributes a valuable concept to the Christian theologies of religions: a relationality of cooperation and contest that fills in the spaces between initial encounter and harmony with the other. The next section discusses this *shared contest* as an expansive relationality which addresses four problems that interreligious dialogue clarifies without correcting: (1) the inability to fully articulate faith, (2) the lack of persuasive religious language, (3) the reality of violence among religions, and (4) the liquescent "truth" of modern times.

#### 4. The Expansive Relationality of the Shared Contest of Religions

The dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter are encapsulated in one statement: "when Christians tell people who are not Christians that Jesus is the constitutive presence of God in their religion, it means nothing to them" (Esibu 2019). The inability to articulate Jesus expresses Dupuis's concern about every religious faith being unable to "express itself in, and be transposed to, another" (Dupuis 1997, p. 384). The *non-persuasiveness* of Jesus's human face in other religions reflects the increasing powerlessness of secular logic. This non-persuasiveness is not only noticed by theologians and ethicists, but also terrorists who exacerbate the increasingly tragic problem of violence in sacred spaces. These atrocities, and all the other problems of dialogue, are caught up in the modern "de-absolutizing and "de-objectifying" of truth that makes it dependent on a subject's fragmented language, view of reality, and expression (Dupuis 1997, pp. 284–86). Each dialogical concern suggests that *any* description of Christ's presence in another religion means nothing to people of other faiths. This seems to disqualify dialogue, but such a verdict misses the reality that dialogue still happens, regardless of academic concerns. Thus, we ask a question that can expand our view beyond these academic concerns: what is the meaning of the space of the interreligious encounter itself?

From my Christian vantage point, the space of the interreligious encounter is where Christianity enriches and diminishes another religion. Likewise, I contend that this space is also the space where another religion enriches and diminishes Christianity. Dialogue

is valuable, because it discovers this expansive relationality of shared contest. The inability to fully articulate faith undermines the dialogical premise, yet fits into the shared contest whose theological starting point is bewilderment. The lack of religious language that changes hearts and inspires action calls dialogical adequacy into question, but finds acceptance in the shared contest that allows for disappointment. Dialogue is an attempt to work around the reality of violence that religions inflict upon each other, while the shared contest redirects the quantum of anger as the primordial energy of relationality. Finally, dialogue renders the truth of the other as elusive, while the shared contest's experience of re-envisioning renders the other as participative. To be sure, this expansive relationality does not intend to make dialogue obsolete. Rather, the shared contest clarifies the meaning of what happens in the "space" of the interreligious encounter with more specificity than the eloquent, yet vague terms of "cross-fertilizing," "mutual enrichment," and even "dialogue" (Dupuis 1997, p. 7).

I envision the space of the shared contest as one where religious people enrich and diminish each other in an exchange of playful violence. Shared contest unifies two or more people as free, yet vulnerable entities in an expansive, even agapeic relationality. Here, one allows their own strengths and weaknesses to be "held lightly" by another's strengths and weaknesses on a playground. This is conceptually comparable to an offense trying to score against the defense on the football field, contestants trying to answer the most questions in the *Jeopardy!* studio, or the master of Wing Chun battling the master of Hung Ga on the fighting stage. Being in this context requires that one lives in their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of another. Crucially, the playful mode of shared contest is not about proving the superiority or inferiority of one religion. Rather, its aim is to discover the true religious self, which is found alongside another religious person who shares the same space and same capacity for strength and weakness. I learned how this played out through my experiences of playing video games. Some unsaved souls in *Spiritual Warfare* are strong against apples and weak against bananas, just as gamers are strong against some enemy attacks but weak against others. In *FFVI* and *FFX*, gamers who are strong against ice elementals allow a weakness against fire elementals. In *Journey*, gamers who are unable to use words, are assisted by other players who are skilled in non-verbal communication. In these ways, video gaming clarifies my idea of shared contest, which, itself, experientially opens the door to a contestant theology which outplays the academic problems of interreligious dialogue.

"Contestant" theology is my playful riff on the label of "Protestant," which is known for its "protest" against Catholicism that tends to encourage the formation of new denominations. Contestant theology promotes the play experience of the contest as the space of enriching and diminishing aspects of the interreligious encounter. Contestant theology aims to be an expansive relationality where Christians and other religions can put difficult questions to each other with assertiveness, compassion, openness, and harmony that holds together enrichment and diminishment. These hard questions are provided courtesy of Hans Küng, who says that Christianity has a right to pose questions to other religions about "unhistoricity, circular thinking, fatalism, unworldliness, pessimism, passivity, caste spirit, [and] social disinterestedness" (Küng 1976, p. 110). Contestant theology also allows Christianity to be challenged by these same questions. A religion shows its strengths and weaknesses to the extent that it can convincingly engage these questions. Again, the intent is not for people of different religions to hurt each other. Rather, this is a way for religions to be together in the way that close friends can freely hang out with each other without political correctness, self-censorship, or a struggle for understanding. It tries to avoid the dialogical problems of demonizing one religion as a Western oppressor or dismissing another as a primitive superstition. Instead, contestant theology resonates with how martial artists discern and test each other's fighting styles, in order to discover the meaning of their shared capacity for mastery and correction. From my Christian vantage point, the space of shared contest brings wholeness and holiness to its participants.

## 5. Conclusions

A fuller description of contestant theology goes beyond the scope of this article, whose central foci are my video-game experiences of interreligious relationality that experientially open the door for this approach. Yet, this article lays the groundwork for further research and development of this concept. First, studies into interpretations of biblical experiences of relational violence—such as Jacob wrestling with God in Genesis 32 or Jesus’s “contest” with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 and Mark 7—would provide a solid theological foundation for contestant theology. Second, there is a need to clarify and expand approaches to studying video games, which will provide further evidence for how enrichment and diminishment are held together in the expansive relationality of shared contest. Third, this article opens up a new opportunity to consider the theological value of the martial arts and apply them to the expansive violence of the interreligious encounter. Fourth, this article anticipates a need to consider the “theologies” of a growing number of fringe groups who no longer believe that secular or religious sources of authority are able to convey truth. Additionally, there is a need to monitor the steady rise of the number of people involved with these terrorist, nationalist, conspiracy theory, and internet forums. Finally, there is a need to further explicate an expansive idea of violence as a primordial energy that is involved in the creation and development of the cosmos in co-evolutionary relationships.

We conclude this article by returning to Nisan Cathedral in *Xenogears*. We rejoin our fellow adventurers as they gaze at the two angels hovering above the altar, each held aloft with one wing. The exclusivist notices the distance that separates the two angels. The inclusivist pays attention to the angels’ hands that reach toward one another. The pluralist finds meaning in how these one-winged bodies share the same space. The Trinitarian sees two angels depicting the relational pathway of God. I contend that these perspectives either overlook or submerge the bewilderment, disappointment, anger, and re-envisioning that I and gamers with similar experiences got to hold lightly in video games that bring together enrichment and diminishment in an expansive relationality. If one is open to sharing my contestant perspective, one may discern a helpful avenue for overcoming the academic problems of dialogue in order to gain a fuller appreciation of the shared contest of the Nisan angels who depict the interreligious encounter as video-gamed faith.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Anderson, Leon. 2006. Analytic Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35: 373–95. [CrossRef]
- Asestir. 2021. We the Wounded Shall Advance into the Light—Xenogears OST Extended. Video, 1:03:08. July 9. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO5b5-F6BAk> (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Barth, Karl. 1956–1975. *Church Dogmatics*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark.
- Braaten, Carl E. 1992. *No Other Gospel!: Christianity Among the World’s Religions*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Braaten, Carl E. 1997. Hearing the Other: The Promise and the Problem of Pluralism. *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24: 393–400.
- Caillois, Roger. 2001. *Man, Play, and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Callaway, Kutter. 2010. Wii are Inspirited: The Transformation of Home Video Gaming Consoles (and Us). In *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games With God*. Edited by Craig Detweiler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 75–89.
- Campbell, Heidi A., Rachel Wagner, Shanny Luft, Rabia Gregory, Gregory Price Grieve, and Xenia Zeiler. 2016. Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84: 641–64. [CrossRef]
- Creswell, John W. 1999. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Dupuis, Jacques. 1997. *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Dupuis, Jacques. 2002. *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Dupuis, Jacques. 2012. The CDF Declaration Dominus Iesus and My Perspectives on It. In *Jacques Dupuis Faces the Inquisition: Two Essays by Jacques Dupuis on Dominus Iesus and the Roman Investigation of his Work*. Edited by William R. Burrows. Eugene: Pickwick, pp. 26–75.
- Ellis, Carolyn, and Arthur P. Bochner. 2000. Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., pp. 733–68.

- Esibu, Paul. 2019. *Summary of Jacques Dupuis. Jacques Dupuis and Theology of Religions: Inclusive Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue Seminar*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit, May 1.
- Hayse, Mark. 2010. Ultima IV: Simulating the Religious Quest. In *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games With God*. Edited by Craig Detweiler. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, pp. 34–46.
- Heim, S. Mark. 2001. *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends (Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age)*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Hick, John. 1993. *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, Ltd.
- Hunt, Scott A., and Natalia Ruiz Junco. 2006. Introduction to Two Thematic Issues: Defective Memory and Analytical Autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35: 371–72. [CrossRef]
- IAMSp00n. 2012. Journey—Gameplay/Playthrough (No Commentary). Video, 1:16:57. March 21. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkL94nKSd2M&feature=youtu.be> (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Irizarry, Joshua A., and Ita T. Irizarry. 2014. The Lord is My Shepard: Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy. *Religion in Digital Games: Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches* 5: 224–248.
- Küng, Hans. 1976. *On Being a Christian*. New York: Doubleday.
- Laycock, Joseph P., and Natasha L. Mikles. 2021. *The Religion Matters Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Lindbeck, George A. 2009. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th anniversary ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid. 2009. *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*. London: Penguin.
- Migliore, Daniel L. 2014. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. 1993. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 1st Fortress Press ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- nesguide. 2007. Spiritual Warfare—NES Gameplay. Video, 4:05. July 15. Available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvGcLsg\\_ajw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvGcLsg_ajw) (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Paul VI. 1965. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions: Nostra Aetate. *Vatican Website*, October 28. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Poulous, Christopher N. 2021. *Essentials of Autoethnography*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Prothero, Stephen R. 2020. *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions*. London: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Race, Alan. 1982. *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*. Maryknoll: Orbis.
- Rahner, Karl. 1961–1992. *Theological Investigations*. Baltimore: Helicon Press. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.
- Richardson, Laurel. 1994. Writing: A Method of Inquiry. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., pp. 516–29.
- Sangnoksu. 2015. Final Fantasy VI—Dancing Mad (Symphonic Arrange). Video, 18:18. May 3. Available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O-9U\\_QKhgA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-O-9U_QKhgA) (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Segundo, Juan. 1976. *The Liberation of Theology*. Oregon: Orbis Books.
- Smith, Ed. 2012. A Personal Journey: Jenova Chen's Goals for Games. *Game Developer*, May 18. Available online: <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/a-personal-journey-jenova-chen-s-goals-for-games> (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Squaresoft. 1994. *Final Fantasy III*. Redmond: Squaresoft.
- Squaresoft. 1998. *Xenogears*. Costa Mesa: Squaresoft.
- Techopedia. 2020. Role-Playing Game (RPG). Available online: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220729040345/https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27052/role-playing-game-rpg> (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Tillich, Paul. 1963. *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions*. Bampton Lectures, Columbia University, New York City, America, Fall 1961. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wisdom Tree. 1992. Spiritual Warfare. In *Spiritual Warfare Instruction Manual*. Brea: Wisdom Tree, Inc. Available online: <https://www.thegameisafotarcade.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Spiritual-Warfare-Game-Manual.pdf> (accessed on 29 July 2022).
- Yale Youth Ministry Institute. 2017. Courtney Goto: Challenges. Video, 3:52. February 24. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHkYfyVUyV4> (accessed on 29 July 2022).