

## Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural

Natale, Simone and D. W. Pasulka, eds. 2020. *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*. New York: Oxford University Press. 264 pp. \$35.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9780190949990.

In the NBC television series *Parks and Recreation*, two characters show what we might call the extremes of the reception of technology's place in the everyday human life. On one end is the curmudgeonly department director Ron Swanson, a staunch libertarian and immensely private person. After receiving a personalized ad while shopping online for a model airplane, he calls in his assistant, April, to explain how such an invasion of privacy occurred. While explaining cookies and the personalized ads they inform, she tells a gobsmacked Ron to put his home address into Google Earth if he really wants to see the extent of the invasion of privacy, which he does to his horror. The scene cuts to Ron carrying the computer and monitor outside and throwing them into the dumpster with much aggression. At the other end is the entrepreneurial Tom Haverford. In a different episode, Tom's propensity for using his phone while driving ends in a car accident. A judge rules that Tom must refrain from using any screens for one week. Tom cannot navigate his short commute from home to work without a GPS, creates a disappointing cork board Pinterest page, observes a coworker using a computer with a handheld mirror, constructs a paper iPhone, and finally laments to Ron, "Life without screens is pointless." Later, after failing his digital detox and again crashing a vehicle, he tells Ron that he is so fixed on his digital life because "a lot of the stuff in my real life isn't going that great. So I'd rather play [an online game] than think about that."

April and Ron's conversation demonstrates the language many use to describe digital interactions. It remembers, creates, and learns, underscoring the separation between human programmer and machine that makes us believe the machine actually knows us or reads our minds. Tom's addiction reveals how others construct digital identities to project a desired reality or escape from one's "real" life. In religious studies language, digital media is taboo for Ron and a totem for Tom; Ron must avoid the digital at all costs, while Tom structures his life around the digital. *Believing in Bits: Digital Media and the Supernatural*, edited by Simone Natale and D. W. Pasulka, explores the spectrum of digital media and the religious. The central category informing this conversation is belief, and the unifying assertion of the book is "that religious belief and practices are inextricably linked to the functioning of digital media" (3).

This argument is worked out in three parts. "Archaeologies of the Digital Supernatural" shows how contemporary applications of digital media are rooted in the language of spirituality in the past. A person who wonders how digital products and platforms from Amazon, Google, and other developers read her mind interprets the phenomena through an imaginary informed by nineteenth-century psychic studies. Victorian mindreading has provided a metaphor utilized by the fields of cybernetics, programming, and artificial intelligence. This metaphor makes computer technology appear magical and supernatural. Another Victorian movement, spiritualism, is relevant to contemporary media and literary history because its nomenclature considers how technology intersects with human consciousness and mortality. As humanity creates and uses new technology, spiritualism offers language useful for both endorsing and criticizing the technology as either a mode of immortality or a paragon of human annihilation. It is also useful for assessing new media modes in contrast

with their antecedents, such as the loss of sounds in digital media compared with the phonograph. This archaeology exposes the importance of belief in assessing technology.

Part two, “Believing in Digital Worlds,” considers the function of belief in four examples: digital gaming, Safety Kitty on Instagram, Karma memes, and Disciples of the New Dawn (DOTND). Digital gaming shows the potential of the medium in evaluating belief because of the unique experience gaming offers. The rules governing digital games, both in terms of player ability and computer actions, introduce a balance of power that gaming explores in profound ways, though the game itself ultimately has the most power. Belief in the rules and world of the game makes the immersive gaming experience possible. Thus digital gaming presents *religio*—“the subjective disposition to believe” (74), belief itself, and the experience of transcendence. Belief in magic underlies the use of Safety Kitty on Instagram. These memes function like a digital trinket to protect users from chain posts of harmful or grotesque images, while also signaling danger for those who do not participate in the chain. Belief in the power of #safetykitty forms a community of users who propagate #safetykitty and perform the rituals associated with it. Karma memes offer mass interpretation of a complex religious teaching that reduces it to mere retribution. Karma, in these instances, is meted out by users as they interpret good or harm that comes to particular people. This belief in a co-opted Karma gives users the power to determine how actions shape outcomes, though this belief is almost always deterministic. DOTND offers users a digital performative space that mirrors the religious by providing ritual, community, identity, and authority. On the other hand, it offers opponents a space to identify what is *not* religion in their critiques of the actions and purpose of DOTND. Though DOTND is, by all measures, a fake religion, belief in its positive or negative messages makes it real in the minds of participants and opponents.

The final part, “*Entre Nous: Spiritual Relationships Between Technology and Humans*,” explores the boundaries of the human and the computer through telepathy, tulpa communities, revelation and secrecy in UFO communities, virtual reality, and algorithms. Digital advancements that incorporate physiological phenomena like eye tracking or facial expressions reveal the possibility of alternative modes of communication. Online communities that co-opt the Buddhist idea of tulpas create non-corporeal, autonomous entities within themselves who provide companionship. The internet is the space where these tulpamancers describe their tulpas and acknowledge their own identities as plural beings. This tulpamancy introduces positive internal plurality that challenges the stigma of mental illnesses manifesting in plurality that are almost always diagnosed as harmful. Ufology offers a rich ground to complicate simple notions of belief. These communities circulate government secrets through digital means and thrive not in the proving or disproving of alien UFOs, but in the labyrinths of secrecy extended by these so-called revelations. Digital repositories allow ufologists to collect these secrets and distribute them. In other words, the digital world allows ufologists to produce UFOs. Digital repositories also provide spaces for augmented and virtual reality devices to mediate immersive religious experiences like digital pilgrimages. In addition to these possibilities, the study of algorithms through the lens of animism and magic shows the hermeneutics used in human-algorithm interaction and reveals the potential of religious discourse to elucidate the digital world.

There are some weaknesses in this book that undermine its otherwise instructive nature. One problematic feature is its loose interpretations of religion, worship, ritual, spirituality, supernatural, the sacred, etc. For instance, the chapter on Safety Kitty likens the use of the hashtag as religious ritual and its community of followers as worshippers. These correlations seem overstated, especially

since worship goes undefined and the use of ritual is murky in its scope. The chapter on DOTND is the most problematic essay. A stated aim is to problematize defining religion. Yet, this aim is explored at the expense of coherence. One notable moment is when the author describes the DOTND in the language of postcolonial theory. Using Homi Bhabha to evaluate the hybridity of DOTND on the digital borderlands is a confusing, albeit original, take (132). However, applying postcolonial theory to an anonymous group of internet trolls who antagonize for antagonism's sake (127) is nonsensical. Without fail, the chapters most interested in problematizing definitions spend so much space in theoretical grounding and/or are so full of jargon that they are incoherent and unconvincing.

Perhaps problematizing the definition of religion, explicitly or implicitly, is the point of the book, in which case, mission accomplished. Perhaps the taxonomies provided by academic religious studies do not adequately consider the religiosity behind human interaction with digital media. Does muddying the waters constitute a contribution to the field? *Believing in Bits* is indeed a quirky book, but this quiriness is a welcome intrusion into religious studies. Though some attempts at muddying the waters—such as those listed above—miss the mark, other essays demonstrate the value of digital media studies as a fresh source of interlocutors for scholars and students of religion. The essays on Victorian spiritualists and their discursive contributions to common language of digital media are both fascinating and convincing. The highlight of the book is the essay on digital gaming. It is a medium that so frequently intersects with religion and is beginning to receive scholarly attention. The essay's discussion on the nature of belief in the act of playing games is a welcome contribution to that scholarship.

As to its usefulness, it may be best read in bits (no pun intended) and pieces. Graduate students in religious and media studies will find several chapters useful depending of the focus of their research. Historians of religion will appreciate part one for its evaluation of Victorian spirituality. Theological librarians should be aware of its features and recommend it especially for those studying the nature of belief.

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