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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers a posthuman theory of the digital mediation of religion, divided between theoretical chapters on posthumanism, ritual, and new media before two case studies: one on death, one on play. First developing conceptual relationships between posthumanism and religious studies and methodological connections between new media and ritual theories, it then asks questions in the playful and experimental ritual spaces of video games and the profoundly material and ecological spaces of digital mourning objects. For example: how do digital readouts on the health of a plant fed by cremains reposition living and dead bodies? Or, how do video games that ritualize death change how with think about playing with technology? By offering an emergent, embodied, networked, and ecological sense of ritualization and digital media this dissertation avoids logocentric, genderless, and disembodied theories of both religion and the digital while bringing a posthuman epistemology to religion, death, and media studies.

Immanent Technologies: Posthuman Digital Religion in America

by

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DISSERTATION

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INTRODUCTION

"Then the boat on which embark the dead, that the old Ferryman, Charon, used to steer, they found not within its moorings…"[1]

This is the first existing textual reference to the Greek steersmen of the dead: Charon. Charon is a ferryman, a psychopomp who communicates living to dead across a river by navigating the flow of water, steering his vessel to bring human beings from one side to the other, requiring a fee of coins to transport the bodies.[2] As a steersman of the dead, the figure of Charon binds death and ritual as forms of mediation between human and non-human worlds. From living to dead or otherwise, the precarious mediations of human and non-human worlds (worlds of the dead, worlds of the gods, worlds of reincarnation) take place through the body as a place and an interface for ritual. This present story of communication, mediation, death, and going outside the human begins at the shores of the rivers Styx and Acheron, with Charon pushing his paddle to steer the ferry of the dead across the flow of the water and continues through a theory of communication named after Charon's movements, a story that binds digital computation to the mediation of death.

This work is a look at the rituals that mediate between life and death through an analysis of the tools that mediate them, the subjectivities they shape, and what that means for the study of religion, digital culture, and death. It is a story about how we mediate death, whether it be with paddles and rivers or keyboards and hard drives. This is a story of mediating death through these technological and embodied interfaces, like Charon and his paddle. As new scales for understanding death settled over the world after the Second World War, American engineer

[1] Ronnie H. Terpening, *Charon and the Crossing: Ancient, Medieval, and Renaissance Transformations of a Myth* (Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press,1985), 1.
[2] Agnes Alfody-Gazdac and Cristian Gazdac, ""Who Pays the Ferryman?" The Testimony of Ancient Sources on the Myth of Charon," *Klio* 95, no. 2 (2013), 298.

Norbert Weiner took this Greek word for steersman, kybernetes (χυβερνήτης) to name his new study of communication, Cybernetics: "the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal."[3] Cybernetics emerged from Wiener's attendance at a series of conferences aimed at understanding human communication, the nature of the human mind, and the mechanics of mediation. The "Macy Conferences" gave rise to theories of communication and mediation that founded modern computing. From this postwar interest in communication came Cybernetics and the computational architectures for contemporary digital communication.

New mediations of death make this also a story about how such rituals in America help us theorize religion and digital technology more broadly, and how we can think about the human being in the light of these new conditions. Death is a discrete moment of crisis: physiologically, culturally, and ideologically as well as a moment of numerous transitions: from life to death, living with to living without, caring to mourning. Such a singular moment locates and marks the influences of material, ethical, and ontological forces at play, and this project charts these influences. Death and mourning practices in America locate interactions between digital media and ritual at a particular time and a particular place from where we can model a type of scholarship accounting for these intersections of media, ritual, and death.

These stories of mediating death via digital religion are about going outside the human. Whether it be through the act of conceptualizing an afterlife or media technologies that exceed human sensory capacities, death and the digital both go outside the humanby imaging material and social relations outside the humanform and granting social agency and power to non-human

[3] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Second Edition (New York: The MIT Press, 1961), 18.

subjects and materials whether they be spirits of circuit boards. In order to understand both stories of going outside the human, we first need to look at their formative characters and account for any concepts of functions arising from them that overlap, that interchange, and that create bridges for theorizing American death and media technology. Here belongs posthumanism.

Leading posthuman theorist Cary Wolfe defines posthumanism as

> a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrust them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon.[4]

Cristin Ellis, in her study of the creation of the posthuman and the rise of scientism in antebellum America, adds that posthumanism "suggests that a truly materialist conception of the human obliges us to relinquish—or at least steeply qualify—Western humanism's conception of the human as an autonomous subject free from physical causality. In doing so, posthumanism erodes the grounds upon which Western humanism has traditionally upheld the innate superiority of the human to all other forms of being."[5] Posthumanism broadens what is contained under the label of the human by emphasizing functional understandings rather than essential definitions. In other words, posthumanism does not rely on the leverage of a term like "the human" to demarcate what belongs in and around the category of human being, instead only assuming relationality as inherent to being and agency as visible through relation.

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[4] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xv.
[5] Cristin Ellis, *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, First edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018) ,6.

Orientations

As a set of ideas of going beyond the concept of the human in order to explain or diagram relations between materials and subjects, posthuman theory creates a bridge between death and media technology by primarily attending to function rather than essence, action rather than object, and interactivity rather than subjectivity. Through first an outline of digital media and then rituals of death, we can gain a better understanding of the contingency of death and mediation, the transformation of embodiments and orientations towards death through key areas of mediation, ritualization, and play.

Digital or "new" media reform information between human and computational sensibilities through digital apparatuses where human and computer sensibilities translate and mediate each other at the level of the interface. Interfaces, as new media theorist Alexander Galloway states, " are not things, but rather processes that effect a result of whatever kind."[6] In other words, digital mediation depends on *action* and *interaction*, on the mediation of sense, understanding, and experience between human and non-human agents. Action and interaction (in the form of performance, embodiment, and materiality) make up the interface as a kind of action, a process of inter-action. Action and interaction (between worlds of the living and the dead, the human and the non-human) are the primary functions within a digital ritual interface. Keyboards, joysticks, monitors, touchscreens are all the human end of an interface that goes on to incorporate mechanical and digital processes that make up new media processes.

[6] Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012),vii.

The digital turn, according to new media theorist Mark B.N. Hansen, is when the body takes on the "function of the processor," and where networks are "elemental."[7] This interfacing and interaction between computational and human logics takes place through a material medium – the interaction of the human body and its sensibilities through an interface with the machine materiality and *its* sensibilities. In other words, "new" mediation is "new" not because it involves differing technological apparatus or artifacts per se, but because the ways of thinking made possible by these machines changes how we can think about how mediation functions. New media is a new way of thinking about media, a new theory of media more than new mediation, one that incorporates digital technologies into a sense of mediation going beyond the particularity of the medium (visual, audio, etc.).

New media scholars attend to the materiality of media technologies and the bodies they act upon as a way of making new theories of media. Hansen's advisee and media theorist Amanda Starling Gould names a metabolic media framework linking the human, the environment, and digital into a contingent network by way of their material interdependence.[8] Hansen turns to the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze as a means of understanding digital media as relying on the body as a place of mediation. Such attentions to emergent, embedded, and contingent subjectivities by way of intermediation between human bodies and non-human technologies creates an ecological view of how digital practices form where "new media" is a co-operation between technology and human, within a material world,

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[7] Mark B.N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Book, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004) , 21 ; Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015) , 2.

[8] Amanda Starling Gould, "Restor(y)Ing the Ground: Digital Environmental Media Studies," *Networking Knowledge* 9, no. 5 (July 2016); Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, (Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012; Mark B.N. Hansen , *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015); John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago;London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).

preceding essentialist questions of on/offline or virtual/real. By blurring or exceeding boundaries between what is mediated and what is not, what is "on" or "off" line, "virtual" or "real," "digital" or "not," these new approaches to new media liberate media scholarship to interact with other forms of theorization on a functional rather than essential level.

This insistence on theorizing the interface forwards a sense of a functional and embodied *performance* between digital and human being. Performance stands out as the mode that makes new media, and more specifically the interface, new. If we take the interface to be a process, as Galloway does, then that process is a performance. Performance, for purposes here, is an always mediated and embodied action taking place within a recognizable system of conventions that establishes an argument about a world through its repetition. In other words, performance is a recognizable and repeatable embodied epistemology. Following Elin Diamond, performance at its simplest is *doing*, an action.[9] But these actions must be recognizable within a cultural system. And in order to be recognizable as such, a performance must be mediated – whether this is simply through the body of the performer itself or through a more complex media apparatus. Through a repeated and recognizable action, a performance begins to form a particular argument, a view of the world, or a sense of identity.

The performance of an interface *does* something, forms an argument about the world through its repeated interaction between human beings and digital apparatuses. By continuing to interact with digital technologies, human being is per-forming ideas about what the digital is and can be, what new mediation is, and what being human means in relation to the performance. New media theories (and this project as having a part in those) are largely an exploration of *what*

[9] Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016),7.

argument in particular this performance is making. For this project the performance is one mediated by bodies, both living and dead, digital technologies, and the cultural (and otherwise) systems that dictate, limit, and make recognizable these repeatable actions.

Ritual studies offers a conceptual way into the performative aspects of the new mediations of religion as it maps the activation and performance of human and non-human interactions around death and dying. Rituals organize behaviors to transform the world from how it is into the world as it should be, and religious rituals explicitly interact with non-human realms of gods, spirits, and the supra- and super-human. As Victor Turner puts it, "[r]eligion, like art, *lives* insofar as it is performed, i.e., insofar as its rituals are 'going concerns.' If you wish to spay or geld religion, first remove its rituals, its generative and regenerative processes. For religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experience meaning."[10] Religion and ritual are bound theoretically and conceptually together through their shared attention to material forms of interrelation, creating meaningful and communicative subjectivities. Ritual theory charts these living performances of ritual through action and interaction, communication and mediation between subjects and objects, and the human and non-human (dead, divine) as mediated.

Bodily comportment, spatial layout and design, designated objects and costumes, order of operations, particular texts or speech are all subject to ritual theorizations: these are the things out of which ritual is made, which ritual mediates. Ritual draws attention to these things by attending to them. In other words, ritual pays attention to particular things in particular places for particular purposes. Jonathan Z. Smith takes this one step further to name ritual *itself* is a mode

[10] Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982),86.

of paying attention – a "process for marking interest."[11] Ritual is a way of paying attention, a way of marking interest, and a way of making and marking difference. Beginning to define ritual this way, as a process, is a project developed by landmark ritual theorist Catherine Bell when she renames her object of study "ritualization" and continued by this project. Citing Bell on Smith and reconceptualizing Smith's formal rigidity into Bell's reflexive (and cybernetic) sense of ritual not only brings together these two substantial theories of ritual but marks a definition of ritual that is both formal *and* processual, both structural and reflexive.

One way of making and marking difference is the making and marking of different bodies or changes in embodiment. Attention to bodies means attention to how *specific* bodies are formed and reformed under these performative regimens. Victor Turner's work on coming of age rituals paid attention to the treatment of female versus male-gendered bodies and the impact of ritual forms not only on these embodiments of the form of the ritual themselves. By dividing rituals into his three-part process of separation, liminality, and return, Turner turned ritual into an embodied and material process and turned too towards real experience and away from previous linguistic models of rituals like Claude Levi-Strauss.[12] Such ritual theory pays attention to not only the formal structures which make up what we call ritual but the impacts that these structures have on the formation of bodies and subjectivities.[13]

Ritualizing dead bodies is a play between human and non-human beings and human and non-human worlds that emphasizes the materiality of embodiment and the transformation of these embodiments from human to non-human, living to dead, human to post-human. From

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[11] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987),103.
[12] Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1969), vii.
[13] Jonathan Z. Smith deals in the domestication of violence through ritual action and Ronald Grimes focuses on the negotiation and contestation of boundaries (racial, socio-political, and otherwise).

living to dead or otherwise, the precarious mediations of human and non-human worlds (worlds of the dead, worlds of the gods, worlds of reincarnation) take place through the body as an interface for ritual. As they are cleansed, wrapped, burned, and buried, bodies transform materially and ideologically, from one state of being into another, from one realm of being into another. Dead bodies are liminal objects between human and non-human and are themselves objects for ritualization. Attending to ritualizations of death and their mediations through digital technologies assure a material and embodied approach to digital ritualizations.

Examining ritual as a *doing of religion* means incorporating material and interactive dimensions of *doing* subjectivity – specifically religious subjectivities. Ritual studies examines the forms human beings make and take, both create and perform, in demarcated spaces for effectual ends that involve problems of living and dying through ritualized modes of rulemaking and repetition. Ritual studies now emphasizes these performative acts of subjectivity and identity and has moved away from its earlier symbolic and linguistic roots. Action and interaction are primary to social and subject formations within this constellation of ritual and performance studies, from "Victor Turner's ethnographic descriptions of ritual as a processual form of 'social drama,' J. L. Austin's linguistic theory of 'performative utterances,' and Erving Goffman's analyses of the scenarios of 'social interaction.'"[14] As Catherine Bell notes, the term "performance" was embraced in the 1960s by sociologists and anthropologists "as a means of sidestepping the mind/body and thought/action dichotomies that previous approaches to ritual appeared to impose."[15] This performative approach to subjectivity formation lends itself too to the new form of media theory.

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[14] Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 206.
[15] Ibid.

Both theories of new media and ritual incorporate the kind of "sidestepping" mentioned by Bell by focusing on spaces of relation and connection rather than division. Stepping aside means stepping into spaces and places of mediation. New media and ritual theories both focus on mediation -- the spaces in between -- and their material connections. Encapsulating a sense of "ritual" and "new media" from Charon to Cybernetics means going beyond territorial subfields to find connective tissues and functional bonds between them and accounting for their broader territories and what these territories show us about media, ritual, and death in contemporary American contexts. Posthumanism offers this encapsulating tissue. As both an ontology and ethics, epistemology and methodology, posthumanism emphasizes material and embodied subjectivities across human and non-human boundaries and is sympathetic to the performative emphases of both ritual and new media theories.

Posthumanism sees interactions between plant, animal, and the technological as networks of embodiments and subjectivities that re-assign the "human" subject as a material expression of relation. By rejecting and moving beyond humanism's anthropocentric legacy of excluding and obliterating non-normative (non-"human") subjects and bodies through patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and ecological destruction, posthumanism seeks a new referent for the human that relies on ecological and material networks and relations rather than discursive, logocentric or autonomous models of subjectivity.[16] In other words: posthumanism sees human *being* as an active relation rather than a static subject mode. In its striving to think past anthropocentrism to include broader arrays of objects, subjects, and means of being, posthumanism operates with a set of tools beyond those currently being deployed in the study of digital religion.

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[16] Rosi Braidotti, *The Post Human*, (Cambridge, Malden MA: Polity, 2013), 2 ; Cristin Ellis, *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 6.

Feminist posthumanism in particular attends to materiality and embodiment. Donna Haraway's formative work explores the limits of what it is to be human through feminist ontologies focused on scales of inclusion by encompassing the animal, human, and technological in an interdependent ontology.[17] Kathryn Hayles' posthumanism is most concerned with rebutting the type of techno-escapist fantasies that proliferated in the first wave of religion and new media scholarship.[18] Rosi Braidotti suggests a constructed, expansive, and materially interdependent sense of human embodiment relating to media technologies.[19] These ontological models are attractive alternatives to the instrumentalist models of technology and media in contemporary scholarship on religion and media technologies that obscure the particularities of material interactions between human and non-human in the performance and functions of digital religion.

As a matrix of critical and ideological orientations emphasizing non-human being arriving from ethical and ontological thinking that both prescribes and describes states of human and non-human being, posthumanism is not just thinking past the human but thinking about *how* to think past the human, relying upon a transdisciplinary way of thinking through fields of feminist, animal, and disability studies. Posthumanism works to understand human difference by exceeding anthropocentricism and its conceptual and historical legacies of exclusion, which has "obscured the relationship between human and non-human animals but it has also masked other relationships such as that been the organic and inorganic, the animate and the inanimate, and the

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[17] Nicholas Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?: Interview with Donna Haraway," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7–8 December 2006, 135–58 ; Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).
[18] Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999) , 4.
[19] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2002); Rosi Braidotti, *The Post Human*, (Malden MA: Polity), 2013.

classical opposition between subject and object."[20]A posthumanist methodology begins from the position that human subjectivities are not either materially or ideologically separate from their environments. This feminist posthumanism of Rosi Braidotti and Kathryn Hayles rejects the idea that human beings can be independent of their bodies or their technologies, as it is "historically, scientifically and culturally impossible to distinguish bodies from their technologically-mediated extensions," with Braidotti describing human beings as "shot through" with technologies.[21] Donna Haraway agrees: "Not letting anyone think for a minute that this is immateriality rather than getting at its specific materialities."[22] This project seeks this descriptive specificity in accounting for how digital technological apparatuses interact with the materials around and within them and seeks out modes and nodes of both connection and interference.

Constructing a methodology that seeks where and how digital devices of plastic, metal, and mineral interfere and interact with human, animal, and plant bodies requires some mode of connectivity. Cary Wolfe frames this as a methodology that: "…far from surpassing or rejecting the human – actually enables us to describe the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social signification and affective investments with *greater* specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection and so on."[23] If we are going to take materiality seriously, this methodology needs to account for a way in which real material interactions (touch, friction, fusion, diffusion, dissolution) are taking place through digital interventions into religious practice. Within these senses of posthuman embodiments, how do these material specificities

[20] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, 3.
[21] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, 228.
[22] Gane, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?",140.
[23] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xxv.

tether themselves together? What makes them inseparable? Most importantly for this proposed methodology: how do we analyze and make sense of it? Posthuman theory gives us a second hint towards a methodology: performative interaction.

As Peter Mahon notes in his *Guide for the Perplexed,* posthumanism is "just an acknowledgment that humans and humanity are constantly changing through their interaction with technology and tools."[24] While this definition of posthumanism is overly simplistic and leans into some humanist tendencies, it offers a certain clarity: if human and tool are the poles of posthumanisms, if the simplest relation of posthuman thinking is between humanity and its tools (those things that reach out into and manipulate the world) then being posthuman requires being interactive. If posthuman *being* requires these interactions, then derivative posthuman *thinking* must focus, as Pramod Nayar puts it: "not on borders but on conduits and pathways, not on containment but on leakages, not on stasis but on movements of bodies, information, and particles all located in a larger system." [25] Nayar points to cybernetic and biological systems as interactive systems that are both "open" and "closed," both affected by the environment and maintaining their integrity, as systems that must communicate, which must mediate. These open systems, by remaining open, interactive, and wholly undetermined, allows Braidotti to play-off of Spinoza's fundamental question: "…we simply do not know what our enfleshed selves, minds and bodies as one, can actually do."[26]

Posthumanism offers unique advantages to religious studies through their shared engagement with striving beyond human being – the same strivings of religious experience or divine ontology that religions and religious studies seek to explain. In other words, both

[24] Peter Mahon, *Posthumanism: A Guide for the Perplexed* ,(New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2.
[25] Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, 10.
[26] Braidotti, *The Post Human*,190.

posthumanism and religion work from a notion that the human being is capable of exceeding its own subjectivity, its own materiality, and its own realm of being to act and interact with and through non-human forms, whether they be plant or animal, god or ghost. This dissertation founds a heuristic posthumanist methodology for understanding digital religious actions in contemporary American embodied practices around death and play that work at going beyond these religious boundaries. In particular, it invests in how posthumanism opens new understandings of human and non-human interaction around digital religious practice, and what possibilities posthumanism offers for the study of digital religion in general, beyond the few cases covered herein. What does it mean to think religion from the posthuman perspective? What does ritual look like under a posthuman lens? How does a definition of "the religious" or "the spiritual" change?

Directions

In order to answer these questions about the function of digital religion in light of posthumanism, this dissertation divides itself into two parts: an opening set of chapters exploring the contexts for posthumanism as a concept and heuristic tool for theorizing ritual and new media, and the second pair of chapters deploying this set of tools over two case studies on green digital death and death in video gaming.

Chapter one offers a functional and methodological introduction to posthumanism. Establishing both ethical and ontological orientations, it charts two foundations for each, a Foucauldian anti-humanism and material feminism for the former, and science and technology studies and cybernetics for the latter. Ethical posthumanism in Foucault and material feminism prescribe solutions to the exclusive, exclusionary, and anthropocentric histories of humanism through their opposition to logocentric and essentialist understandings of the human and

attentions to alternative bodily formations. Ontological posthumanism by way of science and technology studies and cybernetics grant functional and material understandings to these alternative ethical prescriptions by enmeshing human and nonhuman technologies as co-emergent. Through these prescriptive and descriptive modes of thinking beyond humanism, the chapter develops a posthuman epistemology and methodology that attends to the situated, embodied, and performative aspects of digital religious performance.

The second chapter goes on to chart new media and ritual theories from their origins to present interactions with a posthuman epistemology to show the shared power of both in exposing what is already there: the mediated and interactive nature of religion and human being. Both emerging from smaller schools of thought, new media and ritual theories are interdisciplinary, reaching out to cobble together effective new ways to speak to mediation and performance. From Durkheim and Freud, ritual theory has always been concerned with how rituals organize communal and individual values and desires, bringing with them anxieties around the impact of ritual on bodies and communication, and ritual's ability to impact the everyday. From Benjamin to McLuhan, (new) media studies worries over the authenticity of the image and agency within media technologies. Together, ritual and new media theories have a shared focus around embodiment, performativity, and interfaces towards understand how new media technologies function within a religious practice.

The first and second chapters organize and present a theory of posthuman ritual for digital media by forwarding embodiment, performance, and interface as primary to conceptualizing the function of digital media in ritualizations of death. The second half of the dissertation then turns to examples of ritualizing the posthuman through case studies in digital-eco mourning and playing with death in video games.

Chapter three picks up posthuman, new media, and ritual theories to analyze a case of digital mourning within the broader contexts of the green burial movement. The BiosIncube is a three-gallon planter housing a tree sapling and human cremains, monitored for its need for light, water, or temperature change via a smartphone application. As part of a global green burial movement focused on ecologically friendly burial and memorialization, the Incube offers a domesticated device that brings the life of the tree into relation with digital and human bodies. Ritualizing the BiosIncube locates posthuman subjectivity as ecologically, technologically, and biologically contingent and gives place to green burial through the tree, the planter, and the digital application. In anticipation of human and ecological death, the Incube puts dead human materiality back into circulation with plant and human life through digital technology and offers a place to ritualize the posthuman into being. This chapter turns to three aspects of ritual - place, intensification, and performance – to locate the digital mediations of the BiosIncube as exemplary of an ecological, co-emergent, intersubjective, posthuman process.

The fourth chapter follows the rise of video gaming to understand relations between gaming, play, and death through the practice of "No-Death Runs," player prescribed rules within video games that exceed the prescribed means of play. The history of the study of religion and play extends from early studies around mythologies and meaning-making to contemporary studies of ritual and video gaming. This chapter marks its way through this history before applying a posthuman ritual media theory to no-death runs, identifying three ways this kind of play ritualizes death. This chapter brings the study of religion and games into broader conversations about death and mediation by navigating both the priorities of the study of gaming and religion and exercising the posthuman epistemologies of the present theory.

Destinations

From Charon's paddle to keyboard clicks, mediating death has always involved prosthetic tools, helping us move (materially and otherwise) from one side of death to the other, or through a process of mourning, or from the living to the dead. As the tools for mediation transform, they transform the mediating rituals they enact and help perform. By doing so, these tools reshape what the limits of human being can be and question if the term human can even apply to what is happening in these mediating rituals. Posthumanism is inherently concerned with thinking outside the humanand how these interactive performances of human beings to non-human beings create spaces for subjectivity formation or networks for creating modes of differentiation between what we call the human all the non-human. For religious studies specifically, the advantage here can be thinking about the divine or the sacred – what does it mean to be not only not human but superhuman or suprahuman?

Looking to functional definitions of religion where religion is a type of doing that mediates the human and non-human, posthumanism shows (in combination with something like ritual studies) the very types of relationships that make up these larger functions – where subjects connect, how, at what material or conceptual level, through what form and function, to what ends, and in what shades and shapes. What makes up that function – the materials and relationships between the materials – and what is motivating that relationship? Posthumanism can reveal the function of religion at the material and intersubjective level. Posthumanism attends "the human and its characteristic modes of communication, interaction, meaning, social significations, and affective investments with *greater* specificity once we have removed meaning from the ontologically closed domain of consciousness, reason, reflection, and so on" to access ecological and networked ways of looking at human practices of religion that integrate non-

human elements through mediations of body and ideology.[27] Posthumanism offers a way of understanding these words "digital" and "religion" through their material and functional specificity.

This dissertation and its posthuman intervention go beyond digital religion into broader conversations about the relationship between religion and science, religion, and materiality and American sensibilities in navigating these relationships. By centering around the body as the place of digital interface, this project finds common ground in these broader discussions. As such, the dissertation itself serves as a mediation between interests in religious studies, American studies, and science and technology studies and by presenting a way of thinking about death, media, ritual, and religion within the context of American techno-capitalism and consumerism.

Science and technology studies and a recent turn in religious studies towards new materialisms coalesce around investments in how material conditions shape ways of knowing. [28] Both new materialism and science and technology studies recognize the agency of things, of objects of materials: the ability for material objects to act on human ways of being. Together, they share not only this interest in the agency of materiality but they want to use this recognition of non-human agency to exceed the assumptions and limitations of humanism. The urgency with which religious studies is turning to material agency beyond the confines of humanism and anthropocentrism and incorporating material sensibilities of nonhuman from the animal, plants, ,

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[27] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xxv.

[28] Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Modest-Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*, (New York: Routledge, 1997); Catherine Keller, ed., *Entangled Worlds: Religion, Science, and New Materialisms* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris, *Religion and the Body: Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning*(Boston: Brill, 2012); Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Peter M. Scott, *Anti-Human Theology: Nature, Technology, and the Post-Natural*, Book, Whole (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Jeremy Stolow, *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, Book, Edited (Fordham University Press, 2013).

ecological, and digital supports and elevates the present proposed approach to how religious activity is formed through and with emerging digital technologies. Science and technology studies and new materialism together form another region into which this dissertation can travel.

Along with these contributions to American studies and the new materialism of Science and Technology Studies, this project is an interrogation of what has come to be called Digital Religion, a reassessment of what can be meant by both these terms, and what consequences these definitions have for a changing sense of the human in the study of contemporary American religion and digital culture. This is a look at rituals mediating life and death through an analysis of the tools that mediate them, the subjectivities they shape, and what that all means for the study of religion, digital media, and death. Using posthumanism as a macro lens for exploring new media, death, and ritual reveals a few landmarks:

Posthuman epistemologies, rituals, and new media theories are a constellation of shared concerns leveraged towards understanding digital religion and mediation beyond demarcations of human and non-human or digital and non-digital. This posthuman approach offers a functional understanding of religious practice as primarily situated, embodied, and performative. With these theoretical and methodological orientations in place, this dissertation unveils death and mediation in America as an exemplary location for understanding how these new mediations and ritualizations function to both expand a sense of what counts as within the sphere of the human conceptually, and what can be effective methodologically for understanding digital religion beyond the screen. Digital burial objects like the BiosIncube and playing with death like "No-Death Runs" illuminate the contingency of death and mediation, the transformation of embodiments and orientations towards death through mediation, ritualization, and play, and the ways posthuman theories help us see these connections.

Posthumanism going forward is a heuristic typology. Like any typology, it has its limitations. With the task of both creating and implementing this heuristic typology, it cannot account for all things. Developed for studying digital religion within its currently established discourse and for the case studies at hand, it is able to capture only certain aspects of what could go on to be a more comprehensive and applied study. Through the limited case-studies chosen and the works cited, this posthumanism does offer new avenues of exploration in these areas without being able to go down all of them.

As Charon dips his paddle into the mediating flow, his body functions with his tools to bring human life closer to human death, like the religious rituals and media technologies that follow. This dissertation charts these movements between bodies, tools, and the non-human spaces and ways of being accessed through religion. In all, it is a story about mediating life and death and the tools and performances that make that possible, the worlds we imagine and achieve through these mediations, and what role bodies and media technologies have in creating these possibilities. Through understanding the extension of human life through human death and media technologies mediation of this extension, we can grasp a posthuman lens for religion and ritual that can peer through to the movements of a steersman, as he cranes over his paddle, pushing human life into the unknown.

CHAPTER ONE – Posthumanisms: Ethics, Ontology, Epistemology

Charon's journey of death and mediation begins long before bodies reach his shores. This journey extends to the limit of human being: its limits of life and death, being and non-being, human and non-human. So too must our journey extend into understanding new mediation of death. Here posthumanism and its collected set of concepts and values come into play. To understand posthumanism's methodological usefulness for theorizing digital religion, we need a sense of posthumanism that exposes its working roots, pulls its connective tissues into view, and fires its circuity. In other words, we need to understand posthumanism primarily as a *way of thinking about being human.* We need a working definition of posthumanism that favors *function* over *essence* by looking at the conceptual and theoretical composition of the ethical and ontological aims of posthumanism. Four root systems make up these ethical and ontological functions of posthuman thinking: Anti-humanism and Material Feminism under an ethic, and Cybernetics and Science and Technology Studies under an ontology.

Only by unsheathing these active edges of a posthumanism can we fully account for its utility and consequence. Understanding going outside the humanthrough digital religion requires what philosopher of science Karl Popper in 1953 called a "bold hypothesis," one that reaches beyond the rational or the sensible to a place tested only by trial-and-error, "of boldly proposing theories; of trying our best to show that these are erroneous; and of accepting them tentatively if our critical efforts are unsuccessful." [29] This kind of post-war thinking from Popper is part of a broader theory of "heuristics," what mathematical theorist George Poyla defined in 1945 as "reasoning not regarded as final and strict but as provisional and plausible only, whose purpose

[29] Karl Popper, "Philosophy of Science: A Personal Report," in *British Philosophy in the Mid-Century; A Cambridge Symposium*, ed. Cecil Alec Mace (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 166.

is to discover the solution of the present problem…[w]e shall attain complete certainty when we shall have obtained the complete solution, but before obtaining certainty we must often be satisfied with a more or less plausible guess."[30] Coming from the Greek "*heuriskein,*" "to discover," heuristic thinking involves concepts, terms, hypothesis, and thesis that are by definition uncertain, adaptive, or reflexive. Heuristic concepts are beginnings for thinking rather than endings, devices for trial-and-error, tools rather than foundations, functions rather than essences.

Heuristics and cybernetics (the basis of all things digital) share both Greek *and* postwar origins: they both were conceived as exploratory endeavors dependent on "feedback," the ability to send something (like data or a concept) into the flow of the current to watch its ripples, see its impact, and reshape that thing according to how the environmental impact. In other words, both cybernetics and heuristics are functional tools for uncertain environments. The uncertain environment in the case of this dissertation is the relationship between digital structures, human beings, non-human beings, and religious practice. The heuristic concepts here (in their most functional plainness) are humanism and posthumanism. We must first understand how these terms operate around and through each other in order to understand how digital religion changes them. This chapter offers up lineages of "humanism" and "posthumanism" as heuristic concepts for the purposes of understanding digital religion in order to position them to go forward into the forthcoming case-studies as functional tools for trial-and-error.

(Post)Humanism

[30] George Poyla, *How to Solve It* (Princeton University Press, 1945),113.

Using posthumanism as a tool to understand relations between the human and the non-human in digital religion requires first understanding how posthumanism is “post" “humanism”: posthumanism only functions in relation to something called humanism – so we first need to understand humanism in the context of posthumanism. Humanism (rather than being one thing or even one set of things) is a set of value systems that theologian and posthumanist Elaine L. Graham calls “to account for their implicit idolatries.”[31] Humanism exists for the present project at its breaking point with posthumanism – in a mid-twentieth century post-war, post-modern atmosphere. Humanism (in all its changing forms, from renaissance humanisms to seventeenth-century rationalism, to its nineteenth-century critiques) was, as Tony Davies puts in his summary of *Humanism* “called to account” in the face of atrocities of the Nazi regime and the atomic fallout. Both Graham and Davies see humanism chiefly as an object of critique, one that (particularly in a post-war/post-Foucauldian moment) exists not as real historical fact but as a set of values persisting since the renaissance, when man overtook god.

Humanism that began, as William Robert puts it, as a “ domineering self-assertion based on an appeal to some intrinsic ‘human nature’ and shared ‘human condition’ that distinguished humanity from divinity” evolved after the Second World War into a theoretical object within a “broader field of gender, sexual, racial, and colonial relations” according to race and gender theorist Zakiyyah Imán Jackson, when thinkers like Franz Fanon called for a more expansive and inclusive humanism.[32] Humanism as a value system and theoretical-heuristic object was positioned for its critique in the “post” moment. In particular, Graham points to Nietzsche’s

[31] Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, Aliens, and Others in Popular Culture*, Book, Whole (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002).225.
[32] William Robert, Trials: Of Antigone and Jesus, electronic resource, 1st ed, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York, N.Y: Fordham University Press, 2010), 37; Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, “Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism,” ed. Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, Michael Lundblad, and Mel Y. Chen, *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 669–85, 669.

influence on Foucault as placing humanism within a genealogy as an object of critique. Humanism, in the late half of the twentieth century, became more this object of critique than a locatable historical object, with posthumanism as the point of departure for such a critique. This chapter first positions humanism within such a lineage before introducing it as a heuristic object as critiqued by and through the construction of posthumanism.

Posthumanism acknowledges the imbrication and co-evolution of the human and the non-human in a heuristic, exploratory and wholistic sense to integrate human ethics, ontologies, and epistemologies with non-human elements of the world: cosmic, sacred, animal, plant, and technological. These various ethics, ontologies, and (finally) epistemologies guide the present study and formation of a particular posthumanism for understanding digital religion. In her book *Antebellum Posthuman* Cristin Ellis defines posthumanism as an "admittedly heterogeneous set of material ontologies" that "insist upon the constitutive entanglement of mind and body, human and nonhuman being upon material and cultural forces."[33] The heterogeneity is inherent to heuristics: a posthumanism for the emerging and always changing contemporary study of digital religion should be heuristic (of trial and error, flexibility and feedback, adaptable) and therefore epistemological: driven by an exploratory way of knowing based on a value system that critiques humanism.

Posthumanism (as heuristic feedback of humanism) follows Popper's "bold hypothesis" and the Greek roots of heuristics "to discover" as an exploratory term that (1) critiques the value system of humanism and (2) seeks to go beyond or beside the category of humanism to create a more inclusive value system. For the study of religion and digital religion specifically, posthumanism puts human subjectivity and being heuristically back into play with non-human

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[33]Cristin Ellis, *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018),6.

subjects like ghosts, gods, trees, data, animals, and machines through a re-orientation from humanism to give religious studies' *already* eclectic and collective sense of theories and methods a new tool. As posthuman theorist Pramod K. Nayar puts it, posthumanism is "the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by, and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines."[34] Acknowledging this "co-evolution" is itself heuristic: by opening up the channels through which the concept of the human being can flow, there are increasingly possibilities for feedback, for echoes, for ripples of new relations. Posthumanism is a system of trials and errors, and an imperfect but bold hypothesis that reaches outside the human. Like religious studies and wondering beyond the limits of death, posthumanism works at the limits of human experience.

But this heuristic and epistemological posthumanism cannot emerge out of whole-cloth: in order for it to be responsive to something called humanism, it needs to arrive from particular critiques of that value-system. The task of this chapter is in large part to lay out and defend the lineage of posthumanism I have chosen as a tool to understand digital religion, a posthumanism that is particularly suited for the heuristic task ahead. Following again from a Nietzschean influence and Foucauldian grounded approach to identifying genealogies of value systems, this chapter introduces four "root-systems" for understanding a posthumanism heuristically fit to understand digital religion: a Foucauldian Anti-Humanism, Material Feminism, Cybernetics, and Science and Technology studies and what follows is a close reading of exemplary models of each type of thinking. These genealogies or what I am calling (to avoid any particular Nietzchean obligations) "lineages" characterize my particular use of posthumanism, and in particular, the

[34] Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, Book, Whole (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 2.

kind of tools each methodology allows for the proposed heuristic approach. Each of these four roots generates a range of posthuman concerns as a response to a humanist value system that bring ethical (Anti-Humanism and Material Feminisms) and ontological (Cybernetics and Science and Technology Studies) concerns to new media practices involving religion and the non-human.

This heuristic methodology chosen for such a task (of root and value systems, close readings and trials and errors) is imbricated in the same historical period when the roots of posthumanism take to ground. Heuristics emerged as of interest to mathematicians, philosophers of science, psychologists, and economists in the 1950s and 60s alongside Foucault's anti-humanism, feminism, cybernetics, and science and technology studies. This project sees both humanism and posthumanism as heuristic concepts: built to be reformed and re-shaped through interrelation and feedback, as adaptive but not amorphous terms held up to signify a network of values, ethics, ontologies, and epistemologies. In order to introduce a specific posthumanism for the purposes of digital religion, this chapter offers a set of exemplary close readings representing each of the four roots of posthumanism that illustrate their investments in the mediation and materials involved in the doing of digital religion. Selecting a methodology for constructing a posthumanism that is inherent to the material both grounds posthumanism in a particular history of thought while reinforcing its heuristic nature: posthumanism only exists as a critique of humanism, and humanism only exists *for* posthumanism at its point of departure with humanism. From here they both become objects of echoes and feedbacks, ricocheting concepts that build and defeat each other, that in their trial-and-error chaos function more as tools than touchstones, more as orientations than objects: beginning with the ethical and ontological implications of a posthuman heuristic.

Posthuman Ethics, Posthuman Ontologies

I approach ethics (principles for being) and ontology (conditions for being) with caution, not wanting to wade into overly contested philosophical territories but instead simply marking modes of thinking as two different ways of understanding posthumanism. I do not wish to embed this discussion in contested lineages of capital "E" Ethics and capital "O" Ontology but instead divide posthumanism into recognizable categories to clarify the literature and its consequences. As Pramod K. Nayar puts it, "'Posthumanism' on the one hand merely refers to an *ontological condition* in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, technologically modified bodies and/or in close conjunction (networked) with machines and other organic forms…As a philosophical, political, and cultural approach, it addresses the question of the human in the age of technological modification, hybridized life forms, new discoveries of the sociality (and 'humanity') of animals and a new understanding of life itself."[35] Nayar's division between material conditions and political questions hews posthuman into distinct categories of the "ontological" and the political/cultural, or what I am calling the "ethical."

Ethical posthumanism demands reprioritizing inter-species and inter-material relations at a moment of ecological, technological, and economic precarity. It reads humanism as being inherently exclusionary, drenched in a history of colonial and hegemonic violence. In response to these violences and exclusions of anthropocentric humanism and the changing material conditions of being human on earth, ethical posthumanism, as Braidotti tells us, seeks a new referent for "ourselves."[36] Looming posthuman ethical problems include agency and self-hood,

[35]Ibid., 3.
[36] Braidotti, *The Post Human*, 12.

what constitutes a human subject, and how we can understand the imperatives and responsibilities of human beings as agents concerning nonhuman agents, and constitute an ethical imperative through its questions: how does human-made climate change impact the security and well-being of both human and nonhuman? How do invasive technologies alter bodily integrity and autonomy? How does new knowledge of animal behaviors infringe on human exceptionalism?

A peril of enlisting a purely ethical posthumanism for theorizing the human condition is that it can fall victim to its own critical fangs and become an ouroboros – the snake eating itself. By critiquing all conditions of being human through the lens of humanism, ethical posthumanism can create a two-pronged trap: first, the reification of a straw-man humanism that represents no realized conditions for being human and second (as a consequence of this) the possibility that the prescriptions of an ethical posthumanism will become just as exclusionary or impossible as those of the perceived humanism. In order to avoid the purely prescriptive nature of ethical posthumanism (and hopefully these pitfalls) within the proposed heuristic, this project too turns to ontological posthumanism as a descriptive and material echo or feedback apparatus. A functional posthumanism must be not only prescriptively ethical but also descriptively ontological in order to effectively venture out into cases of death and mediation.

Where an ethical posthumanism seeks to decenter humanism, ontological posthumanism describes a world where the human has *already* been decentered by focusing on material and functional relationships between subjects and bodies that problematize the bodily and subject integrity label of "human." Ontological posthumanism is concerned with subject integrity, function, and conditions for being. Ontology concerns itself with the substance and function of being, whether it be called monads or planes or *rese extensa*. Posthuman ontologies focus on the

material and functional being of the posthuman subject. Where ethics prescribe a conditional way of being, posthuman ontology describes a current state of becoming and is the material position to which prescriptive ethic relates. In other words, ethical posthumanism extends from the material conditions observed by way of a posthuman ontology. Rosi Braidotti describes such a posthuman ontological state as materialist, vitalist, embodied, and embedded, part of a nature-culture continuum, and most importantly for understanding digital religion in this case, as "shot-through" with techno-cultural constructs.[37] Posthuman theorist Don Ihde too sees technology and the posthuman body in a prosthetic "embodiment relation," where the environment is experienced only through the embodiments of a device.[38]

Dividing ethical from ontological posthumanism untangles a posthuman spectrum that swings from immortal cyborgs to the agency of minerals by marking the prescriptive critique of humanism as unique but not separate from the analysis of ontologies under new material regimes. Together, ethical posthumanism concerns the category of the human while ontological posthumanism accounts for everything from minerals to microchips and flora to fauna. This more complex approach to posthumanism disassembles a monolithic capital "P" Posthuman into constituent histories of thought by attending to two unique origin points for ethical and ontological posthumanism and creates a self-reflexive heuristic to explore the limits of human being and digital religion.

Ethical and ontological posthumanism arrive from dual genealogies of posthuman thinking: the ethical branches from the final passages of Michel Foucault's *Order of Things* in

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[37] Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*,188; Braidotti, *The Post Human*, 2.
[38] Ihde 126: Don Ihde 1934 et al., *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix for Materiality*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 126.

which he declares the death of man, the ontological at the Macy conferences, a post-war series organized around understanding human thought and communication technologies.[39] These two points, first Foucault's statement that "… man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end," and conclusions from the Macy Conferences that "When human atoms are knit into an organization in which they are used… it matters little that their raw material is flesh and blood" are the origins of an ethical and ontological posthumanism.[40] Each makes bold statements in the postwar period about the end of humanism and the beginning of the evolution and revolution of human-being into a new posthuman state. But new compared to what? Before fully unpacking what it is to use posthumanism heuristically, we must understand what posthumanism is "post."

Humanism

A central assumption of both these posthumanisms is that there is something called humanism to begin with. As Cary Wolfe puts it posthumanism, "…comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world…[b]ut it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible

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[39] I adapt this dual-genealogical framework from Cary Wolfe and further show how these dual genealogies lead to different sense of the posthuman and how these different senses of the posthuman can help us understand the particularities of its effectiveness for understanding digital religion.

[40] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York NY: Vintage Books, 1994),386-7; Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1956),185. Each of these origins have lineages of their own becoming, lineages that, excluding points directly supportive of present arguments, are too broad for my aims. However, it must be said, these chosen lineages are wholly white, western, and masculine. It must also be said that the lineages are post-war. However, I hope my most critical interventions arrive from the feminist perspective, interventions around specific embodiments.

to ignore."[41] This "decentering" of the human being comes after the labor of humanism to put the human being at the center of all things. In order to place posthumanism as a heuristic concept in relation to this before and after, we need to understand humanism and its power primarily as a heuristic concept to which posthumanism responds.

As Tony Davies notes, many historical concepts have been called "humanism":

> ..the civic humanism of quattrocento Italian city-states, the protestant humanism of sixteenth-century northern Europe, that rationalist humanism that attended at the revolutions of enlightened modernity, and the romantic and positivistic humanisms through which the European bourgeoisie established their hegemony over it, the revolutionary humanism that shook the world and the liberal humanism that sought to tame it, the humanism of the Nazis and the humanism of their victims and opponents, the anti-humanist humanism of Heidegger and the humanist anti-humanism of Foucault and Althusser…[42]

As a concept, "humanism" can be traced through its philological roots in Greek, its transcription through the nineteenth-century into a classical curriculum inspired by a romantic Hellenism, and its subsequent development as the "humanities" as a scholarly discipline.[43] Legal theorist Fred Baumann, in an attempt to reinvigorate the category of humanism in this "post" moment, breaks this history of humanism and its changing referents into four broad historical moments: (1) the renaissance humanities, (2) the seventeenth-century rationalism exemplified by Renee Descartes, (3) the nineteenth-century critique of humanism exemplified by Friedrich Nietzsche, and (4) the twentieth-century neo-liberal humanism and the accompanying (what he calls) "cultural embarrassment" around this idea of humanism.[44] Baumann is helpful here, for not only does he

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[41] Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xv.
[42] Tony Davies, *Humanism*, (New York NY: Routledge 2008), 130.
[43] Davies, *Humanism*, 2 ; Stefan Lorenz Sorgner and Robert Ranisch, *Post- and Transhumanism : An Introduction*,(Frankfurt: Peter Lang, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2015), 7; William Robert, *Trials: Of Antigone and Jesus*, 38.
[44]Baumann, Fred. 2010. "Humanism's Four Stages." *The American Interest*, Sep, 83-93 ,92.

give a clear lineage of this thing called humanism, but in doing so recognizes its inherent ambiguity or malleability. In each of these moments, humanism is defined by the things around it, the presence of a value system within a particular cultural environment, more so than it is defined by some essential nature.[45] What Baumann allows for here, more than anything, is the resilience of a heuristic humanism. Following Baumann, and rather than a comprehensive account of humanism, I hope to provide an account of humanism as critiqued or exceeded through posthumanism. The danger here, of course, is the meticulous and unintentional reconstruction of a strawman. However, humanism is as multi-valent as its critique, and so I choose to preserve points for heuristic purposes to reconstruct the humanism that posthumanism responds to or rejects.

Davies gives us a more dualistic view of this heuristic: "'humanism' is either the "philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity" or an "ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society."[46] Davies' humanisms, as either triumph or smokescreen, represent the kinds of intentionally polarizing positions that posthuman attempts to counter. Of interest to this project is the concept of *humanism at the point of its break with posthumanism* in the post-war period. Davies argues that this brand of humanism is in one way a project of modernity, of separating human being from non-human being through historical and scientific narratives.

[45] In addition to these many humanism, William Robert categorizes humanism under a central idea of autonomy, calling it a "theory of human independence and self-sufficiency that frees humanity from reliance on divinity and positions it atop a hierarchical ordering of reality." (William Robert, *Trials: Of Antigone and Jesus*, ,3) Such autonomy is not only from god but from *anything* other than human being. It is self-sufficiency built upon self-determination, and self-determination built on reason and rationality. Rationality, or the hierarchy of thought or the mind over the material and the body sustains a long line of relations not necessarily of *human* mind over *human* body, but mind over body.

[46] Davies, *Humanism*, 5.

Davies' two-part conceptualization and Baumann's four-part lineage of humanism helps avoid getting too far away from humanism as a heuristic object shaped by its circumstance. I follow Baumann's line beginning from Cartesian rationalism as a starting point for understanding humanism. As David Roden puts it in *Posthuman Life*, Descartes' internal epistemology (*cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am) is "arch-humanism", for it completely dismisses anything other than the human mind (or more precisely rational thought) as the essence of rational being.[47] This emphasis on rationality re-centers humans as the axis of a new world of being where humans detach themselves from the non-human world in order to make that world more intelligible. Whether a hierarchy or field of orbit, rationality pulls all things towards the human at the center.

In his 1637 *Discourse on Method,* Descartes abstracts a number of ideas articulated further in his later works, including the formation of rationality as a unique human property that *functionally* separates humans from all other life. After working through such concerns as scientific consideration, rules of method, morals of method, and the proof of god and the soul, Descartes turns to "Part V: on physics, the heart, and the soul of man and animals," -- what he calls the "rational soul." The rational soul is a unique object created by god alone and imbued into human beings alone, in "that it could not be in any way derived from the power of matter, like the other things of which I had spoken, but that it must be expressly created."[48] Here Descartes forms of a singular relationship between humans, god, and this thing called rationality: God has formed the rational soul for the unique purposes of human being and this rational soul

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[47] David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, Book, (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 23.
[48] Rene Descartes, *Mediations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 36.

"should also be joined and united more closely to the body in order to have sensations and appetites similar to our own, and thus to form a true man."[49]

Descartes arrives at such a unique relationship between man, god, and rationality through his familiarity and fascination with automata, or mechanical puppetry. Deploying his own case study, Descartes recognizes that many automata can, with "very few parts in comparison with the great multitude of bones, muscles, nerves, arteries, veins, or other parts that are found in the body of each animal" in fact closely mimic the outward appearance and behavior of those animals.[50] He extrapolates from this that if there were a far more complex automata, one "possessing the organs and outward form of a monkey or some other animal without reason, we should not have had any means of ascertaining that they were not of the same nature as those animals."[51] Materiality and performativity are particularly important to Descartes' analysis, as they are both indeterminate and easily disguisable or unknowable things: "organs and outward form" can easily deceive his epistemology, it seems. Functionally speaking, an automata and a monkey collapse into the same category if their materiality and performativity are effectively the same. It is only rationality that ascends from this confusing mix.

Descartes, in thinking animality, mechanics, artificial life, rationality, and the essential human being together elevates only the rational soul as the height of difference between human and other animals (or "brutes" as he calls them). [52] In doing so, he forms a humanistic epistemology that eliminates all but the human from the category of rationality, subjugating animals, machines, plants, and other forms of materiality, life, or performativity into one broad category: the non-human, and makes them seemingly indistinguishable from each other. In

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., 36.
[51] Ibid., 35.
[52] Ibid.

proving human rationality by way of showing *no* discernable distinction between a well-made machine and a monkey, Descartes expemlifies the exclusionary, categorical, and bifurcating power of "rationality" and its ability to create two categories: human and non-human. This Cartesian rumination contains all the materiality and performativity of later posthuman responses: by bringing these categories together only to separate them, Cartesian-rationalism-as-humanism has declared its boundaries.[53]

This Cartesian brand of rational autonomy is, under the critique of posthumanism, failing to hold. This failure, Roden points out (citing Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway), is "in part, technoscientific in origin. Descartes' dualisms between inner and outer, mind and mechanism have become harder to maintain since the computation revolution showed that rational operations can be implemented by appropriately structured mechanical processes…"[54] Part of this dissolution of a Cartesian heuristic-humanism has to do with this dualism. But the roots of this critique go far deeper than this "computational revolution." The cracks were showing well before then - at the end of the Second World War.

Anti-humanism, feminism, cybernetics, and science and technology studies found their particular posthumanisms on ethical and ontological responses to humanisms. Anti-humanism and a feminist critique prescribe alternative ethics to those of humanism, while cybernetics and Science and Technology studies create material grounds for alternative posthuman ontologies. All create mirror images of humanism where their critiques form the objects of their criticism alongside new possibilities for humans as subjects and as materials. Without these critiques,

[53] Of interest too perhaps to religious studies in particular is the division of god and man on one side and all other forms of life or being on the other: in Cartesian rationalism there is no room for a religion of anything else other than humans. Likewise, materiality and performativity are not critical categories, but are rather indiscernible: only rationality, interiority, and thought (like language) are categories for determination or critical categorization.
[54] David Roden, *Posthuman Life: Philosophy at the Edge of the Human*, Book, Whole (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 24.

these mirrors, these alternative ways of seeing human being, there is no full account of the power of posthumanism. It is from this territory of humanism both as a construction and as an object of critique that I map the paths these critiques form for posthumanism as fruitful for digital religious studies as material, embodied, and performative. One crack in this monument of humanism began in the post-war periods with a direct response of "anti-humanism" that culminated in Michel Foucault declaring the death of man.

Anti-Humanism

As the Second World War ended and the Cold War settled over the earth, new scars and fears emerged from the genocidal fascism and paranoid nationalism, with concurrent regimes of mass murder and terror redefining human being by creating new mortal categories of who was allowed to live, be morally good, or exist within a certain state-hood. Anti-humanism came to resist these tendencies. Anti-humanism sought the dissolution of the category of "humanism" through a resistance to the hegemonic cultures facilitating atrocities of the World and Cold wars. A particular strain of Foucauldian anti-humanism cited by posthumanists and religion scholars cracked open humanism as a concept, creating the possibility for a new ethics around the idea of the human. Posthumanists cite Foucault as indicative of this mid-twentieth century break and credit the passage with exposing humanism itself (as Baumann notes) as a heuristic concept now turned tool for critique.[55]

Posthumanist theories look to Michel Foucault's 1966 *Les Mots et les Choses* or *The Order of Things* as a primary document for the death of humanism and as representative of anti-

[55] Braidotti, *The Post Human*,16.

humanist thinking for the purposes of posthuman ethics.[56] Specifically, ethical posthumanists point to this closing paragraph as a place where ethical posthumanism began:

> One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed from human knowledge...one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it...And that appearance was not the liberation of an old anxiety, the transition into a luminous consciousness of an age-old concern, the entry into objectivity, of something that had long remained trapped within beliefs and philosophies: it was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge. As the archeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of a recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end. If those arrangements were to disappear as easily as they appeared, if some event...were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.[57]

Ethical posthumanists cite this final passage as the (dis)orienting point for a thinking about the death of "man." It marks, for them, the mid-twentieth century as the breaking point of posthumanism from a cohesive, autonomous, and wholly unique "humanism." Cary Wolfe claims that the roots of posthumanism begin with the "pronouncements of the sort made famous by Foucault in the closing paragraph of *The Order of Things*…"[58] Pramod Nayar cites Foucault here as proposing that we "treat humanism as a set of techniques or processes…Foucault sees humanist philosophy as a device through which powerful groups and institutions were able to control other individuals and groups."[59] Rosi Braidotti claims the "death of Man, announced by Foucault formalizes an epistemological and moral crisis that goes beyond binary oppositions and cuts across the political spectrum…Anti-humanism consists in de-linking the human agent from the universalistic posture, calling him to task, so to speak, on the concrete actions he is

[56] Neil Badmington, *Posthumanism*,c(Routledge, 2011), 29; Nayar, *Posthumanism.*,12-14; Davies, *Humanism.*;Sorgner and Ranisch, *Post- and Transhumanism : An Introduction*,51.
[57] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 386-7.
[58] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?*, xii.
[59] Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 14.

enacting."[60] By problematizing the concept of man as response to the concept of God, and wrapping this in a genealogy of the humanities as creating certain forms of knowledge that create this idea of "man" or human," Foucault re-creates "humanism" as a heuristic term, one now ready for use as a critical tool. A Foucauldian anti-humanism began to create the possibilities for a posthuman way of thinking, cracking open the concept of humanism as it stood (per Baumann) at the middle of the twentieth century, for a new revision and critique.

Religion scholar Richard King similarly points to this final passage in *The Order of Things* as generative of *religious studies* as we know it today, when he says "For Foucault the death of God …has led to God's *temporary* replacement by "Man" (and the establishment of the 'sciences of man' as they replace of the science of God, theology). This, he suggests, is little more than an aftereffect (an "aftershock" if you will) of the death of God. Similarly, this "Man" (actually a white European male) is destined to be displaced as the figure on which to establish the foundations of scientific knowledge and history."[61] Foucault's passage on the death of man has opened up the possibility of a critical engagement between concepts of man and god through an idea of the "sciences" by throwing both concepts of "god" and "man" into a tumble, as King suggests. For opening up a posthuman heuristic for the study of religion in the contemporary moment, Foucault's words are unavoidable: they are cited not only by posthumanist and religionists as the roots of a new way of (re)thinking the human, but they do so within and through a post-war reaction to the human condition, coinciding in time with the cybernetic heuristics inherent to this project.

[60] Rosi Braidotti, *The Post Human*, (Cambridge, Malden MA: Polity, 2013), 23.
[61] Richard King, "The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion," in *Religion, Theory, Critique: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methedologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 3-4.

The post-war rise of anti-humanism coincided with the Macy Conferences' investment in understanding human being and human thought. Anti-humanism resisted human cognition as the central, determining factor for both human and non-human existence. Anti-humanist tendencies destabilized the category of the human by refusing this central component of a dominant humanism and upended the category of the human or "man", opening up the possibility for a new, proto-posthuman ethic.

Material Feminism

What qualifies as "human" has always been a political question of race, gender, and class. Feminism first worked to include the category "woman" amongst those qualifying as human, while later feminisms exposed the internal political struggles within this very aim by questioning categories upon which both human and woman stood, and how and why these categories are constructed – through what models of thinking, literacies, and recognitions. This third-wave feminism demanded a re-evaluation of how human subjectivities are conceived and created by upsetting the roots of the female/feminine. As Braidotti puts it: "[f]eminism has contributed in fact to re-thinking the living processes of existence, literally the spaces in between the mental and the physical, the theoretical and the experimental. Feminist philosophers have also connected this shift to the task of overthrowing centuries-old dichotomies."[62] Both re-thinking spaces between the mental and the physical and overthrowing dichotomies contribute directly to feminist theories' influence on posthuman theories of the digital and how they shape the present project.

First, feminist scholarship validates limit-experiences of both the ineffable and the material by looking for the production of thought and ethics beyond the limits of phallogocentric

[62] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2002.,69.

and logocentric humanism. Feminism has sought out alternative ontologies and epistemologies for creating new knowledges that aim to re-center those ways of being excluded or silenced by a logocentric humanism.[63] These third-wave and materialist feminists make room for religious and mystical experiences and claims under an ethical stance that accepts nonrational or ineffable or irreducible claims as claims of and for a kind of non-unitary subjectivity. Feminist reworkings of ethics and epistemology lay claim to limit experiences of human and non-human being (both near and beyond death) in ways that challenge humanism and extend into the posthuman.

Material feminism is another re-working of the ethical epistemologies leading away from the exclusionary anthropocentrism of humanism, using feminist theories of subjectivity and the body to include human and nonhuman actors and agents in networks of being and doing, including the digital. Material feminism emerged out of third-wave feminism, which questioned the very categories upon which this idea of the female/feminine stood and the rigidity of such categorization. First and second wave feminisms depended on a fixed notion of the female/feminine to leverage arguments for equal rights and representation.[64] These femininities were more often white and western than anything else, dependent upon Enlightenment notions of agency and autonomy.[65] Third-wave feminism "rejected the fixity and homogenization of the

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[63] Nayar, *Posthumanism*.155;Helene Cixous,*The Book of Promethea* (University of Nebraska Press, 1991); Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Julia Kristeva and Arthur Goldhammer, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (New York: Columbia Univ Pr, 1988); Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, Book, Whole (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Book, Whole (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
[64]Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2006); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4 edition (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015); Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); Betty Friedan, Gail Collins, and Anna Quindlen, *The Feminine Mystique*, 50th Anniversary edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, 1 edition (New York: Vintage, 2011); Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (Palala Press, 2015); Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York : Greeley & McElrath, 1845), http://archive.org/details/womaninnineteent1845full.
[65] Darlene Juschka, "Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion," in *Religion, Theory, Critque: Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methedologies*, ed. Richard King (New York NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 509–22 ,512.

category of 'women' while it embraced post-colonial, post-structural, and queer theorizing, it turned to cultural analysis, embracing difference, fluidity, and uncertainty" by questioning categories on which feminism based its concept of the female/feminine.[66] Rejecting rigid subject categories opened up new political and material orientations by way of fluidity and difference.

As Katherine Hayles points out, erasure of the body in general and particular embodiments more specifically is part of *both* the worst parts of liberal humanism and escapist visions of posthumanism that simultaneously proclaim freedom from the body, either through rational thought or digital manipulation: "only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subjects its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity." [67] Materialist feminism, in particular, conceptualizes subjects through both new embodiments and ecological philosophies by re-valuing spaces between a mental and physical dichotomy while unsettling grounds upon which the categories of human/woman/female/feminine stand. A demand for particularity, materiality, and situatedness precludes body occlusion from the formation of subjectivities by including these as a necessary element for subject formation prior construction of categories of the human and non-human. By favoring material interdependence and connection, material feminism allows for a kind of non-unitary subjectivity that defies humanism and gestures towards the posthuman, or "an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and

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[66] Darlene Juschka, "Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion," 517; see also Barbara Findlen, ed., *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation, New Expanded Edition*, 2nd edition (Seattle, Wash: Seal Press, 2001); Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (Macmillan, 2000); Leslie L. Heywood, *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism, Vol. 1: A-Z by Leslie L. Heywood* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood, 2005); Rebecca Walker, ed., *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*, 1st Anchor Books Ed edition (New York: Anchor, 1995); R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (September 2008): 175–96.

[67] Katherine Hayles 1943, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Book, Whole (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.

others, including the non-human or 'earth' others, by removing the obstacle of self-centered individualism."[68] Material feminism fosters a concept of the posthuman that remains imminently connected, undeniably material, and inescapably ethical.

In the introduction to her landmark compendium of material feminist works, Stacy Alaimso writes that material feminists

> are developing theories in which nature is more than a passive social construction but is, rather, an agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human…[t]hey explore the question of nonhuman and post-human nature and its relationship to the human. One of the central topics in this approach is the question of agency, particularly the agency of bodies and natures. Material feminists explore the interaction of culture, history, discourse, technology, biology, and the "environment," without privileging any one of these elements.[69]

This lack of privilege allows technological apparatus and ecological conditions to have agency in the formations of human and other subjects. So, rather than a humanism that works from the human outward in terms of agential power and influence, material feminisms adopt a networked and ecological approach to subject and body formations.

Karen Barad takes material feminism into an explicitly posthuman realm. Following Foucault, she points to the ideological systems of power that create and enforce discursive and linguistic representations of subjectivities like "man" or "human" and proposes a different, performative approach to subjectivities, what she calls "agential realism." Agential realism defines agency as *at the point of interaction* (or "intra-action"), not as a capacity for action. For agential realism, interaction and performance are what make up agency, rather than an inherent capacity to act or essential characteristic. For Barad's agential realism, agency is functional rather than essential. Agency are physical and material interactions, not inherent or essential states. This performative and interfaced approach to agency is posthuman.

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[68] Braidotti, *The Post Human*,49-50.
[69] Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms*,7.

As Barad says, "[t]heories that focus exclusively on the materialization of "human" bodies miss the crucial point that the very practices by which the differential boundaries of the "human" and the "nonhuman" are drawn are always implicated in particular materializations."[70] These "particular materializations" are the interactions included in her agential realism. Human-being then becomes a function of agential inter and intra action, rather than an essential characteristic. Barad's alternative, focusing on function rather than essence, grants agential power to things beyond a human/nonhuman binary in order to recognize the performative nature of ontology. Barad's agential realism is a helpful link for understanding posthumanist ethics for a digital religion: it arrives from a Foucauldian focus on the function of ideological systems of power *and* arrives at a performative and interactive (cybernetic) way of thinking about agency that involves non-human agency in subject formation.

Material feminism's opportunities for ethical posthumanism helps scholarship on digital religion and digital religion theory (1) by attending to alternative bodily formation and relations and (2) considering the ineffable as relational and legible. By keeping alternative embodiments in play, feminist critiques account for their negotiations and formations and Barad's agential realism pushing for a performative sense of agency and materiality – for the study of digital religion this allows for what Rosi Braidotti calls seeing bodies as "shot through" with technology: technological embodiments that are performatively and materially co-formed with technology and human embodiment. One way these embodiments form is through ritualization of thought and relationships with non-human subjects and materials. In other words, material feminists like Barad, Grosz, and Haraway not only *prioritize* materiality conceptually but offer methodological tools for capturing and contending with these materials as part of subject. This

[70] Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 (March 2003): 801–31, 824.

ethical posthumanism by way of materialist feminism allows the study of digital religion to construct new models of ritualization, subject formation, and modes of thought by allowing in both the material and ineffable as themselves critiques of humanism. From its critique of the feminine as exclusionary to its inclusion of the nonhuman in subject formations, material feminism deconstructs an exclusionary humanism into its parts and rebuilds a more inclusive model.

Ethical Posthumanism for Digital Religion

Both of these foundations for an ethical posthuman heuristic - Foucault's anti-humanist urge and material feminism - respond directly to the occlusions and oversights of humanism by destabilizing and offering alternative models for human subjectivity and performance. First, Foucault's anti-humanism tests the endurance and utility of "the human" by digging into its root system and revealing a recent and shallow past, ready-built to be washed away by a new form of knowledge and a new "order of things." Second, from feminist theory, "man" is the inadequate model for "human," an incomplete image requiring alternative modes of embodiment and knowledge production. Together, they ground a going outside the humanas posthumanism as a direct response to a humanism heuristic in ethical terms: in other words, anti-humanism and material feminism prescribe a world as it should be (posthuman) in direct response to a world as it is (humanism).

Anti-humanist and feminist theories made human being contingent – contingent on ideological hierarchies of what is included in or under the category of the human under the epistemology of a humanist heuristic, and that this humanism was itself a political project. In other words, being human is not what one *is* but what one *does*. First, the category of the human becomes a political question, and second, human being becomes a formation of extensions and

functions rather than essences and ideals. Foucauldian and feminist theories reveal these terms as negotiated – as both dependent upon and constructing hierarchies of what is included in the category of the human (i.e., race, gender, nationality) and as such making humanism a politics. These dual contingencies at the roots of ethical posthumanism make it both critical and prescriptive.

Cary Wolfe labels these kinds of ethical posthumanism as “reactive” to new crises of humanity, and while this is true in the sense that it reacts, we must be careful not to call it reactionary in a pejorative sense and instead hold them as reacting to a heuristic reacts to a dominant ideology: as itself reformative. Such ethical posthumanisms embed themselves within histories of political prescription by citing both Foucault’s “death of man” and feminist theory as launching points for understandings of the human. By sticking themselves to Foucauldian and feminist underpinnings, ethical posthumanism arrives from these assumptions and motivations, pitfalls, and histories. They “react” (not as reactionary) to long histories of oppression, violence, and exclusion that demand forceful rebuttals. I label these seeds of posthumanism “ethical” to both categorize their concerns and objectives and to place them within the task at hand: using posthumanisms to understand digital religious practice. Locating anti-humanism and feminist critique as lodestars for ethical posthumanisms sets them in an intellectual constellation that also harbors religious studies as a discipline in the mid-twentieth century.

Contemporary religious studies emerged from the same post-war cultural and political forces that gave rise to Foucault's anti-humanism and critical feminisms like material feminism. Alongside other major anchor points for this dissertation like cybernetics, the 1950s and 1960s are central to appreciating connections between ethical posthumanism and the study of *digital*

religion, not only due to their coinciding timelines, but for grounding them all in similar sentiments, motivations, and eventual after currents.

The political, material, and moral consequences of WWII greatly impacted the study of religion in the Western Academy. The violence of war and the healing that violence impacted how the academy viewed itself and the objects and subjects of its study. The global trauma of WWII left a world with shattered boundaries and persecuted peoples, bodies displaced and killed on ideological grounds and brute categorization. Under these forces the study of religion came into its own as an academic discipline. As the study of religion became "Religious Studies," there was a self-reflexivity brought on by the violence of colonialism and WWII. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's 1962 *The Meaning and End of Religion* argues that "religion" as an object of study is artificial and inconsistent with the practice of what has been labeled as such. Smith proposes a dualistic model of parallels of "faith" and "cumulative traditions."[71] This logos and praxis model favors personally held beliefs on the one hand (think William James) and historically entrenched traditions on the other (think Marx). Clifford Geertz, writing in the mid-1960s, argues that not much has changed in the study of religion since the close of the *first* World War.[72] He complains that few have ventured beyond the ground set up by Durkheim and Weber and suggests that rather than attempt to do away with these great fore-fathers, we work to broaden the discipline of religious studies in both theory and method. This self-criticism gives that field or discipline some autonomy to define its own boundaries. Jonathan Z. Smith arguably embodies the complexities of studying religion in the post-modern and post-structural moment – Smith is flexible and adaptive in his deployment of concepts. Even the form of his publications,

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[71] Wilfred Cantwell Smith 1916-2000, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), ix.
[72] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

collections of short essays represents an attempt to work quickly and change tact often (whether he has done this or not is another matter). Like Weber and Eliade, Smith offers a typology of religion, but one that is highly unlike those offered by his forefathers. His typology is rhizomatic, inspired by the grasses he studied as a child. Where there is only grass (religion) there are still the many ways and places from which it can grow and reshape itself.[73]

Like both Cybernetics and Foucault's anti-humanism, religious studies in the post-war moment prioritized a way of understanding not only its object of study (religion) but its own form (as religious studies). Anti-humanism, feminism, and religious studies all share this moment under a new ethic, one that prioritizes the deconstruction of monolithic concepts like the "human" or "religion" into more reflective and reflexive heuristics and self-conscious objects of study. In other words, each of these ethical agendas creates a functional and heuristic term out of its object of analysis, one to be deployed into the stream of the world and traced for its echoes and reflections. By sharing these roots with religious studies, Foucault's anti-humanism and material feminism calibrate an ethical posthumanism for the study of digital religion. By forming the basis of my proposed heuristic, they not only ground ethical posthumanism in particular literature, but they also venture beyond that literature in the same spirit of evolving religious studies. At the same time, these new ethics for heuristics were emerging, two other disciplines were taking on a more ontological form.

Ontology

Where ethical posthumanism provides conceptual conditions for unraveling humanism and a prescription for re-evaluating the human as a subject, ontological posthumanism describes

[73] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Relating Religion : Essays in the Study of Religion*, Book, Whole (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) ,193.

material formations and functions of these new subjectivities in relation with technologies, animalities, and other non-human life. Ontological posthumanism invests in the necessary interconnectedness and contingent being of human and non-human agents. In other words, ontological posthumanism *assumes* the conditions that ethical posthumanism anticipates exist already and re-describes or analyses the world within those terms.

Like with posthuman ethics, two intellectual and conceptual roots for ontological posthumanism ground its utility for charting digital religion: cybernetics and science and technology studies (STS). From the post-war Macy conferences that brought together leading thinkers about the human mind and information studies, cybernetics emerged from a want to understand human thought. Science and technology studies emerged from a want to re-evaluate the absolute authority of scientific fact in the face of its exclusive (and at times) violent past within the categories of race and gender. Both cybernetics and STS and depend on seeing technological artifacts as dependent upon human materiality and performance, and both emphasize interdependence, materiality, and historical contingency. Together, they support an ontological posthumanism that emphasizes functional thinking, one that along with the ethical, forms a complex posthuman heuristic for digital religion, one that begins at the roots of digital architecture itself.

Cybernetics

The study of systems of automation and communication that is cybernetics began as a series of post-war discussions about communication technologies and human advancement called the "Macy Conferences," bringing together scholars of information, medicine, linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, and more to reach a systematic understanding of technology, artificial intelligence, computational systems, learning machines, and the essence of human thought. The

Macy Conferences' most lasting output was credited to Norbert Wiener, now dubbed the father of cybernetics.[74] Wiener's published *Cybernetics* and its layman companion *The Human Use of Human Beings* as the foundational public understandings of early computational theory, primarily emphasizing the co-emergent and contingent relationship between feedback machines and human beings. Wiener's claim is that society can only be understood through studying its communication between man-man, man-machine, machine-machine. Wiener asserted and early posthuman thought when claiming: "what is used as an element in a machine, is in fact an element in the machine," meaning the human being.[75] In other words, understanding society requires understanding networks of communications between humans and machines, and as part of these feedbacks systems, humans are part of this macro mechanic.

"Feedback" is *the* central concept in cybernetics, and it remains central to modern computation and automated systems.[76] For purposes here, feedback is defined as output from a system becoming new input for the same system. Wiener uses two examples to explain feedback: one of a ship, the other a human hand. The first describes feedback as a series of comparative relations between the orientation of the ship, the position of the steering wheel, and the position of the tiller used to direct the ship. Each reacts to each other in a system of movements that roughly make up the direction of the ship itself. In other words, the position of the ship is a relation of these three agents, rather than its place in the water. The example of the human hand involves the seemingly simple process of picking up a pencil. Wiener points out that throughout the whole of the process, the pencil, in relation to the hand, is in various states of being "picked-

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[74] As Wiener is most frequently cited in the works addressed across this text when referencing the impact of cybernetics, I too will focus on his work as the landmark for cybernetics and posthumanism.
[75] Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*,185,16.
[76]Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, 15; David A. Mindell, *Between Human and Machine: Feedback, Control, and Computing before Cybernetics*, Johns Hopkins Studies in the History of Technology (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

up" or "not picked-up." A series of reports through the nervous system by way of nerves in the hand and visual inputs help in making slight adjustments in delicate hand muscles to ensure the pencil is properly picked up. As Wiener puts it, feedback occurs when "…we desire a motion to follow a given pattern… the difference between this pattern and the actually performed motion is used as a new input to cause the part regulated to move in such a way as to bring its motion closer to that given by the pattern."[77] In both examples, feedback is a function of desiring towards a pattern and how performances approach that ideal pattern. Whether these desires have machine or human interfaces, cybernetics charts their function and performance, rather than essence or ideal.

For cybernetics, feedback is desiring towards a pattern. Within digital religious practice, desiring towards a pattern includes not only the cybernetic movements within digital mediation but forms of ritual and ritualization that likewise desire towards a pattern. For both cybernetics and ritualization, there is feedback and adjustment, performance and ideal, material function, and imagined outcome. Rituals feedback systems, which desire towards an ideal pattern and adjust their performances to achieve them. Covered more in the next chapter, new media (the results of cybernetic thinking) and ritual offer furthers shared methodological resonances, but for the sake of the sense of posthumanism, we shall stay here with desiring towards a pattern.

These desires for feedback within computer theory began by thinking about human interaction. Wiener is a thinker of human relations, from his anecdotal exemplars to his formal structures. Cybernetics and its influence have at their center the premise that human thought is not internal but interactive. Wiener ruminates on the changes this type of thinking might have for our understanding of the human being: "The central nervous system no longer appears as a self-

[77] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine,* (New York: The MIT Press, 1961), 6.

contained organ, receiving inputs from the senses and discharging into the muscles. On the contrary, some of its most characteristic activities are explicable only as circular processes, emerging from the nervous system into the muscles, and re-entering the nervous system through the sense organs, whether they be proprioceptors or organs of the special senses."[78] This troubles a functional sense of the independent or self-contained human subject and poses a posthuman concept of the human.[79] For Wiener, cybernetic concepts are ultimately concerned with human systems. Rather than read this as a humanist origin for cybernetics, I see this rather as the beginnings of posthuman thinking about the human – Wiener's human is already posthuman.

Cybernetics founds posthumanism in early computational models by recognizing primary relationships between human and machine as computational systems. These support posthuman calls to conceptualize human beings as part of larger systems by putting human thought itself outside the mind and placing human beings as part of the machinic computer from its beginnings. Feedback (and all the images and analogies it entails) points to theories of computing machines as foundationally entangled with human materiality and behavior – these digital technologies evolved from a desire and aimed to understand human thought rather than machine thought. The machine entangles human thought and behavior, both in its conception and its theorization. That is, both in cybernetics and digital machines are embedded from their inception in human behavior, as relational rather than foreign to human conditions.

For studying digital religion, understanding how a cultural form and force like religion functions through digital and computational machines means understanding these cybernetic formations, especially if we are to take a heuristic approach. While the next chapter will take on ritual theory in relation to new media technologies in a much more elaborate form, for now, it is

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[78] Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*,8.
[79]Nayar, *Posthumanism*,36.

important to see ritual as a technology itself, as a function itself, as a kind of programming. Just as feedback is a function of desiring towards a pattern, ritual too is such a function, one that depends on action and interaction. Ritualization is a process that strives towards an ideal within and through a series of intersubjective performances, an inter-objective performance that works to make the world as it should or could be out of the world as it is. Just as cybernetics seeks the uninterrupted or most efficient flow of information or communication, rituals too seek a kind of perfected or idealized world, in frequent communication between human and non-human realms. Rituals are cybernetic.

Science and Technology Studies

Science and Technology Studies (STS) emerged in the 1960s alongside cybernetics, anti-humanism, and feminism, as a reaction to dominant philosophies of science that emphasized individual intervention and achievement as the major motivator of scientific advancement. For STS, the origins of new technology lie not in some scientific imperative or sudden interventionist flash of individual brilliance, but instead, scientific discovery arrives from relational forces of power where scientific truths and technological advances are constructed rather than uncovered. Science and Technology Studies abstracts this reflexive study of technology to approach the concept of technology as a whole through a study of the "origins, dynamics, and consequences of science and technology."[80] Like cybernetics, STS sought interconnection and function over form or essence when looking at the foundations of scientific or technological advancement.

[80]Edward J. Hackett and Society for Social Studies of Science, eds., *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies, 3rd ed* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press : Published in cooperation with the Society for the Social Studies of Science, 2008),1.

As a collection of disciplines and a foundation for posthuman thinking, STS conceptualizes technological objects and artifacts as functionally co-creative with cultural and political forces. STS grounds the present concept of posthuman ontology in its own kind of lineage, one that embeds technological creation and scientific discovery in a co-evolution and co-creation with the material and social forms around it. By recognizing the embeddedness of technological objects in scientific discourse in the cultural contexts out of which it arrives, STS creates a kind of scientific or technological ontology for posthuman thinking. Under an STS lens, science and technology function with and through other material and cultural forms. For the study of digital religion, this allows religious formations like ritual and death to be co-formative with the technological objects and procedures they encounter. Two critical STS interventions warrant further discussion when thinking about the ontological implications for STS, new media, and digital religion: first, its rejection of technological determinism, and second its ecological framework.

Raymond Williams, in his landmark essay on society and technology, writes that technological determinism

> is an immensely powerful and now largely orthodox view of the nature of social change. New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the condition of social change and progress. Progress, in particular, is the history of these inventions, which 'created the modern world' The effects of the technologies, whether direct or indirect, foreseen or unforeseen, are as it were the rest of history. The steam engine, the automobile, television, the atomic bomb have *made* modern man and the modern condition.[81]

Technological determinism marks technology as an independent factor causing social change – in some cases being the sole factor of technological change. In other words, technological

[81] Raymond Williams, "The Technology and the Society," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wadrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambride MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 289–300,293.

determinism accounts for a one-way relation between technology and human being, with technology in the dominant role. While this completely upends the hierarchy of anthropocentric humanism, it at the same time perpetuates humanism's forms of relation between subject and object, only reversing its flow of power.

A frequent example of technological determinism is Lynn White's argument that the stirrup caused feudalism. White argues that the invention of the stirrup allowed for a new kind of mounted combat. With the rider now securely on the horse, they were able to swing and impact violence from horseback with greater confidence and efficiency.[82] Maintaining and deploying such shock troops required training and funding and thus required the reorganization of society into economic units capable of maintaining such levels of violence and control, and so, as the argument goes, the invention of the stirrup led to new political and social structures.

Marshall McLuhan's famous contention that "media is the message" (to be addressed explicitly in a later chapter) is the flagship of media technological determinism. Theories arriving from this mantra of media technology frequently deploy technological determinism, with the advents of television, radio, and film marking massive shifts in human behavior. Noah Wardrip-Fruin points out the role technological determinism has played in media studies in particular and how scholars respond: "Technological determinism, a viewpoint for which Marshall McLuhan is the canonical figure in media studies...has been rejected, or greatly qualified, in its use, by most academic writers since McLuhan. However, it remains the dominant popular discourse on technology, and many academic writers remain engaged in outlining their

[82] Donald A. MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, eds., *The Social Shaping of Technology*, 2nd ed (Buckingham [Eng.] ; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), 5.

positions as alternatives to this viewpoint."[83] This project, too, must engage in this kind of outlining.

The idea that technological media *alone*, that objects *alone*, make or determine social and human behavior has persisted in popular cultural opinions. Apocalyptic film depictions of autonomous technology overpowering human society (think the *Terminator),* or trains corrupting the American West, or dystopian cybernetic fantasies all perpetuate a tech-determinist worldview. Scholarship must take care however, to not fall down a rabbit-hole that turns technological determinism into a straw-bogey man for ungrounded and cynical fodder. Critiquing technological determinism in good faith requires taking seriously what STS has contributed to a broader understanding of science and technology rather than being satisfied solely with its rejection of technological determinism as a previous stance. This might be where STS begins, but it does more than paint a poor portrait and then tear it down.[84]

STS posits a counterpoint to technological determinism – the Social Shaping of Technology (SST). SST maps the movement of technology in the direction opposite of determinism: insisting that societal conditions like economic, state, and gender shape the need for an appearance of particular sciences and technologies.[85] SST instead insists that material conditions create opportunities for emergent technologies and scientific schemas and both STS and SST turn technological determinism on its head. This interactive and social conceptualization of technology under SST and STS can be thought of as ecological, as both

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[83] Raymond Williams, "The Technology and the Society," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wadrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambride MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 289–300, 289.

[84] The following chapter goes into greater detail around the impact of technological determinism in particular on media studies, and offers a more nuanced approach to both tech determinism and its reception.

[85] Donald A. MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman, eds., *The Social Shaping of Technology*, 2nd ed (Buckingham [Eng.] ; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999),18.

having an impact on what is commonly understood as the ecological (flora and fauna) and itself being an ecological formation embedded in a series of relations. Within an ecological worldview, technologies provide food and shelter, warmth, and security; they also corrupt and kill environments and ecosystems, as well as preserve and shelter them.[86] This ecological and *social* shaping of technology seeks to "understand the nature of relations and action across the arrays of people and things in the arena, representations (narrative, visual, historical, rhetorical), processes of work (including cooperation without consensus, career paths, and routines/anomalies), and many sorts of interwoven discourses."[87] These interwoven discourses manifest as an ecological web of technological intervention and impact, a recursive set of relations between technological and non-technological forces, dually shaping each other in constant revolution.

Technology, under the gaze of STS, is ecological both in its impact and as a part of the world of things and beings. STS embeds technical innovations and artifacts within material networks and breaks down distinctions between human and non-human by resisting technological determinism and seeing technology as ecological. Donna Haraway points out that technoscience (the use of digital technologies as scientific instruments) blurs perceptions between the exterior and interior, mind and body, cultural and natural, by making the imperceptible perceptible in new ways. Hayles sees information and materiality as not distinct entities but part of what she describes as the Platonic "backhand and forehand" between ideal and material.[88] This Platonic tennis-match is the result of scientific-technologies ability to create an ideal human form through what is imagined through a technological device. Certain imaging

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[86] Ibid., 4.
[87] Edward J. Hackett and Society for Social Studies of Science, eds., *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 3rd ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press : Published in cooperation with the Society for the Social Studies of Science, 2008),115.
[88] Katherine Hayles 1943, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Book, Whole (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12-3.

technologies that allow insight into, say, brain activity allow for a sense of the human brain or mind once only held as an idea or idea, now visualized. Thus now the blurring of the interior and exterior, ideal and real.

Both STS and cybernetics establish this blurred and contingent sense of tech and human by making cultural and material forms like race, gender, and embodiment foundational to technological ontology, grounding posthuman thought in an inclusive sense of the technological. STS merges the human and the technological into a functional pattern rather than the discrete objects and subjects of technological determinism by attending to the ways technologies work as practices and how they negotiate meaning and understanding. This troubling of human and technology, subject and object is critical to understanding how posthumanism can function as a *method*, as STS offers both a response to a history of thought (technological determinism) and a means of posthuman thinking that echoes Cary Wolfe's call for ways for thinking outside the human: seeing larger ecological and technological concepts as in concert with (rather than oppose to or in service of) human being. For a study of digital religion and death ritual, STS provides a historically embedded backdrop for understanding practices and processes like digital religion as co-emergent with their technological objects, as co-formative and intermingled.

Ontological Posthumanism For Digital Religion

Both Cybernetics and STS claim technology as emergent and interdependent alongside human beings, as ecological (both socially and materially), and see technology as not exceptional to human being but interlaced with it. By doing so, cybernetics and STS perform ways of examining posthuman ontologies. This posthuman interdependence is foundational to digital technology from Weiner's example of feedback involving the pencil-in-hand all the way up to the aims of the Macy Conferences: cybernetics and modern computing are theoretical contingent

upon the human condition – not wholly derived from it, but rather embedded historically in it. For STS, this interdependence is historically narrative – our images and stories of technological advance and necessity and invention seep into our notions of necessity and progress, are conditioned by broader conditions of power, visibility, and control.

For thinking about formations of posthumanism and death, ritual, and digital religion, STS and cybernetics eliminate determinism while making even the concept of the technological contingent upon material and ideological conditions. Technological determinism states that technological artifacts intervene in human affairs and shape human behavior (the stirrup and feudalism), thus elevating technologies to a position of agency and influence beyond human being (or, it seems, any *other* being). By illustrating technological origins in cybernetics and embedding them in human and non-human ecologies through STS, these foundations of ontological posthumanism recalibrate agential and motivational parameters between human and non-human, technological, ecological, and otherwise and make human being and non-human being contingent upon the other, irreversibly interdependent, materially interwoven.

The confluence of STS, cybernetic and religious studies thinking in the Post-War period lead to a set of shared orientations. Like religious studies emerging insistence on attending to the interactions between objects and subjects in the material formations of religious meaning, these cybernetic and STS underpinnings resist the supremacy of thought over action. Ritual studies in particular (to be covered in-depth in the next chapter) leans into the performative and interactive aspects of religious practice in similar ways with new media studies that lean on these cybernetic and STS ontologies. STS and cybernetics activate possibilities for a posthuman subjectivity, one (as the non-unified subjectivity of ethical posthumanism) that materially and conceptually binds the ecologies and understandings of being both human and non by unhinging the nature of the

technological from determinism and embedding it in negotiations and ecologies of power, meaning-making, and cultural systems. Under these conditions, ontological posthumanism serves as a material investigation into this hybridity, this non-unified subjectivity. And, like the prescriptive ethical posthumanism, folds together a technological posthumanism with ecological and animal posthumanisms emerging in material feminism.[89]

An Epistemological Posthumanism for Digital Religion[90]

Dividing posthumanism into ethical and ontological branches liberate their methodologies from the force of dominant discourses like a capital "P" posthumanism and creates a more flexible and viable methodology, a heuristic and reflexive way of doing posthumanism. Within my proposed posthumanism (like Karen Barad's onto-ethical agential realism) "the practices by which differential boundaries for the "human" and the "nonhuman" are always already implicated in particular materializations. The differential constitution of the 'human' ('nonhuman') accompanied by particular exclusion are always up for contestation."[91] Both anti-humanism's oppositions to ideological and essential understandings of humanity and the feminist critiques' attention to alternative bodily formation and the legibility of the ineffable exemplify ethical posthumanism's functional and material imperative to principles for being. Ontological posthumanism historically enmeshes human and technology in co-contingent emergence by locating its origins in Wiener's technological understanding of human being in cybernetics and its STS critique in reversing technological determinism cultural blindspots.

[89] Juschka, "Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion.",518.
[90] Special thanks here to William Robert for forcing me to finally admit "epistemology" into my thinking.
[91] Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity.",824.

These *four* origins for *two* emphases of *one* posthumanism elevate non-human elements of human being through function, form, and material specificity. They reveal material, functional, interdependent, and historically embedded approaches to thinking past the human by defining posthumanism as a matrix of orientations rather than a stable "post-humanism." Instead, posthumanism becomes a heuristic device, something to investigate with. Without attending to these flexible root systems, posthumanism is in danger of becoming an ineffective trope or uncritical rhetorical device rather than a means of theoretical analysis. A flexible and functional posthumanism allows for its deployment rather than adherence to certain definitional principle or essence.

Ethics can tell us what we should be looking for, ontology can describe what it is, but only through an epistemology does this looking and seeing become *knowing*. Posthumanism functions as an epistemology by way of these four root systems, and it is through this heuristic epistemology that this project functions. A material and functional posthumanism *epistemologically* links ethics and ontology by offering a way of knowing that accounts for both prescription and description and a way of thinking that embeds itself in both practices. Where ethics demand and ontologies situate, epistemologies sense, and *act.* In this way, a posthuman epistemology activates the kinds of knowledge made possible through the ethical and ontological demands of our four root systems.

Both Descartes' and Foucault's ethical demands for an (anti)/humanism arrive from particular epistemologies, from ways of sensing and acting on the world that tether humanism and its reactions to these ways of knowing. Descartes' "arch-humanism," that is, his way of seeing the world that excludes anything but a human mind, is just that, a way of "seeing." His optical metaphors about candles, monkeys, and men in hats reveal an epistemological ethics and

a way of doing prescribed by way of knowing. Descartes' ontology and ethics are primarily epistemological in that they depend on his way of seeing the world. Foucault too arrives at his anti-humanism from epistemology, the movement from the totemic God to Man as rationale for rationality, and that human being is created through the sciences, with man an invention of this epistemological stance.

Part of this epistemological tethering lies too in material feminism and STS's dependence on situated kinds of knowing. Material feminism, in particular, demands an awareness of embodiment and materiality, without succumbing to the closed sense of a humanist embodiment. In other words, material feminism seeks an agency for materiality that is not dependent on a humanist notion of cognition or rationality or intention, but rather is embedded and inherent in all materiality. Material feminism broadens a sense of agency to include materialities and subjectivities beyond the scope of humanism. This agential materiality is similarly taken up in science and technology studies, re-calibrating the excess of agency given to objects in a technological determinism to create a social, collaborative, and contingent formation of technology, science, and subjectivity instead. Bruno Latour's "actor-network theory" is a colorful example of the kind of work possible when STS gives real attention to the interplay between society, technology, and forms of knowledge production.[92]

Science and Technology Studies' located knowledge depends on feedback between agents and forms a cybernetic way of knowing. Feedback and cybernetics are functionally epistemologies dependent upon posthumanism ontologies. Wiener begins his thinking about computational and cybernetic systems from the particular materiality of the human body, making

[92] I stay away here from "Object Oriented Ontology" or "OOO" as a similar epistemology, being wary of its Inhuman rather than posthuman treatment of objects and subjects. It (like transhumanism) could be accused of being a hyper-humanism in disguise.

materiality and embodiment part of a cybernetic epistemology. Both STS and material feminism, too, work from this embodied and material epistemology, functioning within cybernetic or feedback systems to create new forms of knowing.

This epistemological (onto-ethical) posthumanism synthesizes functional heuristic approaches to interactions between human being and digital religion. Offering functional, material, historical, and embodied approaches to the study of religion corresponds with what Tom Tweed calls an "organic-cultural flow" approach to religion.[93] With roots of ethical and ontological posthumanism that arrive from historical and material specificity, Tweed asks that such a flow theory of religion be grounded in "both neural pathways and ritual performances" that "that conjoin to create institutional networks that, in turn, prescribe, transmit, and transform tropes, beliefs, values, emotions, artifacts, and rituals."[94] My grounded posthuman theory attends to these concerns, specifically around the digital, through their inclusion of technological and digital materialities into such networks and in their ability to include technological and material together

Posthumanism can include the ineffable, the things in between, the more than human in its material and religious networks. This, for religious studies, can mean an inclusion of the divine or the sacred as the more than human elements of posthuman thinking. Like certain elements of material and other feminisms, an epistemological posthumanism casts a wider net for what is sensible, what can be made sense of, or at least what can be included in descriptions or prescriptions for the human condition. Applying an epistemological posthumanism to religious studies means accepting these new limits of and for human experience as valid, as useful, and as

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[93] Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Book, Whole (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 54.
[94] Ibid.,69.

within the purview of a posthuman situation. For the study of digital religion in particular, this means including the human and the non-human (digital/technological) as agential in processes of knowing.

Histories and genealogies of anti-humanism, feminist critique, cybernetics, and STS are essential to the coming analysis of death and digital religious practice in their accounting for the unaccountable in human/digital interaction and interface. But before applying such a methodology, we need to know where we are going and the location for such a knowing. The next chapter turns to these grounds, to ritual theories and new media as a location for this theory of posthuman digital practice. Ritual theories' (like cybernetics') emphasis on function and performativity, and new media theories recent turn to historically embedded materiality flourish and empower each other under this posthuman rubric. The following chapter turns to the specifics of how the study of digital religion can benefit from both new media and ritual theory within such a posthumanism epistemology and its attention to embodiment, performance, and interface.

CHAPTER TWO- Ritual Theory and New Media: Concepts and Approaches

In combination with posthumanism, ritual and new media are the guiding orbits of my heuristic project. This chapter lays out a theory for new media and ritual through reviews of landmark and present literature before turning to three intersections of ritual and new media elaborated on in the following two chapters. Ritual will go on to be defined as a technology that transforms subjects from one cultural state into another and re-orients material embodiments of being through formalized action and agency through attention to these cultural states, both human and nonhuman. So-called "new" media refers to data-driven media that can function and perform without human intervention and without the intention towards human perception. What is new about new media is not its ability to make sense of things at a human level of perception that is remarkably different from other forms, but it is forcing us to think beyond human perception of data and information, to re-imagine what mediation of information can mean.

This chapter (1) establishes the location and characteristics of each of these concepts and (2) sets a trajectory of interests linking the two in a shared system for understanding religion and new media practices, while arguing that what is "new" about new media, and what is unique about ritual are their shared ability (as heuristic devices) to expose what is already there, to see media and religion as inescapably material and mediated and together to see digital religious practice as the same. New media rituals interface between places like a possible world and a realized one, the sacred and the profane, the living and the dead. Like the previous posthumanism chapter, the present chapter approaches aspects of the study of both ritual and new media for their usefulness and their function for the present project – that is, understanding death and new media in American contexts – while still establishing enough conceptual territory and apparatus to suggest a broader methodology for posthumanism, ritual, and new media.

While *interest* in media and *interest* in ritual have deep roots in the humanities and social sciences, their explicitly named "theories" and "methods" have only been around a short while, comparatively. Ritual and media studies formed as smaller "schools" or subfields within departments in the mid-twentieth century, and while their particular institutional histories are less pertinent to present purposes, they both were foundationally interdisciplinary and secondary pursuits -- these specialized sub-fields in the study of religion did not begin until the 1960s through the 1980s with formations of departments, journals, and the subsequent establishment of the canon. As a result, these sub-fields have always been cobbling and collecting theoretical and methodological resources from other established disciplines, making their edges ragged and blurry and their methods adaptable. Media studies and ritual studies depend upon established canons, methods, and interests to create a sense of gravity and utility.

I turn later to three of these shared interests: embodiment, performance, and interfaces as bridges between media and ritual studies, as not only vital and pressing *objects* of study but *modes* and *methods* and ways of seeing and looking at (what are) concepts like "new media" and "ritual." In looking at embodiment, performance, and interfaces as modes of inquiry and as trajectories for interrogating broader categories, this chapter synthesizes ritual and new media as lenses for viewing the other, using the techniques and forms of other disciplinary territories to create another lens for seeing, revealing the shared investments in the other. Like the previous chapter's approach to posthumanism, new media, and ritual serve more as ways of seeing than things to be seen.

Defining both ritual and new media, like defining anything else, is a matter of utility – rather than the *essential* definition of anything, this project favors a functional definition, the means of defining for use. As Jan A.M. Snoek puts it in their introduction to *Defining Rituals*,

“the intention is *not* to propose a generally applicable definition of the term…but to show how one could proceed if one wanted to construct a definition of this term for a specific project (which in my opinion, is very wise to do).”[95] I agree, and as I layout working definitions of both ritual and new media below, think of them as way-points rather than directions, clusters rather than lodestars, vehicles rather than destinations. When thinking of ritual as a technology of transformation and new media as data-driven and non-anthropocentric, each supplies the other with a functional understanding of death and religious mediation. Though the two topics at hand here are objects of this study, they are more importantly subjects, reflexive and reflective of the aims here and should be taken as guides rather than targets. The explications and definitions below aim at the usefulness of new media and rituals for understanding current objects and looks at cases in the study of religion and death that gravitate towards forms and functions that best serve these ends.

(New) Media Studies

Media theorist Fredrich Kittler once asked: “what’s new about new media?”[96] I have been asked the same question more than once when presenting (or defending) my own work and have come up with various answers with various degrees of success. Some sounded like Janet Murray’s response in *The New Media Reader* (an early foray by MIT press in establishing a canon of new media), emphasizing essential properties of new media: it is procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial in ways that media have never been before.[97] Other

[95] Jens Kreinath, Joannes Augustinus Maria Snoek, and Michael Stausberg, eds., *Theorizing Rituals*, Numen Book Series-Studies in the History of Religions, v. 114-1, v. 114–2 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2006),10-14.
[96] Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, eds., *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Trios (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014),1.
[97] Janet Murray, “Inventing the Medium,” in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wadrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambride MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 3–11,6.

answers focused on the medium itself, drawn around this new idea that data itself is what makes new media new – that new levels of information capacity or accessibility are inescapably unique. Both of these definitions, one focused on properties of new media and the other on its forms, are accurate – these things are in some ways new about new media. But, is this what makes new media *so* vastly different in the way we treat it, in the way it impacts us, and the way it plays out in the world? Or, as some have suggested, do new media forms rely on old media forms – like text and image and is treated and utilized in much the same way? An answer to Kittler's question becomes clear through a particular history of media studies: what is new about new media is nothing to do with mediation, in the sense of human sensibilities of images/sounds/language, but in the capacities digital mediations have for re-imagining the concept of media itself.

But what of this term "media"? What is meant by media or mediation in comparison to what is "new" media? From the Latin for middle, or middle layer, media has to do with coming in-between, a point of passage from one thing to another. It also has to do with human modes of experiencing this middle, the human sensoria of taste, sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Media is, then: the material and process of storing, organizing, and transmitting information for the human sensoria. It is both the material technologies and the process, in that media objects cannot be separated from their performances. Media, in other words, *is* mediation. And media is tied to human legibility, human sensation, and the human sensoria.

This definition arrives from a constellation of a few thinkers, beginning with the aforementioned Frederich Kittler, who defines media as defining "the quasi-transcendental

condition for experience and understanding."[98] This "condition" is what I am dividing into the material and the process, following Jeremey Stolow's assertion that media is "not just the textual or iconographic systems of representation, but also much broader terrain of sensorial techniques, tools, material artifacts, and systems of coordinated action."[99] Media is, from here, the technologies and processes through which sensation takes place. But towards what end? Both Stolow and Kittler go on to agree that media have to do with the storage and retrieval of information or knowledge.[100] Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and Mackenzie Wark further qualify this information or knowledge as *human* knowledge, with media being about "sense-making," or making sense of and making sensible this information and knowledge.[101] Media is tied to its material technologies and particular to their processes. This material and humanistic understanding of media precedes any understanding of new media technologies or processes.

New media reshapes this concept of media through two unique positions: the uncanny persistence of the image as a descriptor and the (in)accessibility of informational mediums that are not necessarily anthropocentric in either their conceptual description or their function. These two observations on new media create a bridge between the above-established definition of media as tied to materiality and sensoria and a *new* concept of media as it proceeds from here. In other words, what is new about new media has little to do with media itself but with how we think about the function and role of media. To understand what is new about new media in

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[98] W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, eds., *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010).,vii.
[99] Stolow, *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*., 4.
[100] Ibid. ; F. Kittler and C. Weinberger, "The Cold Model of Structure: Friedrich Kittler Interviewed by Christoph Weinberger," *Cultural Politics an International Journal* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 375–84, https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-1722109., 383.
[101] Alexander R. Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark, eds., *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Trios (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2.

relation to religious activities around death requires first reflecting on the field of media studies itself, on what it accomplished by way of defining its terms, and in turn see what we can make “new” about *a theory* of media, rather than a theory of *new* media.

Studying the nature and function of media in the Euro/American academy begins primarily in five “schools” of thought that cobble together different sets of priorities, ideologies, and tools to describe and prescribe the uses and usefulness of media in the twentieth century. The Columbia, Frankfurt, Toronto, Chicago, and British Cultural Studies schools, to greater and lesser extents, form a network and legacy for understanding media and mediation from text to hypertext, image, and sound. The Frankfurt and Toronto schools have had the most considerable influence on the *new* media theory that deals directly with digital mediations of the body and the human, gravitating around such monumental names like Walter Benjamin and Marshall McLuhan.

Benjamin is the Frankfurt school’s most famous critic of media, encapsulated in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”[102] In it, Benjamin marks the loss of the power of the original artwork (its “aura”) in an age or easily reproduced images, and the depletion of the museum as a place of transformative aesthetic potential, where: “By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced."[103] In the same work, Benjamin praises the advent of film as an egalitarian and potentially revolutionary media with *no* original, a place of distributed social and political power for the masses. This turn positions Benjamin as a foundational critic of *mass* media, which

[102] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Book, Whole (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).
[103] Ibid., 22.

he saw as producing a “different kind of participation” in media forms.[104] Benjamin saw this kind of participation as re-formatting the relationship between human beings and the technical apparatus of mediation into a more participatory or “progressive” form, where “the most important function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus."[105] For Benjamin, mass media formations create the potential for revolutionary and liberatory acts. For mass-media theorists, Benjamin represents the earliest political and critical theories of twentieth-century mass media.

“The Work of Art…” represents an early example of critical mass media studies, one still held up to this day in critiques of mass media and reproduction. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, in their early but comprehensive study of digital mediations, *Remediations,* point to Benjamin as breaking crucial ground for two aspects of media studies: “Perhaps for Benjamin, the immediacy offered by film is the immediacy we have identified as growing out of the fascination with media: the acknowledged experience of mediation. Furthermore, film for Benjamin is a medium that demonstrates the inseparability of technology and reality.”[106] Mike Featherstone, in his essay “Post-Bodies, Aging and Virtual Reality” encapsulates the perceived ambivalence of Benjamin amongst new media scholars, where “ …at different places in his writing he actively supports the potential of the shocks and fragmentation of the new technologically-induced experiences, yet in other places he seeks to bemoan the shallowness of such transacted experiences.”[107]For new media theories like Bolter, Grusin, Featherstone, Galloway and Hansen, Benjamin has become a touchstone for landmark discussions of human

[104] Ibid.,39.
[105] Ibid., 37.
[106] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, 6. Nachdr (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003),74-5.
[107] Mike Featherstone, “Post-Bodies, Aging and Virtual Reality,” in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedt (New York NY: Routledge, 2000), 616.

and technological agency and new forms of mediation, and subsequent discussion of authenticity and authority.

The "Toronto" school revolves around largely one man, largely one book, and largely one phrase – Marshall McLuhan, his 1964 *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, and the title of its opening chapter "The Medium is the Message."[108] McLuhan and his legacy constellate admiration and critique, straw men and rehabilitations. Such an enduring legacy revolves around his most contentious point, that "…the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."[109] In other words, "…the dominant medium of each age uniquely constrains the ways in which our brains process in formation, which, in turn, shapes our personalities and our social systems."[110] This assertion that "the media is the message" conflates with broader forms of techno determinism and over the years has become the sticking point for *any* conversation around the role of media and human behavior. Any one paragraph or section or chapter will do little to address this properly. I introduce the man and the phrase here only as a provocation and catalyst for further discussion regarding McLuhan's repercussions on discussions of technological determinism and anthropocentrism, central to the broader concerns of this project.

Legacies of Benjamin and McLuhan persist into *new* media studies, manifesting as anxieties around the authenticity and authority of the reproduced image and human agency in modes mediations. Like the turn to digital religion, the turn to *new* media studies or a new *media*

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[108] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1st MIT Press ed (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994),7.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Elihu Katz, ed., *Canonic Texts in Media Research: Are There Any? Should There Be? How about These?* (Cambridge : Malden, MA: Polity Press ; Distributed in the U.S.A. by Blackwell Publishers, 2003), 154.

studies (that is either a study of new media or a new study of media) means both recuperating and rejecting, fostering and forgetting canon and paradigms like those of Benjamin and McLuhan. These anxieties and contestations pull on and ground some of the problematic divisions within the field of digital religion– things like authenticity and authority, technological determinism, and so-called "mediatization."[111] The following explication of some of these recuperations or rejections lays out a path from mass media to a material media, in a move away from mediation and towards a medium, one that fosters a new answer to an old question: what is so new about new media?

New (Media) Studies

Robert K. Logan, a former colleague of McLuhan's, wrote the 2010 *Understanding New Media* "to develop an understanding of 'new media' and their impact using the ideas and methodology of Marshall McLuhan…"[112] Logan is not the first and will not be the last to wrestle with McLuhan's legacy in the study of new media, which confronts and ultimately recuperates McLuhan's work, particularly around ideas of materiality, embodiment, and technological determinism. We have seen already how Science and Technology Studies offers a critical response to technological determinism in the broad scale of the (post)humanities, but media and new media studies and theories have their own particular response, one that revolves largely around materialism and specificity of the medium.

Media scholar John Durham Peters begins his own reevaluation of McLuhan and technological determinism by recounting McLuhan's cameo appearance in Woody Allen's 1977

[111] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, Book, Edited (Routledge, 2013),99.
[112] Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010),1.

film *Annie Hall*, in which McLuhan and Allen puncture the fourth wall of the film to rebuke a man who is incorrectly espousing McLuhan's theories (luckily McLuhan and Allen have no such capacity in *this* present medium).[113] While spelling out the history of technological determinism, Peters notes that that the term "starts to bend in the mid-1960s…[i]t was less a term for sectarian squabbles in historical materialism than a global term for the fallacy of giving technology too much weigh in societal prognostication," and that McLuhan had become the harbinger of this fallacy.[114] For all its specificity of use, "technological determinism" had been abstracted to almost a point of uselessness, a straw man without referent.

Peters argues that the villainizing of technological determinism (like the man rebuked in *Annie Hall*) is a "problem of the long shot," in which academics cling to hyperbolic definitions of a term like "technological determinism" to leverage their argument, and in turn overshoot the bulk of the term's worth.[115] As a result, technological determinism became an object of ridicule, rarely examined in any seriousness rather than something to work through and with, and McLuhan, in many ways, went with it. However, with the maturation of things like STS and actor-network theory, Peters assures us that "[t]he concept of technological determinism has more or less stabilized since the 1990s as a morally inflected trade-off between resistance (by the people) and domination (by machines or their captains)."[116] This "trade-off" is where we stand now, where McLuhan's brand of technological determinism or medium-determinacy stands not so much as a straw man, but a hinge point: a more nuanced discussion point about where and

[113] John Durham Peters, "'You Mean My Whole Fallacy Is Wrong?': On Technological Determinism," *Representation* 140 (Fall 2017): 10–26.
[114] Ibid.,17.
[115] Ibid., 20.
[116] Ibid.

how particular forms of "resistance" or "domination" take place around and through technologies of mass mediation.

McLuhan's approach was recuperated mainly through this stabilization, and in working out a new media theory, his ideas (particularly those around the interrelation of human ontology, materiality, and media technologies) have found new life. I make this bridge between McLuhan and new media theories not to draw attention to McLuhan and his thinking in particular, but more simply to relate the maturation of thought on media into thought on new media. The concepts that interested McLuhan continue to be of interest in current theories of new media, namely technological specificity and extension of human being through technological devices. The recovery and recuperation of McLuhan is less a redemption story of a man and his thinking, and more a single echo of one concept that exists among many in the study of media, concepts and problems that persist even unto so-called "new media studies."

In their introduction to *Critical Terms for Media Studies,* Mark B.N. Hansen and W.J.T. Mitchell re-organize the subtitle of McLuhan's landmark text *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* to re-envision McLuhan's work as concerning that very extension in the form of "media as a *prosthesis of human agency*."[117] McLuhan's work, they say, implicates the logic of human embodiment in media history in a way that makes common cause with some important contemporary media theorists and philosophers of technics, including feminist posthumanist Katherine Hayles, who always views mediation and information as tied in with bodies, as working through bodies. By recognizing the embodied and material aspects of McLuhan's work, Mitchell and Hansen tether him to broader discourses of contemporary media studies while

[117] W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, eds., *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), xii.

simultaneously giving those current studies a lineage and history they may not (previously) have credited. With the re-engagement of these old figures and terms, there arrive new paradigms and new battlegrounds.

One such contestation is the place of "image" versus "information" as the medium *of* or *for* new media. The "image" has held a special place in thinking about mediation and mediation, especially during the rise and proliferation of film and filmic images. Benjamin's main concern in "The Work of Art…" was the integrity and endurance of the "image" in the face of mechanical or technical reproduction. Visual media theorist W.J.T Mitchell has taken this one step further by writing extensively on what he calls the "pictorial turn," the turn to images and image analysis in the humanities and critical theory, and "the realization that while the problem of pictorial representation has always been with us, it presses inescapably now, and with unprecedented force, on every level of culture, from the most refined philosophical speculations to the most vulgar productions of mass media."[118] For media studies, the "image" is emblematic of a distilled essence, that which is in and of the medium, the generative core of what is mediated and serves as the contested space for defining how media and mediation shape this "image": visual media. But as computer technologies began to produce, re-produce, and project images within their own medium, some media scholars called for a move away from the image as the center of mass for visual media studies. Alexander Galloway nods to Kittler as already skeptical of what is so new about new media, taking exception where "[m]any scholars today continue to classify the computer as another installment in the long march of visual culture. As Kittler makes

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[118] W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16; W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? : The Lives and Loves of Images*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); W. J. T. Mitchell, "Dinosaurs and Modernity," in *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 351.

clear, such a position is totally wrong. Subsequent to television, which began a retreat away from optical media and a return to the symbolic form via signal codification, the computer consummates the retreat from the realm of the imaginary to the purely symbolic realm of writing. "In contrast to film, television was already no longer optics."[119] For Kittler via Galloway, television's move to encoding visual media into signals for transmission and then their transference *back* into a visual media for consumption or viewing represented the first step away from the purely visual medium of film and towards something else. So for them, digital codification is the culmination of television's beginnings.

For many, information becomes the new lodestar for new media studies and battles waged over the place of "information" and its analysis. An early and unavoidable attempt to reorganize and reconcile the image within the medium of information is Lev Manovich's 2001 *The Language of New Media*, the title alone giving some clue as to how he will approach the structure of new media.[120] In it, Manovich argues that computers have fulfilled the cinematic ways of "seeing the world, structuring time, of narrating story, of linking one experience to the next…In this respect the computer fulfills the promise of the cinema as a visual Esperanto…"[121] Manovich's analogic project works through cinematic and poetic comparisons to reconcile computer-based mediation with previous technologies and modes of sensing. Above all, Manovich emphasizes narrative, language, and cinematic metaphor to explain the *structure* of new media more than its operation, switching back and forth between film and digital analysis to strengthen his more significant points on media, rarely taking into account the use, reception, or cultural contexts of these structures. While one could argue that this (relatively) early attempt at

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[119] Alexander R. Galloway 1974, *The Interface Effect*, (Malden, MA; Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 17.
[120] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 1st MIT Press pbk., (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002)
[121] Ibid., xv.

understanding new media should be forgiven for these oversights, Manovich's work has since continued to emphasize visuality and language, especially in his turn to software studies, which turns to code into language and obscures both materiality and particularity in favor of poetics, where "software is the interface to our imagination and the world – a universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs."[122] This emphasis on software and language keeps Manovich clearly in a linguistic (rather than imagistic, material, or interface) based approach to digital media.

Such early turns in new media analysis that draw comparisons to established media forms for analysis by analogy are now targets for a new class of new media theorists.[123] Whether these critiques are based on what was theorized or what thinkers like Manovich represent (like with McLuhan) in hyperbole is still an open question. But such evaluations and refutations do reveal new priorities in the study of new media: particularly the materiality and particularity of "information" over "image" as a primary point of analysis. This re-alignment rests both in technological specificity (that is, paying attention to the particular type of device, interface, mode of mediation being analyzed rather than generalizing about "new media) and the talking about information and data as the primary medium of digital media.

Galloway cites Kittler as cautioning against adopting a predominately visual-based interpretation for computer mediation. Galloway later expands on this complicated relationship between visuality and digital media, saying

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[122] Lev Manovich, "Software Is the Message," ed. Raiford Guins, *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 1 (April 2014): 79–81; Lev Manovich, "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life: From Mass Consumption to Mass Cultural Production?," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (January 2009): 319–31; Lev Manovich, "The Poetics of Augmented Space," *Visual Communication* 5, no. 2 (June 2006): 219–40. See also Mark B.N Hansen 1965, *New Philosophy for New Media*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 31.

[123] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003).

> …any understanding of contemporary visual mediation that ignores software does so at its peril, in an age when cinema has become synonymous with Final Cut Pro, photography with Photoshop, writing with Microsoft Word, and on and on…But at the same time I am sympathetic to a certain minoritarian refrain running through recent media theory in the specificity of computers as non-optical if not altogether non-visual media, for anyone wishing to cram computers into the framework of 'visual culture' is certainly suffering from an unfortunate fetishization of the physical interface, as if the computer monitor were an adequate substitute for the medium as a whole, in which, in addition to screens of various shapes and sizes, consists of any number of other technologies: nonoptical interfaces (keyboard, mouse, controller, sensor); data in memory and data on disk; executable algorithms; networking technologies and protocols; and the lost continues.[124]

Rather than tether themselves to established theories of visual media to understand the digital, Galloway, Hansen, and others drift away from the image as an entry point, instead choosing "data" or "information" as a vehicle for exploring both the nature and function of digital media. For Hansen, information and data offer a multifaceted approach, one that escapes the velocity of the history of the image, when "regardless of its current surface appearance, digital data is at heart polymorphous: lacking any inherent form or enframing, data can be materialized in almost a limitless array of framings…"[125] Data (as a concept) grounds much of digital media studies as the "stuff" of new media, the medium in and out of which digital media is sensed and made sense of, the new location for theorization. For thinkers like Hansen and Galloway, data and information are both the "stuff" of digital media and the means of relation between these "stuffs".

Galloway grounds his definition of "data" in the Latin *dare* meaning "to give" and in its perfect passive form, "the things having been given."[126] So, for Galloway, data are those things,

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[124] Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 63-4.
[125] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 34.
[126] Alexander R. Galloway, "From Data to Information," *Culture and Communication* (blog), n.d., http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/from-data-to-information.

those things that can be given. But he admits this definition is incomplete: “The true definition of data, therefore, is not simply ‘the things having been given.’ The definition must conjoin givenness and relation. For this reason, data often go by another name, a name that more suitably describes the implicit imbrication of givenness and relation. The name is information. Information combines both aspects of data: the root form refers to a relationship (here a relationship of identity as same), while the prefix in refers to the entering into existence of form, the actual givenness of abstract form into real concrete formation.”[127] For Galloway, information and data are about things in relation and in communication.

Mark B.N. Hansen develops a similar definition of information from early cyberneticists Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s “information theory,” where information is the result of the interpretation of data after transference.[128] In other words, for Shannon and Weaver (and therefore, for Hansen), “information” refers to meaningful interpretations of mediated data. Much of Hansen’s larger project is to free this kind of information-as-meaning-making from its linguistic, imagistic, or cerebral realms and put the ability to make meaning back into the body.

For both Galloway and Hansen, data and information as terms are based in relation. Data are things relayed, and information is the meaningful or actionable relation of those things. “Data” goes beyond digital bits or bytes in definition and becomes the primary means of analysis. For digital media theory, data and information are terms based around the meaningful interpretation of communication – whether that be from machine to machine or machine to human.

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Mark B. N. Hansen, *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2006),249.

While data/information has become the medium of the media and the stuff for theorizing, language of "the image" still lingers, even in Hansen's thesis "…the digital *image* demarcates an embodied processing of information" (emphasis mine).[129] The idea of the image, then, in the face of the "information" age, persists, but why? W.J.T Mitchell suggests its endurance by way of his definition of the image, as "…the uncanny content of a medium, the shape or form it assumes, the thing that makes its appearance in a medium while making the medium itself appear as a medium."[130] This is what Mitchell goes on to describe as the "uncanny" nature of the image, both its containment in and revelation of its own medium, the self-revealing way in which images are both *in* and *of*. In this way, Hansen speaks of the digital "image" in all its embodied and material formations – as still that thing, that *image* in and of the digital that maintains (as Mitchell puts it) "the uncanny, ambiguous character that has from the first made them objects of fascination and anxiety."[131]

So, the question of whether we are dealing with the "image" or "data" or "information" as what is new about new media becomes beside the point. In other words, the *visuality* or *image*-ness of new media is not what is "new" here – what is potentially new is what we prioritize when we discuss what is new about new media, and the levels of perception and function used to demarcate so-called old from co-called new media. The question "what is new about new media?" becomes a question less about the content or form of mediation but the ways in which we can talk about mediation because of the provocations of new media as a term. New media has the ability (in all its conceptual *and* material forms) to create new modes of perception, whether through its interfaces, as Galloway suggests, its ambivalent data as Hansen

[129] Ibid, 11.
[130] Mitchell and Hansen, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*,30.
[131] Ibid., 47.

suggest, or the persistent and uncanny image, as Mitchell suggests. All of these suggestions together question what is new about new media: not as mediation, but as a concept.

For Hansen, what is new about new media is not its impact on the image as an image, but rather the way computer and data-driven mediation force us to rethink the specificity of particular interfaces as inherently tied to certain sensations (image, sound, text). New media instead forces us to think about computer technology as multi-modal in its form of mediation. He wonders "[c]an it be that, for the first time in our history, media (meaning the storage, dissemination, and transmission of experience) has become distinct from its own technical infrastructure, from the computational networks and machines that undergird most of what we consume as media?"[132] He goes on to describe this separation of media from technology as the computer's "indifference to medial difference" where computer technologies emulate other technologies for human sense perception with no regard for that media's original form.[133] He gives an example of wax cylinder recordings that can now only be read by sensitive digital equipment, which then translate the data into audio for our own perception – granting us the only way to access this lost medium. This "indifference" reveals that a wholly different context -- what is new about new media is not its ability but rather its ambivalence – that data-driven media can function and perform in some ways without human intervention and without the intention towards human perception.

This is what is new about new media: it is forcing us to think beyond human perception of data and information, to re-imagine what mediation of information can mean. New media moves away from the specificity of any form of mediation (image, sound) and any specific

[132] Mitchell and Hansen, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, 72.
[133] Ibid.

technology of mediation (film, text) and towards an indifferent and multi-modal form of computer mediation. This means that "…humans must rely on technologies to perform operations to which they have absolutely no direct access whatsoever and that correlates to no already existing human faculty of capacity."[134]

What is new about new media is its movement away from an anthropocentric sense of mediation towards a posthuman or ecological sense of media, where media is untethered from both their form and their technology. Wark, Thacker, and Galloway, in their introduction to three essays on media, push for "…not so much a post-media condition but rather a non-media condition, not so much the extensions of man but the exodus of man from this world. Our task is not so much a reinvigorated *humanism*, no matter how complicated or qualified it might need to be, but rather a glimpse into the realm of the *non-human.*"[135] Like the roots of the posthuman in the previous chapter, these thinkers oppose a heuristic "humanism." Instead of leaning on an anthropocentric (or what they call "reinvigorated humanism") approach to new media, they instead look to prioritize the non-human elements of mediation. In thinking beyond media specificity and in turn thinking outside the human, Wark, Thacker, Galloway, Hansen, and Mitchell are all responding to the questions of Kittler, the assertions of McLuhan, and the anxieties of Benjamin more than rejecting the old/new media theory of someone like Manovich. Instead, they endeavor to think that what is new about new media is not in the media itself (as Bolter, Grusin, and Manovich did) but in prioritizing the non-human in a conception of media.

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[134] Mark B.N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media*, (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.
[135] Galloway, Thacker, and Wark, *Excommunication*, 21.

But if the "image" no longer has any utility, and "data" is of no real interest beyond human perception (or at the very least a poor substitute or mimesis of "image" as a concept), to modify Kittler's question: what is there *new to study* about new media? Kittler expounds on the problem: "[t]here are physiological computer interfaces that you can continue to regard as media. But inside, in the realm of hardware and software, there is nothing imaginary. Along these lines: media are the visible sides, turned toward laypersons and others, of a world that science invokes as the dark side of the moon."[136] How do we get to the dark side of the moon if we can't sense it? How do we make *sense* of it? What is there to hold on to? We need to pay attention to the vehicles that get us to that dark side of the moon, grasp what specifics we can about how these devices function in the ways we *can* sense them – because we depend on them whether we can know how they work or not.

Materiality, embodiment, interfaces, performance: these are the kinds of tangible things to grasp as we venture towards the dark side of the moon. At Kittler's urging, we need ways to orient ourselves towards a better understanding of what is new about new media: how we think about mediation itself. While Hansen argues that media is not tied to *specific* materiality, it is inescapable (through Kittler's admission as well) that new media is bound t*o one* materiality at least – that of the digital computer. John Durham Peters, Amanda Starling Gould, Katherine Hayles, and others demand we think of this digitality as materiality. Hansen (like the feminist posthumanists) urges us to think the digital "image" as contingent on the human body for translation. Galloway's *Interface Effect* is an examination of how the "interface" as a concept can help us think about how new media functions. All of this materiality, embodiment, and

[136] F. Kittler and C. Weinberger, "The Cold Model of Structure: Friedrich Kittler Interviewed by Christoph Weinberger," *Cultural Politics an International Journal* 8, no. 3 (January 1, 2012): 375–84.

interfacing must too be ultimately performed as such, brought out into space and time as mediation, as mediated, as media. Turning away from Kittler's question ("what is new about new media?") and instead turning to his provocation (the dark side of the moon) leans away from searching for conceptual generalities and qualifying essences of so-called new media and towards sensible practices and material contingencies for a functional understanding of media in context, recognizing technological mediation as a broader set of practices and extensions of a human and nonhuman world. These materialist approaches to mediation invite contemplating "technology" as a grounding term for understanding how computer-based mediation operates within human and nonhuman worlds, as a means of excavating the hidden aspects of the "dark side of the moon," what is inaccessible about new media by way of humanism, or at least the effects these technologies have on their sensible counterparts.

These co-extensive and collaborative relationships between media, technology, and organic life see technology as a major mediating factor in the material and social lives of the planet and human being. Bernard Stiegler presents the idea of the *homo faber*, that technologies and humans co-originate, that they are dependent *of* each other as means of mediating experience. Jeremy Stolow defines technology *as* mediation, as "the material appurtenances, mechanical operations, and expert knowledge that enable humans to act upon, and in concert with, the very tangible domains of nature and society." [137] Both these approaches (and like those encouraged by Hansen and Galloway) see media and technology as co-extensive while maintaining the importance of particularity of technical function and materiality.

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[137] Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 20; Mitchell and Hansen, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*.xiii; Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time*, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998), Jeremy Stolow, *Deus in Machina: Religion, Technology, and the Things in Between*, (Fordham University Press, 2013),2.

Approaching technology and mediation as co-extensive with human and nonhuman experience through the interface, materiality, and embodiment compliments a Science and Technology Studies approach to seeing tech and media in and of a larger world. STS (the same which Peters cites as a balm for the technological determinism backlash) bridges both new media studies and posthumanism, as the new media theorist wrestled with above and others all emphasize (to varying degrees) media technologies as within a spectrum of co-extension and codependence with human and nonhuman life and ecologies. From the nonhuman sensibilities of computer-based technologies (Hansen, Thacker) to the co-extension of human and technology (McLuhan, Hayles) and the ecological impacts and sensibilities of media (Starling Gould, Peters), these material approaches to media technologies incorporate the interdisciplinarity and exploratory nature of early media studies.

From Benjamin's anxieties around authenticity and McLuhan's human and technological agency, the problems and questions of media studies persist. They now have gravitated towards functional and material questions of what technology and mediation do and what impact they have on the human and non-human world, in a vastly embodied, material, and ecological sense of being and world. In other words, what new media studies allow us to do in a broad sense is to understand the performances and impacts of technologically (namely digitally) mediated experiences of the world, whether these experiences be strictly anthropocentric or not, sensible by humans or not, impacting humans or not. A new theory for media is material, embodied, and ecological.

From New Media to Religion (Ritual)

The concept of new media is but one of *two* parts for a posthuman method to study digital practices in America around death and mourning. It also requires a corresponding understanding

of *religion*. As with the definition of new media, the aim is to create an understanding that is *useful* for the ritualizations of death at hand in the subsequent case studies, and one that picks up on and interacts with the concepts and theories around it. So, when constructing a definition or concept of religion that corresponds with new media in a way that is useful, I propose following the turn to things like materiality, embodiment, and the interface to locate an idea of religion that is useful. “Ritual,” as a term for analysis, does just this.

Ritual studies relies on the material and performative aspects of religion. As with the turn to specifics in a new theory of media, this attention to specifics in ritual is part of considerable resistance to a thought/action dichotomy (the residuals of a Cartesian dualism/humanism).[138]And like the new theories of media, ritual theories largely turn to function, impact, and performance as points for analysis. Ritual theorist Ronald L. Grimes charts the constellation of ritual study’s concerns as Space, Time, Sound, Identity and Action.[139] These are some of the material objects for ritual studies, its “realm”, what it accounts for when looking at religious or ritual action. As with the term “image,” “ritual” slips away, replaced by more material fields for investigation.

And like with new media, defining ritual requires understanding the field from which it emerged, so I offer a sense of ritual studies relating to new media studies, where the following case study chapters further activate these ritual theories in the specifics of their analysis. This sense of ritual studies begins with its emergence (like media studies) as an interdisciplinary and nascent subfield, marking its founding figures, blurry boundaries, and (for our purposes) its attention to the body. I then turn to what ritual studies attends to as its own rubrics or heuristics –

[138] Catherine M. Bell 1953, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 21.
[139] Ronald L. Grimes 1943, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*,(Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 25-38.

doing and being, place and difference, human and non-human – to establish a definition of ritual that suits understanding digital religious death practices in America today.

Ronald Grimes tells us that "[t]o theorize is to look at something in a special way, one that achieves its perspective by distancing or by probing beneath the surface. Well executed, either theoretical tactic should enable scholars to notice previously unnoticed dimensions of their objects of study."[140] For theorizing ritual, I'll take two steps back in order to create some distance – one step to look at the state of ritual studies and theory as an academic pursuit, and the second step to look at what remains for a definition of ritual within the context of American digital religion. The first echoes a similar step back taken above for new media, to gain perspective on the field, where it came from, its concerns and questions, and its aims. The second step back places particular aspects of the ritual theory into the context of *this* project's pursuits and aims – to understand digital religious practice around death in America, by selecting aspects of ritual studies to arrive at a definition of ritualization as a technology that transforms individuals from one cultural state into another and re-orients material embodiments of being through formalized action and agency through attention to these cultural states, both human and nonhuman.

Ritual studies (again, like media studies) is itself a relatively new specialized sub-field, with roots in the beginnings of anthropology and sociology. Iconic names like Durkheim and Freud were both interested in ritual, but with the *Journal of Ritual Studies* only forming in 1987, the canonization of these icons within a set of theories and methods called "ritual studies" is relatively recent. Reasons for this recent emergence are many-fold, including the Protestant bias

[140] Ronald L. Grimes, "Performance," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jan Snoek, Jens Kreinath, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006),79.

in scholarship for thought over action, belief over practice, doxy over praxy, and the sense that action and ritual were, in fact, the opposite of "theory."[141]

More positively, the elevation of ritual to the realm of acceptable theory came alongside the rise of media theory in the 1960s as the turn to cultural studies took more seriously ideas of performance and materiality. [142] Ritual studies here aligns with the rise with other academic movements at the time (like posthumanism) working to resist these dichotomies, and instead turn to specifics of function and encounter. The persistence of these theoretical orientations, along with the recent blossoming of ritual theory, keep attention on the blurred lines between formal and informal religious or ritualistic behavior, what Catherine Bell calls activities that are "particularly ubiquitous and fluid." [143] For Bell, such acts are the simplified evocation of more elaborate ritual patterns in the culture: "such rites hover on the blurry boundary between formal religion and informal domesticity."[144] Ritual studies now attends to these blurry boundaries, the formal and the domestic, the unique and the ubiquitous.

Objects dotting both sides of these blurry boundaries make up the "field" for ritual concern highlighted above: Space, Time, Sound, Identity, and Action - what Grimes suggests we question and examine about the structure and construction of ritual action. One constellation of these active space/time objects of identity and sound is the human body, of great importance to rituals studies from its beginnings. From early anthropologies of ritual like Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, the form and performance of the body in relation to other bodies and

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[141] Kreinath, Snoek, and Stausberg. xv; Graham Harvey, *Ritual and Religious Belief: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005),3.
[142] Catherine Bell, "Performance," in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[143] Catherine Bell, "Embodiment," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 541.
[144] Ibid.

objects (human and non-human, alive and dead) has been central to understanding the layout and function of rituals.

Bell points out two basic orientations to the body in ritual studies: a specific, constructivist approach or a recursive, reflexive, performative approach. The first (specific/constructivist) asks either: *how the ritual shapes the body* or *how the body shapes ritual.* Each, Bell points out, is unilateral in its approach and limited its reflexive analysis. These limitations give rise to a "more complex theory of social constructionism- one in which there is no unconstructed priority granted to either the ritual or the body. This stance is apt to be called a discursive or performative approach."[145] This unconstructed approach to ritual and the body allows for a reflexive approach, one in which neither the body nor the ritual is a stationary object of study, but both are subject to constant fluid (re)formation. This approach is crucial to understand the body as itself a process of the interface.

A Theory of Ritual

Combining the blurring of lines between the formal and the everyday and a recursive role of the body and ritual in formations of each other, a few things can be said about ritual towards a functional definition for our purposes: ritual is about both *doing* and *being;* ritual is about *place*; ritual agency is *not necessarily human*; ritual is of the *everyday*; and ritual is a *technology* of *transformation*. Each of these nodes reaffirm the definition that *ritualization is a technology that transforms individuals from one cultural state into another and re-orients material embodiments of being through formalized action and agency through attention to these cultural*

[145] Ibid., 539.

states, both human and nonhuman, and what follows is a quick sketch of the ritual theory origin of each of these projections.[146]

Overarching all of these proceedings is a key distinction between two of the most dominant theorists of ritual: Jonathan Z. Smith and Catherine Bell. The key distinction is between what they each mean by "ritual" and "ritualization," respectively. As noted above, Bell opposes a hard structuralist approach to ritual. "Ritual," as a term for Bell, is too static, too set apart itself, too, perhaps, structural. Thinking with "ritualization" rather than "ritual" turns away from structures and towards processes, where, as Bell puts it: "acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialized body and the environment it structures."[147] Theorizing ritual in and as a social process is not unique to Bell – from Durkheim to van Gennep to Turner to Geertz there has always been an emphasis in ritual theory on the social roles that rituals play in building and maintaining communities. But Bell desires to move beyond the sphere of ritual -as-societal-tool to seeing ritual as itself social action. In other words, Bell wants to move away from seeing ritual as *instrumental* to community maintenance and towards understanding ritual as a human behavior outside of structural terms. As Bell states:

> In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities. As such, ritualization is a matter of various culturally specific strategies for setting some activities off from others, for creating and privileging a qualitative distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'profane,' and for ascribing such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.[148]

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[146] Again, the following case-study chapter will take further labors to play out these connections in context, here I only flag them up towards a working definition of ritual.
[147] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*,8.
[148] Ibid., 73.

Here, Bell is not without the influence of Smith's structuralism. These "strategies" and "qualitative distinctions" are what Smith calls setting things apart. Placemaking is central to ritualization's setting things apart and calling for a certain type of attention. Smith writes: "[r]itual is, above all, an assertion of difference."[149] This "difference," he goes on to explain, marks ritual as a mode of comparison, a moment for incongruity, and a means of relation.[150] Comparison, incongruity, and relation make and resolve difference: in setting something apart, ritualization forces contemplation by creating stark contrasts and binaries, "ins" and "outs," qualifications of status, privilege, and relation. Smith writes, "Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention."[151] Asserting difference is paying attention to these comparisons, incongruities, and relations, so ritualization is primarily about *both* an assertion of difference *and* a mode of paying attention, taking asserting difference as a particular mode of paying attention. So, in my own use of "ritualization," I include Smith formal influence on Bell – as Smith classifies ritual as a "mode" or an "assertion" or a "means," I allow him into a kind of procedural or processual thinking that Bell would admit has a kind of reflexivity or recursive quality, perhaps outside a hard formal or structuralism.

Ritual is about both *doing* and *being*. Roy Rappaport notes that "ritual expresses individual status within a structural system" – it is an action (in that it is an expression) of a way of being (in that it is about status). [152] Victor Turner's structuralizing of ritual involves three movements and two states of being. The first movement is removal from society, the second into a removed/ritualized space that mirrors societal structures, the third a return to society. The two

[149] Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual,*(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).109.
[150] Ibid., 110.
[151] Ibid., 103. With his sense of humor, ritual is both "above all" and "first and foremost" two different things
[152] Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, (Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52.

states are of *liminality* and *communitas,* both found in the second stage. Turner (in a form adapted from Arnold Van Gennep) illustrates the interrelation of action and being (combining as transformation) in and through the kinds of expressions of social status Rappaport discusses.[153] These primary orientations towards ritual reveal a dual-core – that is, ritual is not *primarily* about action *or* being but about *both*, and this interrelation plays out through ritual's transformative function, tackled below in more detail.

Ritual is about *place*. Jonathan Z. Smith is most clear on this point when he says that sacred spaces are focusing points. For Smith, a sacred space is created as such when "nothing is accidental" when a place is so intentionally constructed for one purpose that everything within that space becomes identifiable and singular. Here ritual is primarily about setting things apart. This is not just a spatial metaphor: there is a particular and set-apart *place*.[154] Richard Schechner, in his performative and staged approaches to ritual theory, recognizes the importance of not only particular place but *placing*. Placing, for Schechner, is the act of putting objects and bodies and things in certain ways in relation to each other as an act of ritualization.[155] Like Smith, Schechner emphasizes place and relation place, the interrelation of subjects and objects in place-making. Both Smith and Schechner articulate the specifics of place as part of ritual act – both a particular place and the act of placing in particular. Ritual is about putting things in their place and the actions and identities that become of them.

Ritual agency *is not necessarily human*. William S. Sax forwards Science and Technology and Actor-Network theories as examples of making decisions between ritual actors

[153] Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 96; Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.
[154] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion : From Babylon to Jonestown*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 54; Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual*, 109.
[155] Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 13.

and agents where “ritual actors (like social actors generally) are particular, conscious, embodied, and intentional beings, while ritual agents (like social agents generally) may be non-human or human, complex or individual. Actions are performed by particular social actors, whereas agency is distributed in networks.”[156] Sax points to anthropology’s long history of recognizing non-human agency in ritual, “..of ancestors, spirits, gods, winds, and so forth” along with “recent discussions of the agency of non-human primates, machines, technologies, and signs” as a reason to take seriously the non-human agency in ritual.[157] Citing both ethnographic and anthropological accounts of ritual and theories of agency, Sax affirms the non-human agency of rituals as not a “trend” or development in theory, but a standing conceit of ritual agency and action, one which entangles place, being, and action.

Ritual is in and of the *everyday*. Catherine Bell makes this clear through perhaps her most significant move: the switch from discussing “ritual” to discussing “ritualization,” to “draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves from other actions.”[158] Bell is careful to point out here that it is the *act* of ritualization that makes these distinctions within and through the raw material of the everyday – that ritual action in and of itself is not separate from the everyday, but rather is itself the separating action. In other words, ritualization take material from the everyday and sets them apart as special. Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw similarly make this point in their ethnography of Jain rituals, that ritual is not altogether separate from the everyday, but attributable to the very things that make it up.[159] For

[156] William S. Sax, “Agency,” in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 477.
[157] Ibid., 478-9.
[158] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 74.
[159] Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw, *The Archetypal Actions of Ritual: A Theory of Ritual Illustrated by the Jain Rite of Worship*, Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1994).

Bell, Humphrey, and Laidlaw, ritual is of the everyday both in a structural way (because it is made up of the very ordinary-cum-extraordinary) and social way (as they are transformative social actions that persist outside ritual place). Ritualization is a process that turns the ordinary into the extraordinary for the purposes of transformation – it takes everyday objects, like plants, animals, machines, and food and transforms them (in a specific time and a specific place) into extraordinary things.

Ritual is a *technology* of transformation. If ritual is an action taking place through not necessarily human agency through the everyday, it must be functioning through that every day to create some sort of change, and its acting on bodies and objects makes it, therefore, a technology of this transformation. Bruce Kapferer tells us that ritual is a "technology (*techne*) for bringing-forth, or *poesies.*"[160] Eric W. Rothenbuhler points to ritual as a synthesizing mechanism in its form, where "...there must be about it some properties attributable to idea (meanings, emotions, elements of internal experience) put in material form (written, spoken, recorded, externalized) by some individual (an action taken, by someone, for a purpose) in order to be understandable by others (with a syntax, semantics, and pragmatics we can share, according to the sign system common to the group."[161] Kapferer goes on to note that this technique is about making things as they currently are not, into something they are not yet but could be – a transformation.

Ritual is a technology of *transformation*. Turner, Van Gennep, Schechner, Bell, and Rappaport all acknowledge "efficacy" as central to the ritualization of peoples, places, and things – that is, the efficacy of a ritual to effect change, to transform. In other words, rituals *function*.

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[160] Bruce Kapferer, "Virtuality," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006) ,672.
[161] Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998), xii.

Rituals function to transform their objects and subjects through action: to change social and cultural status, to move from one state of being into the other. Richard Schechner outlines these transformations, from what he calls "actuality 1" to "actuality 2" – from a pre-ritual(1) to a post-ritual(2) state and like Turner's liminal state of transformation, the ritual is the medium for these transformations. [162] Turner and Van Gennep both point to coming-of-age rituals as emblematic of the transformation from adolescent to adult, where Schechner looks to contestation rituals where two warring groups reconcile into one through ritualized acts of war. J.Z. Smith notes that rituals are primarily about a certain type of transformation, "an assertion of difference," the setting of things apart, the transformation of the everyday into something else (no *longer* the everyday) through ritualization, whether this difference be internal to the ritual objects (that is, they are differentiated *as* ritual objects) or the transformation (or the making different) as highlighted in Turner and Van Gennep that persists outside the ritual place and action.[163]

Ritualization is a technology that transforms individuals from one cultural state into another and re-orients material embodiments of being through formalized action and agency through attention to these cultural states, both human and nonhuman. This definition for ritualization arrives from all of the above to offer a functional definition of ritualization as a process, a transformation of material forms through formal action, dependent upon place and action, made up of the everyday (including the non-human) and then acting as a technology of transformation. Both Freud and Durkheim would be satisfied, as in truth, the parameters of this definition don't stray far from their own functional definitions, but instead open them up to a bit more specificity through the inclusion of ritual theory developments and an eye for the task at

[162] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 2003, 118.
[163] Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual*, 109.

hand. Seeing ritual as a technology or a techne or a process forwards it primarily as a function and a formatting. As such, this formatting, or way of doing or being can be *re-formatted*, *re-functioned,* and re-applied to form fit new circumstances. Ritual is no one thing, it is a process of becoming one thing from another. It is a contingent, embodied, and performative mode.

From Durkheim and Freud through Van Gennep and Turner to Rappaport, Schechner, and Bell, ritualization, identified as a technology, strives to transform the everyday into something *else* and imagines something *else*, where this transformation must be idealized before being acted on. This definition of ritualization hints at one more concept of transformation, from the declarative to the imperative, to what is to what could be, from the present to the possible. This is what Rothenbuhler articulates when he calls ritual a combination of the material and the ideal, the communication of a transformation into a previously imagined state.[164] Tom F. Driver labels this as the switch from the imperative to the declarative, from an ideal (imperative) to a state of being (declarative).[165] Picking up on the language of Deleuze and Guattari, Bruce Kapferer describes ritual as a "virtual reality machine…as a kind of scaffolding erected at particular moments and sites...shaped according to the type of interruption and intervention into human actuality that it intends."[166] J. Z. Smith too contends that ritual is about performing things the way they ought to be in conscious tension with the way they are.[167] All of this adds up to ritualization as being a technology of the possible – a means of striving, making towards, and transforming into imagined or currently unattainable states of being. Not unlike what is new about new media, ritualization helps us move towards the unknowable.

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[164] Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication*.xii.
[165] Ronald L. Grimes, ed., *Readings in Ritual Studies* (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1996), 173.
[166] Kapferer, "Virtuality.",676.
[167] Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual*, 109.

Concepts for New Media and Ritual: Desiring Towards a Pattern

Media and Ritual theories are not strangers to each other. Besides their co-emergence as cobbled together sub-disciplines in the mid-twentieth century, ritual and media studies have both been exploited within religious studies scholarship to explain both media and ritualization, at times working at cross purposes to assign essential qualities of one concept to the other. Ronald L. Grimes' 2006 *Rite Out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts* offers a refreshing and necessary step back from this co-habitation of ritual and media theories to assess the utility of each in trying to understand the other.[168] Grimes warns that "[t]he equating strategy (media = ritual) has limited utility…If the two terms are not differentiated as well as connected, conversation between ritual studies and media studies is hardly worth pursuing."[169] Instead, he suggests that "[m]eaningful ritual-and-media discussion becomes possible when the two domains are neither equated nor segregated but rather differentiated and conceived as sharing a common boundary."[170]

Towards a conclusion to these two functional definitions for (new) media and ritual and in offering some context for the following case studies, I would like to suggest three shared boundaries between ritual and new media: Embodiment, Interface, and Performance. I aim here only to point out places either traversed above and upcoming below at the intersections of ritual and media rather than fully chart each intersection, where the following chapters will then fully activate these boundaries. See these three shared concepts as condensations of the above, rather than new ventures – more a streamlining for travel than a finalizing.

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[168] Ronald L. Grimes, *Rite out of Place* (Oxford University Press, 2006)
[169] Ibid., 10.
[170] Ibid., 12.

Embodiment (Material, Ecological)

Ritual and new media are both embodied: they require bodies, and they embody. While Katherine Hayles points to early new media theory as reinforcing a Cartesian mind-body divide, with "information" (or data) images as disembodied and disembodying, we have seen above how new theories for new media push back against this very divide. Hansen argues that even the *concept* of new media requires the body as the mediator, and Galloway and Thacker both look to the materiality of the body as a place to locate our thinking and anxieties about what is "new" about new media. These anxieties around bodily integrity and agency persist from McLuhan and Benjamin's fears in the face of new media technologies. Bernadette Wegenstein, writing on the body for Mitchell and Hansen's *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, confirms "Marshall McLuhan's prophetic insight into the dual function of mesa – at once extension of the body and amputation…", as both the functional extension of the body as a place of mediation and the fear of disembodiment at the hands of new media "information."[171] From formative theories of media to new media studies, the body and bodily anxiety remain all too present.

Bell points to the body as particularly critical to ritual studies, where the materiality of the ritual space/place/objects is central to Smith and where Turner notes that the "whole person" is affected by ritual.[172] Freud and Durkheim agree that ritual has something to do with embodied and bodily formations. What and how that formation works, Bell points out, has since taken on one of three theoretical orientations: the constructionist orientation argues that ritual shapes the body, and "makes the body the object of social action, the recipient of social molding, it invokes

[171] Bernadette Wegenstein, "Body," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 2010). 21.
[172] Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 43.

embodiment in its passive sense."[173] The second orientation is a simple solution to this, asking instead how the body shapes ritual. Bell finds both lacking, in that they both prioritize an assumed constructed entity (wither the body or the ritual) and do not recognize the co-formation of each. This is what Bell offers as a "performative" third orientation, where the body and the ritual are *both* recursive, reflexive, and co-forming. For ritual theory, embodiment is central to understanding not only what ritual does, but how.

Performance

Embodiment requires performativity in both new media and ritual. In new media, performance is mediation-as-cooperation of bodies and machines. Galloway charts playing with new media as a co-operation between human bodies and machines: "[t]he work itself is material action. One plays a game. And the software runs. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move".[174] Playing video games and other new mediations are *performances* of mediation as much as anything else – performances of a co-operation of embodiments and materialities. If we take what is "new" about new media to be its potential for re-imagining mediation and its co-extension with embodiments, then these co-operative performances take seriously McLuhan's early claims that media technologies are both extensions and erasures of the human body – performances of posthuman embodiments. If new media is embodied media, new media then is performative media.

Ritual and performance share genealogies, from Freud and Durkheim's assertions that rituals are expressions and performances of individual and communal anxieties and desires, to

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[173] Catherine Bell, "Embodiment," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006).538.
[174] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*, Book, Whole (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 2.

Schechner (and later Victor Turner's) explicit turn to theorizing performance and ritual synthetically.[175] Performativity forms embodiment in ritual, and ritualization transforms embodiments where performative agency is not necessarily human and therefore neither are the embodiments. Further, Grimes points to "performativity" as the "general human predilection to enact meanings in the presence of others" citing the likes of Judith Butler and others as bringing the concept of performance out from the purely theatrical into the everyday performances of meaning and identity, the everyday places out of which ritual is built, where ritual interfaces between possible worlds and lived worlds.[176]

So, if as Diana Taylor suggests, we are to think of performance as concerning an always mediated and embodied action taking place within a recognizable system of conventions that establishes an argument about the world through its repetition, these arguments are world-building activities, specifically within the context of digital mediations of death as the system of conventions. This world is being built using the embodied mediations of new media about a posthuman sense of being as made possible through the interface.

Interface

Rituals mediate between the world as it could be and the world as it is (what Clifford Geertz calls an "ethos" and a "worldview") by using material and immanent technologies of practice, performance, and embodiment to express or describe (and create the possibility for) and idealized or otherwise state of being. Both Bruce Kapferer and Eric Walter Rothenbluther (in discussing the virtual and communication, respectively) see ritualization as this technology of

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[175] Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

[176] Ronald L. Grimes, "Performance," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jan Snoek, Jens Kreinath, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 391.

mediation, this interfacing, between the ideal and the material, or the possible and the actual. Kapferer describes ritualization as a kind of "virtual reality machine" erected at certain times and places to reform or reformat social relations. This picking up on ritual as a kind of techne in itself (along with the colorful and helpful language) furthers ritual as a kind of interface.[177] Rothenbuhler similarly sees ritual as a form of communication (the meaningful relation of information) that synthesizes "the ideal and the material."[178] By being that point where a false dichotomy of thought and action collapse in processes of performance and embodiment, ritualization becomes a mediating action, itself the interfacing between both that which could be and that which is and the processes by which those things are negotiated: concepts, materials, actions, ideals. Ritual interfaces between places like the possible world and a realized one, the sacred and the profane, the living and the dead.

Galloway so much as describes rituals when he defines interfaces as "not things, but rather processes that effect a result of whatever kind."[179] Interfaces are technologies themselves: interactive, performative, and transformative processes. Beginning with Kittler, media "form the infrastructural basis, the quasi-transcendental condition, for experience and understanding," and interfaces are neither neutral nor transparent, rather actively shaping modes of being and perception, as McLuhan insisted.[180] By foregrounding materiality, performance, and embodiment as places to locate the "new" of "new media," these theories and theorists require rethinking the interface. Galloway goes so far as to say the computer can no longer be thought of as an object but rather a "…practice, in that it introduces a structure of action, a recipe for moving

[177] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 21.
[178] Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication.*, xii.
[179] Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, vii.
[180] Mitchell and Hansen, *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, vii.

procedurally through a certain state of affairs."[181] Like ritual theory, new media turns to interfaces as processes and technologies rather than things, as processes and technologies shaping ways of being and knowing, intentional prescriptions for being and living.

Conclusions: Posthumanism, New Media, Ritual Theories

The first chapter illustrated how a posthuman epistemology emerges out of shared ethical and ontological concerns about the occlusions of humanism and emphases on material ways of knowing towards a methodology for understanding digital religious action accounting for human and non-human agency in a matrix of embodied practices. It posited that even defining posthumanism in relation to humanism is a paradoxical endeavor, with posthumanism working on describing human being while at the same time emphasizing non-human being. Through this paradox, anti-humanism and material feminism take ethical stances to emphasize the oversights and violence of humanisms, where Science and Technology studies and Cybernetics offer alternative ontological orientations to human and non-human interaction as a way of facilitating these ethical imperatives. In all of this, posthumanism comes to take on its own epistemological and methodological claims for digital religion: an emphasis on co-emergent subjectivities, interactive agencies (human and non) and reflexive materiality.

This chapter picks up this same heuristic endeavor, one built on experimentation and reflexivity, and finds them again, with specificity, in the history of the study of both media and ritual. New media and ritual are both concerned with embodiment, performance, and interface, and their theorizations help us understand digital religion at both ends – as digital and as religion. They do so by lending their depth of theory to a kind of posthuman epistemology for

[181] Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 120.

understanding how new media technologies function within performances of religious thinking and (particularly) doing. Like with a theory of the posthuman, identifying to what new media and ritual theory attend reveals their shared functions. As a mode of inquiry, ritual theory makes sense of what is "new" about "new media" through their shared boundaries of embodiment, performance, and interface.

I have selected two studies that pull on the edges of what could be considered digital religion – an eco burial with digital elements and video gaming practices. These case studies play out both the functional posthumanist epistemology and shared theories of new media and ritual around and through death and mourning. Each incorporates different aspects of the first two chapters and lean heavily on their interpretive explications and vocabularies. Through them, these theories come to themselves be functional rather than theoretical, to reveal more broadly how the study of digital religion benefits from the posthuman perspective.

CHAPTER THREE – Eco-Digital Death and Mourning

Introduction

New media and ritual studies help us understand digital religion as *digital* and as *religion* through a posthuman lens by focusing on function and the formation of posthuman being. The previous two chapters traced a lineage of posthumanism, ritual, and new media thought to construct a justified theoretical approach to new media rituals, especially those around death. This heuristic approach to the creation of these concepts determines their flexibility when applied to case studies: heuristic concepts (posthumanism in this case) are driven by an exploratory epistemology, always adaptable and reflexive. The following case studies picks up that approach to investigate a case of intermingled plant, human, and digital materiality in the "Incube," an urn-cum-plantar representative of the growing digital and green burial movements. This chapter turns to the Incube as exemplary of digital religion's imbrication in networks of cultural moments, including the role of the body in modern and postmodern funerary rites, the natural burial movement, ideas of place and placeless-ness in burial and memorialization, trends in digital memorialization and uses ritual analysis of the Incube as an example of digital, posthuman religious practice surrounding ideas of place, domestication, and performance through ecological, intensifying, and interfacing aspects of posthumanism.

As the green burial movement offers alternatives for thinking about the place of the human corpse in the circulation of life and death on an ecologically precarious planet, the Incube offers alternatives for thinking through funerary rites. With its explicit use of a digital interface in concert with human and plant materialities, the Incube offers religious studies and digital religion an example of digital religious practice that moves beyond solely the screen in its interfacing and towards understanding digital religious practice as material, networked, and

performative by illustrating ritualizations of the posthuman within digital religious practices. This chapter explores how the Incube as an object locates posthuman bodies as performed interactions between biological and technological ecosystems.[182] Pulling together the formation of posthumanism arrived from STS and material feminism and the new media and ritual theories of the previous chapters, here we set our sights on an object in context.

Glossy. Plastic. Filled with dirt. And human remains. This is the Bios Incube, a planter housing tree sapling and human cremains monitored for its need for light, water, or temperature change via a smartphone application. [183] The Incube consists of a sensor-rich monitoring device that reaches into the soil and interfaces with a smartphone application to analyze soil and environmental conditions and prompt the user to make accommodations for the health of the tree.[184] The digital network creates a unique ecosystem of grieving and memorialization where the Incube links mourning rituals and human materiality into a digital, posthuman, religious practice.

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[182] I use the word ecosystem here to expand a sense of what we can think of as the so-called digital, moving beyond a screen centric approach, to think of an interface as something that encapsulates all the materiality it accounts for, expresses, and mediates.

[183] https://urnabios.com/support/faq/; The base model Incube costs four hundred and fifty USD and the advanced model five hundred and fifty USD Created in 2016, by design team Gerard and Roger Moliné, the Incube is the digital appendage to the Bios Urn-- a biodegradable urn that nourishes a tree seedling.

[184] The Bios Incube emerged through marketing and funding built around an internet culture. It was crowdsourced --funded by small donations made by the public. These donations are tiered at different levels of investment, with increasing access and reward as the tiers increase. Through platforms like Go Fund Me and Kickstarter, crowdsourcing (or crowdfunding) is particular to younger and more tech-literate communities. They promote a sense of communal support, of transparency, and sense of intimacy between producer and consumer. The digital infrastructures of crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter, sites which (while made to benefit the underfunded) survive through benefiting large founders and firms.

Fig. 1 *The BiosUrn inserted into the Incube, the Incube, sensor, and application (Biosincube.com)*

The Incube is part of larger natural burial movements growing in the UK and US since the 1980s.[185] In the face of ecological crises, natural (or "green") burial techniques make human death more ecologically responsible through biodegradable caskets, chemical-free embalming, and non-landscaped burial grounds. These low impact burials avoid the use of invasive memorial markers (headstones, vaults) – objects that typically give place to and name the dead.[186] These burials are in one way place-less in that they give little or no formal indication that there has been a burial at all, that there is a body present, and that this is a place of and for mourning. Foregoing such demarcation means natural burial sites often give no marked presence to human remains, and this can leave no place to mourn and memorialize the dead, and - in the case of sea scatterings or other materially dispersed disposal methods- no place at all. [187] Such placeless burials can cause difficulty for mourners needing a place or means to ritualize the dead. Without a place to mark the dead, or with that place inaccessible (such as at the bottom of the sea), there

[185] Andy Clayden et al., *Natural Burial: Landscape, Practice and Experience*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2014) , 18; J. Hockey, C. Komaromy, and K. Woodthorpe, eds., *The Matter of Death: Space, Place and Materiality*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 148.
[186] Jenny Hockey et al., "Landscapes of the Dead? Natural Burial and the Materialization of Absence," *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 2 (2012): 115–32.
[187] Like sky and sea burials

is nowhere to conduct memorialization rituals, from the most elaborate funerary rites to the simpler placing of tokens of remembrance.

Planting trees is a non-invasive way to mark the place of the dead.[188] In the US and UK, planting a tree as a memorial marker (either at the place of the burial or another location) is a practice that gives place to green burial in a non-invasive way. The Incube adapts and extends practices of placing trees as memorial markers by bringing the tree into the household and bringing the human cremains closer to the mourning bodies. [189] The digital interface extends this ability to make place by providing users with sensory feedback from the plant through the sensors via the application. By bringing data about the tree and the soil/cremains mixture together and interfacing that data with the mourner through the application, the Incube distributes the location of mourning across plant life and digital technology. The Incube's 'place' of mourning and memorialization is accessible by being in the home marked by a tree, and through the mobile application: the physical state of the memorial can be monitored from afar. Unlike non-digital urns or planters, one could know about the Incube's current internal temperature and need for water while at a great distance from the object itself. This distributed sense of place makes the Incube an explicit part of a posthuman digital network of death and memorialization by effectively extending the limits (both material and conceptual) of what is human (both living and dead) through plant and digital material across boundaries of death and life towards posthuman modes of interaction, in that they are contingent upon seeing human being as contingent. [190]

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[188] Clayden et al., *Natural Burial*, 73.
[189] And its predecessor the bios urn, a biodegradable urn meant to house a tree sapling and planted in the earth.
[190] I use "digital material" to call back a previously argued for concept of the digital as material in that it requires interactions between human beings and material objects from the micro (coding/processor chips) to the macro

Digital interfaces network cremains with plant and human life, a network where the bodies of mourners interact with now life-sustaining cremains through a smartphone. The Incube models a posthuman network that gives place for mourning green burial through the tree, the planter, and the digital application. Further, the Incube gives place within religious studies for understanding posthuman embodiment as ecologically, technologically, and biologically contingent by placing dead human materiality back into circulation with plant and human life through digital interventions. Just as STS can help us draw out these connections, the Incube can perform them. These digital interventions visualize and organize relationships between plant and human and tech, living and dead through robust interactions: the tree and the cremains interact on a cellular level, that interaction is visualized, and in turn, interacted with through the digital application.

Human death creates a particular type of posthuman body – the type of "post" humanism embodied *only* through death, that is, being dead as being post-human. While this could be a tired bit of wordplay, I instead hope to reflect kaleidoscopic conceptions of the posthuman as pried at in previous chapters. Posthumanism engages multiple possible relations between bodies human and non-human, the kind of reformations and reengagements that feminist posthumanists like Braidotti and Hayles see as crucial to locating human ontology as interdependent with, and therefore answering to, ecologies both biological and technological. Posthumanism, in turn, sees human bodies as nodes in ecological and technological networks, one of many nodes making up the human condition. Dead human bodies offer a look at what it means to be posthuman while post-life, an opportunity for thinking the posthuman at a moment (material and social) when the

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(seeing the BiosUrn and its ritualizations *as* a digital artifact, *as* the so-called digital) -- there is no "digital" without these material groundings and interactions.

human body *must* be reconciled with as material and resolved in relation to other material conditions. The moment of death and ritualized internment processes offer this opportunity. This chapter works through entanglements of bodies living and dead at this moment (and the possibilities of the Incube in particular) to theorize ecological, economic, and mediating places of the posthuman body within digital funerary practice.

Death: Rupture, Entanglement, Ritual

The human corpse is an intersection of both rupture and resolution. As Kathleen Garces-Foley puts it: "Death sets in motion a flurry of activity surrounding the body of the deceased as well as the social body. Something must be done with the physical body if for no other reason than that its presence will soon become unbearable. Something must be done about the people who are mourning. Something must be done about the dead person's stuff." [191] Human death creates biological, emotional, and communal crises – material decays, relationships rupture and reform, mourning, and grieving processes emerge and unfold. Death is both a physiological, material moment – a sudden arrival from life into its absence – and a material and social process negotiated through funerary and mourning practices.

Ritual studies attend to such structuring of human behavior and its negotiations – the types of negotiations that surround death and engages such entanglements of bodies, space, and technologies along with larger social regulations (governmental, religious, and otherwise) as placemaking for placeless natural burial demands a theoretical tool for understanding how these materialities constellate and organize around death. From Van Gennep on, ritual theory has attended to how performance and transactions are regulated, managed, and attended to within

[191] Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion in a Changing World,* (Princeton, N.J.: Routledge, 2005).,.ix.

liminal spaces of passage – from child to adult, single to married, alive to dead. Following J.Z. Smith and Catherine Bell's conceptualization of ritual as a process of behaviors rather than a static state, this chapter sees funerary practices around the digital media like the Incube as moving towards posthuman embodiments and subjectivities.

Ritual, as Catherine Bell notes, "…has simultaneously become an object, a method, and even something of a style of scholarship on the American academic scene."[192] Ritual is a method, a mode of charting relations between subjects and objects in action and interaction, and through her own examination of ritual, Bell works towards "uncovering strategies by which ritualized activities do what they do."[193] The aims throughout this work are not dissimilar –to understand how certain digital interventions into funerary rituals reshape how rituals "do what they do" and how these transformations are posthuman. Such points of transition from life to death, as Smith says, are focusing points of and for activity, where "nothing is accidental."[194] It is this focus on intentional actions that frame relations of bodies human, plant, and technological, that ritual studies helps unfold here. Part of this turn to ritual as a mode of analysis includes the deployment of "ritualization" over "ritual" as the conceptual word of choice.[195] Briefly, Bell describes ritualization as "…that way of acting that sets itself off from other ways of acting by virtue of the way in which it does what it does. Even more circularly, it can be described as the strategic production of expedient schemes that structure an environment in such a way that the environment appears to be the source of the schemes and their values…"[196] In other words,

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[192] Catherine M. Bell 1953, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Book, Whole (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3.
[193] Ibid.,4.
[194] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, Book, Whole (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) , 54.
[195] For a concise history of the term, see Bell *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. 88-9.
[196] Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*,140.

ritualization is a mode of action, in particular the act of relating to differentiated subject and objects, an act that sets itself apart by way of its mode of action, by calling particular attention to itself as an intentional action.

My work as a whole invests in ritualization as a mode of mediation – as mediating human and posthuman bodies and subjects. As Bell notes:

> Despite many popular preconceptions and a number of anthropological models of ritual, ritual is not primarily a matter of unchanging tradition. On the contrary, some analysts now see ritual as a particularly effective means of mediating tradition and change, that is, as a medium for appropriating some changes while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity. It is necessary to remember, however, that if ritual plays such a role, it does not do it as some type of external mechanism that acts on a culture from the outside. Ritual can play such a role only from within the system, that is, as a component of the system that is defined and deployed in ways that interlock with how tradition and change are viewed.[197]

In this sense, ritualization acts as mediation *within* culturally recognized systems of symbols and relations. Part of what is so attractive about ritual studies for the present posthuman approach is this attention to material and cultural entanglements in the structuring, production, and mediation of subject and object distinctions and positions. Ritual theory is useful for understanding how posthuman positions can be created through digital religious ritualizations. Understanding digital mediations *as* ritualization and the structures and relations that come with them, human bodies (living and dead) become calculable as data points to relate to each other through apparatuses like the Incube and allow for new capacities for understanding material relations within these ritual structures. Before turning to a discussion of the place of digital mediation in contemporary funerary practices (and the place of the Incube within these) it is important first to place posthuman funerary practice within a history of the modern and postmodern.

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[197] Catherine M. Bell 1953, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Book, Whole (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 251.

Modern, Postmodern, Posthuman: Economies, Ecologies

Funerary practices reflect, refract, and reject larger cultural shifts, and modes of bodily preparation and burial differentiate peoples and practices.[198] In other words, funerary rites offer a microcosm of religious practice centered around bodily practice. As this project as a whole is particularly invested in understanding technological innovations in the United States, the following sketch of historical epochs is a focused rather than comprehensive one on the major movements of burial practices in the eighteenth to twentieth-century west as context for natural burial and digital memorial practices. I try to attend to the bias of the literature surveyed and the conclusions drawn from them, including the categories of modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity changed the treatment of corpses within funerary practice. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century industrial capitalism brought with it life insurance companies that both abstracted and monetized death, professional funerary associations that brought the aesthetics of modern business practice to death and dying, and made home funerals less acceptable or practical within urban tenement housing.[199] In turn, cemeteries rose as new spaces for the dead, an option outside the churchyard, that were intentional and contrived spaces, set apart as places for families to mourn and memorialize, and became places where class and culture visibly intertwined through variances in memorial marking.[200] The aesthetics of perceived economic success bled into funeral accessories, as companies began producing funerary goods to model comfortable middle-class status. Undertakers then moved on from selling or manufacturing these

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[198] Separate burial grounds can differentiate religious tradition, class, and more. Greeks and Romans buried themselves outside of towns and away from the gods, early Christians buried their dead alongside Jews and pagans until the 4th century, when special dead began being carried into churches (Lacquer 299, 94).
[199] James J. Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920,* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ Press, 1980),10.
[200] Professor Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Illustrated edition (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).282,286,309,312.

goods to selling services, like cremation.[201] Modernity also brought about this techno-scientific process, a mobilization of scientific knowledge, in all its "austere technological modernism."[202] As Farrell notes, the first crematory in the United States opened in 1876, the year in which the Stein Co. displayed its caskets at the World's Fair, and two years before August Renouard issued the first edition of his *Undertaker's Manual.*[203]

Through the spaces of funeral homes and cemeteries and the technologies of embalming and cremation, bodies became units of data to be recorded, registered and eventually, commodified.[204] Each new institution a body passes through needs to account for that body, and bodies then begin to count in different ways – on ledger sheets as fees and charges, as materials used or wasted, as units passing through the door. As data, corpses themselves became mediated by a new professional class of funerary technicians, in a modernity cultivating both scientific and consumer thinking. [205]

The postmodern funeral rejected institutional control of funerary rites present within the modern period. Fueled in some ways by a mid-20th century critique of an exploitive funeral industry, post-modern funerary practices react to both the institutional and medical expertise associated with modern funerals. This mid-century critique was fueled by Jessica Mitford's 1963 expose *The American Way of Death*, which took a hardline against the marketing and entrepreneurial practices of a funeral industry she saw as overindulgent and exploitative.[206] Other literature of the time highlighted a banishing of the old institutions, the relegation of dying to

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[201] Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*,148.
[202] Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, 502.
[203] Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*,164.
[204] Gary 1962 Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883*,(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2.
[205] Ibid.,164;Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion in a Changing World*,211; Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*,1; Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*, 260.
[206] Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963).

hospitals and burial to funeral homes, and an emotional vacuity replaced with ornamental funerals as arguments for the banishment of death or the disappearance of death in American culture.[207]

Of course, different religious traditions adopted a spectrum of responses to these social and political changes. Northern protestantism is often positioned as the norm and the assumed subject of the large swath of literature on death and funerary practices in America, as *The* American Way of Death (the title of Jessica Mitford's influential mid-century critique of the American funeral industry, which focuses almost entirely on middle-class Protestant practice). As James J. Farrell notes, while "…a broad middle class ideology shaped funerary ideas of comfort, prestige, and an ideology of separating men's work from their homes and women's work from men's, an ideology of separation that included life and death…there have been important deviations from the American Way of Death…"[208] While *I* would include these so-called "deviations" as *part* of this "American Way," Farrell's capitalization serves as a critique of its own, making "American Way" an exceptional title.

While majority northern Protestants adapted practices of cemetery burials, cremation, and the commodification and professionalization of a mediated and disembodied death and funeral, many smaller ethnic and southern funerary practices remained either resistant to or unaffected by such shifts. For example, Judaism's focus on the integrity of the body and observation or uninterrupted care over the body made techno-scientific interventions like organ donation, autopsy, and cremation problematic.[209] Muslim law allows for "bid'a" (innovations), but they need to be approved and classified, including things like elaborate tombs or memorials made for

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[207] Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*, 3.
[208] Ibid., 214-218.
[209] Rebecca Golbert, "Judaism and Death: Finding Meaning in Ritual," in *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, by Kathleen Garces-Foley (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2006) ,56.

visitation and ritualized funerary structures forbidden by certain laws.[210] These exceptions, while not necessarily falling outside the narrative of privatization and modernization, must too be considered as part of the American way of death. With this in mind, I turn back to the narrative of the so-called modern/postmodern funerary practices as argued for the death studies literature, not solely because it represents the majority of the literature, but because it too serves as the narrative of a field of study into which this chapter hopes to intervene.

Described as "grassroots" movements, postmodern funerary practices frequently operate outside conventional practices and institutions in their treatment for and care of the dead. The largest amount of momentum involves taking back individual control and visibility of death, in particular the visibility of the corpse.[211] Operating outside modern funerary institutions to create such visibility could mean a home embalming in combination with a natural burial or memorial car decoration or jewel rather than a cemetery plaque. Candi K. Cann's *Virtual Afterlives* catalogs a number of emerging funerary and memorial practices like these that work through new channels of production and distribution, as well as taking place differently around race and class. Postmodern funerals and memorials are a social and personalized set of practices, piecemeal rather than packaged, revolving around and turning back to the body.[212] The postmodern practices of natural burial and digital memorialization share two key characteristics: both reject formal institutions (both religious and commercial) as means of memorializing the dead, and both comprise individual and individualized ritualizations that combine into unique means of mourning and memorializing the dead.

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[210] Juan Eduardo Campo, "Muslim Ways of Death," ed. Kathleen Garces-Foley (New York, N.Y: Routledge, n.d.) ,164.

[211] Candi K. Cann*, Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014).. xii ; Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*., 258.

[212] Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*, 224, 258.

Green burial activist Suzanne Kelly describes the ethic of natural burial as both about reclaiming and securing death care rights (by way of *rites*) that have been seized by modern intuitions, and also about recouping ways of caring for the dead that "bespeak a different way of knowing death, and, ultimately, a different way of knowing nature."[213] Green alternatives include non-chemical embalming practices, biodegradable caskets and urns, natural or wilderness burial grounds, and using human remains to actively promote new ecosystems, like the Bios Incube. Natural burial practices aim to make little impact on current ecosystems in the processing and interring of human remains, emphasizing safety and legality while turning away from environmentally harmful chemical and industrial practices. The natural burial industry has standards organizations that regulate these emerging practices within larger cultural movements of ecological awareness. Natural burial has boomed in the UK, with approximately 250 natural burial sites, compared to 13 in the US.[214] The Green Burial Council (GBC), founded in 2002, certifies products for green burial, measuring their ecological impact (or lack thereof) on a scale of one to three "leaves," the higher the number of leaves, the better the product is for the environment. Led by a board of funeral home directors, cemetery owners, and land managers, the GBC exemplifies the types of structures and practices developing within the commercialization of ecological concerns and burial.[215]

Natural burial is part of a capitalist-cultural turn to "going green." As public awareness of the negative environmental impacts of twentieth-century industrialization on air, soil, and water systems became apparent, civic, and industrial regulations were put in place to slow further

[213] Kelly, *Greening Death*,129. ; "What Is Green Burial? | Green Burial Council," accessed March 12, 2018, https://greenburialcouncil.org/home/what-is-green-burial/.
[214] While an institutionalized sense of natural burial may be new to the twentieth and twenty-first century, human remains have been thought of in an explicitly ecological sense in western though at least since the French revolution.
[215] Hockey, Komaromy, and Woodthorpe, *The Matter of Death*, 148; Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains,* 256.

negative impacts. Over the past two decades or so, western capitalist cultures have in turn seized ecological consciousness as a business model. Capitalist cultures monetized "going green" by opening up a new marketplace of eco-friendly products that could give public relations facelifts to companies struggling under such new regulations. This awareness of an ecological crisis, the introduction of new regulations, and a cultural and popular turn to "going green" made space for natural burial practices and products. The industrial capitalism that contributed to the ecological damage causing the response of "going green" is also the embedded capitalism that incubates emerging burial and mourning products like Bios Incube through crowdfunding sites and online retail. [216] In other words, digital-capitalist architectures support both the conditions that give rise to green and digital burial practices and foster their availability and growth: all alternatives are already imbricated in the consumer economy.

Consumer capitalism drives both the visibility and availability of green burial. Visibility, in that products are funded, advertised, and supported by communities on digital platforms. Availability, because the purchasing of products and services is largely through internet services. So, while green burial works to reverse or slow the effects of global industrial capitalism on the environment, at the same time it survives and thrives through those very global networks. The Incube is largely a symptom of these conditions, with its crowd-funded production, sleek "Apple" styling, and approachable marketing. Acknowledging this, however, does not mean having to exclude the way the Incube is changing means of mourning or dismissing it as a novelty. Corpses intervene into these markets of ecological precarity and are material nodes of human embodiment in death and mourning. Institutionalized funerary practices conflict with

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[216] Douglas Davies and Hannah Rumble*, Natural Burial: Traditional - Secular Spiritualities and Funeral Innovation*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012),59.

ecological and economic crises as they become increasingly harmful and expensive, while natural burial offers an alternative through familiar channels of consumer capitalism and products like the Incube materially link the corpse to ecological and digital technologies.

The Incube is an ecologically oriented product exemplifying how funerary performances are changing under emerging conditions of environmental concern and increasing commodification of such concerns. Entanglements of environmental ethics, techno-capitalist commodification, human death, digital interface, and ritualized place converge in the Incube-as-object. This invites a posthuman analysis to understand formations made possible through the Incube. These objects and ideas are bound together by how they relate to each other through ritual. The way the Incube is acted upon and acted out demonstrates these interdependencies, and the Incube exemplifies ways posthuman bodies facilitate and reorganize relationships of the human as contingent with other lives and materialities. Embodiments and the performances around them are central both to these broader movements and the symptomatic Incube.

Embodiments: Natural, Digital

The body takes a prominent role both in postmodern funerary rites and the rise of death studies in the latter half of the twentieth century.[217] Candi Cann points to the absence or erasure of the body in modern funerary practices as being reversed by the postmodern turn: the body is either replaced with other materiality when making a place to mourn where bodiless memorials lack a sense of presence for mourning.[218] Jennifer Hockey names this absence and erasure within modernity "sequestration" – where corpses (and death itself) are marginalized. As Farrell noted earlier on, the rise of these death studies could be viewed as pornography of death, a further

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[217] Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*, 235- 6.
[218] Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*.133, 141.

distancing through aesthetic glorification.[219] Death scholar Douglas Davis notes that attention to death and the corpse heightens in a globalized, imaged, hyper-mediated worldview.[220]

Death studies argues that corpses have agency in their ability to materially or socially impact the world of the living. As Cann puts it,

> Martyr and saint relics, for example, help bestow sanctification on a place, mapping the power of the corpse onto a geographic location...The political agency of corpses can be seen in the veneration of bodies of the dead (such as Mao in modern China and Evita in Argentina and, most recently, in the burial at sea of the body of Osama bin Laden)...Bodies in the form of corpses are important because they are powerful and can be inscribed, reinscribed, covered, hidden, destroyed, exhumed, and metaphorically resurrected in the world of the living.[221]

The extent of this agency granted to corpses (material, social, or otherwise) varies, but the suggestion that corpses reshape the material world or at least social landscapes is significant for understanding the cremains of the Incube as part of a digital, posthuman network. Giving dead bodies agency expands, like Barad's agential realism and Latour's actor-network theory, what has potential agency while remaining grounded in material interactions so as to not re-create a humanism or anthropocentric sense of agency, one dependent upon rationality and cognition. [222]

These agential bodies destabilize dichotomies between living and dead, human and non, dead and alive. Hockey et al. write "social theory is underpinned by a set of assumptions about embodied agency which often overlook the intersubjective and indeed collective nature of self-identity, not only in life but also in death. For bereaved individuals, for funeral directors, embalmers, coroners solicitors and the clergy, the corpse, the grave, the will, and the empty

[219] Farrell, *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920*,223.
[220] Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief*, 1.
[221] Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, 20-1.
[222]Hockey, Komaromy, and Woodthorpe, *The Matter of Death*., 10-18.

armchair can form powerful evocations of full-bodied if absent persons."[223] These "intersubjective and "collective" constructions of self are dependent on the social agency of corpses as well as (through the Incube) the material blending of human and non-human materialities (in this case human death and plant life) towards a blurred sense of agency and subjectivity.

Intersubjective agency in corpses also takes place through processes of memorialization. Memory and processes of mourning are theorized as practices within which the living and the dead share a space.[224] Cann elaborates:

> Though dead bodies, or pieces of them, help sanctify a space, this act of sanctification is no longer exclusively the realm of corpses, but also dependent on the memory of the living…In a world where the dead and their bodies are literally hidden, disappeared or spirited away, memorialization offers a way in which survivors can reinscribe the dead into the realm of the living in a virtual and spatial way....Additionally, grieving individuals determine the location of the memorial spaces...[m]emorials are mapped onto the geographical contexts of the living, in ways that are not always publicly sanctioned.[225]

While Cann is speaking largely of public, ad-hoc memorials, the importance of place, particularly quotidian place, extends into digital memorials like the Incube, whose entanglements and ritualizations are dependent upon a quotidian sense of place.

Postmodernism brought with it an attention to the body, both in scholarship and funerary rites. Death studies focus on the agency of corpses, intersubjective relationships between the living and dead, and memory and mourning as a shared space between life and death recognized the reforming of places for bodiless or placeless deaths like the low impact burials that leave

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[223] Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey, and Glennys Howarth, *Beyond the Body: Death and Social* Identity (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999). 6-19.
[224] *Beyond the Body*, 77.
[225]Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*, 21.

little or no monument for mourning. Landscape architects are developing new strategies and materials for creating a sense of place that leaves no environmental impact but maintains a sense of place. There is, however, a note that the "prominence" of a site in relation to certain landmarks or a "perceived degree of naturalness." [226]

Place and Placelessness

Without headstones, without urns, mourners are without a place to mourn – to place tokens of affection, to visit on anniversaries and holidays, to tend to. In order to give some sense of place, landscape architects and craftsmen create places and objects for mourning with a low impact on the environment, including wooden grave markers, fieldstone headstones, landscaped burial plots, and more. Creating a place for mourning and memorialization where there is no place means setting something else (other than the body) apart; it means creating intentional spaces. Besides landscape architecture and eco-friendly craftsmanship, the internet has become such an intentional place-apart, where death is mourned and tended to. The internet is both a public and private place of mourning, making the invisibility of death visible. [227] Digital memorialization can help mourners reach out towards, interact with, and feel connected to placeless burials (i.e., natural, bodiless, scatterings) far out of reach – like the depths of the sea.

The Neptune Memorial Reef, forty feet below the waves three miles off the coast of Miami, Florida, is the "largest man-made reef ever conceived and, when complete, will have transformed over 16 acres of barren ocean floor."[228] Conceived in partnership with the Neptune Society, one of the country's largest funerary and cremation providers, the reef is made of steel-

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[226] Hockey, Komaromy, and Woodthorpe, *The Matter of Death*,152.
[227] Hockey et al., "Landscapes of the Dead?",121 ; Kevin O'Neill 1941, *Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century*, Book, Whole (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, an imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016), 17.
[228] "Overview | The Neptune Memorial Reef," accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.nmreef.com/overview.html.

reinforced concrete structures, laid out into an interpretation of the city of Atlantis, featuring arches, figurines, benches, and roads that all meet government and industry standards to both support a new ecosystem and withstand harsh weather conditions, with the reef having an eye toward creating anew and supporting existing marine life.[229] Internment of human remains into the reef is a process called "deployment," where human cremains are mixed with concrete, then molded into a shape appropriate for the reef (column, starfish, etc.), and this mold is installed in or around the features of the reef, with mourners have the opportunity to participate in the dive. A copper memorial plaque with the name of the deceased is affixed to the concrete/cremains feature, and mourners can receive a certificate of the memorialization, which includes the geographical coordinates of the memorial feature.[230]

This underwater ecosystem made of human remains and concrete is accessible through both dives and a digital platform. In combination with obits.org, the Neptune Memorial reef staff photograph and catalog each of its "deployed" memorials on their website. These photographs are a touchstone for an interactive online memorial, featuring a "memory book" visitors can write in, a place to "light a candle," make a charitable donation, upload a photo, and set a reminder to your digital calendar for the date of death.[231] These visual interfaces are just one part of the larger network of memorialization with threads extending into the sea and necessarily expand the location or manifestation of the digital beyond the screen. Ritualized practice binds together placeless natural burials and the digital as one process of burial and mourning.

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[229] "Overview | The Neptune Memorial Reef."
[230] "Process | The Neptune Memorial Reef," accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.nmreef.com/process.html.
[231] "Amnery Lopez Soler | Life Story, Memories, Photos, Service Informations," accessed March 23, 2018, http://www.obits.org/memorials/5736-amnery-lopez-soler/life_story.

Fig. 2. Memorial Reef and Memorial Placement (nmreef.com)

Digital memorial features of the Neptune reef integrate established technological innovations in mourning and memorization. New technologies have always augmented the treatment of the dead, from ancient embalming techniques, to modern cremation practices, to digital interventions. Digital memorials range from the online obituary to coffins with digital displays and wireless capabilities, but all can be characterized in-part as belonging to postmodern movements of individuation and customization. Digital innovations augment death practices beyond onscreen appendages to modern funerary practices. [232] Rather, they are digital entanglements that, while on the fringe of common practice, still speak to changing ways of thinking and treating the dead.[233] By adding such a digital apparatus, Neptune Reef both taps into established means of mourning online and extends its presence, literally, into the sea. The inaccessibility of the sea memorial – barring the specialized equipment and training needed for

[232] Christopher M. Moreman and A. David Lewis, *Digital Death: Mortality and beyond in the Online Age*, Book, Whole (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 114-118; Garces-Foley, *Death and Religion in a Changing World*, 222 ;Cann, *Virtual Afterlives: Grieving the Dead in the Twenty-First Century*,106-111.
[233] Moreman and Lewis, *Digital Death: Mortality and beyond in the Online Age*., 121-2; Sites like cemetery.org and apps like ripcemetery provide features like leaving flowers and writing notes.

sea diving – elevates the need for a place to perform mourning rituals. The digital infrastructure provides that place. The digital is one way to make a place for placeless natural burial. Human cremains, concrete, and marine life make up one of the reef's ecosystems. The network of the reef, mourners, and the digital (and the ritualizations of the reef via the digital) make up another.

Neptune is a broad example of the culture out of which the Incube emerges, as it rhetorically places itself within the natural burial movement by foregrounding the industrial guidelines met and government permits acquired as well as its membership in the Green Burial Council.[234] Promotional language highlights place, permanence, and conservation: "Why do people choose to deploy to the memorial reef? To become part of something original, to be part of the circle of life in an intimate and meaningful way, for a permanent memorial following cremation, to help counter reef destruction by contributing to a new Reef, to celebrate a love of the sea, as a green burial alternative."[235] Both the conservational and digital aspects of Neptune Memorial Reef create networks. One between the marine life, the material corpse, and the funerary rites of the mourners, and the place of internment and the place of memorialization online. These networks extend place by making the depths of the sea interactive and accessible from a desktop and material, in that they put lifeless human materiality back into circulation with marine plant and animal life. These networks are materially sustained by the labor of divers and server operators. These material strands are maintained by ritualized activities.

While the depths of the sea offer a vivid example of networks made possible through digital technologies, the function of the digital in the case of Neptune is no more extreme than in

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[234] "The Neptune Memorial Reef™ project is environmentally sound and meets the strict guidelines and permitting of the EPA, DERM, NOAA, Florida Fish and Wildlife and the Army Corps of Engineers. The Memorial Reef™ is also a member of the Green Burial Council." "Overview | The Neptune Memorial Reef."

[235] "Deployment | The Neptune Memorial Reef," accessed March 26, 2018, http://www.nmreef.com/deployment.html.

any digital memorialization: to make a *place* for mourning and memorial where there is none: digital memorialization can be used for other placeless burials or death, such as deaths in foreign wars, deaths without a body, and deaths in mass tragedies. Catherine Bell notes that, increasingly, Euro-American societies are going to greater lengths to embody bodiless burials or retrieves those bodies that seem out of reach. She notes that "A funeral without a body may need to rely more heavily in the meaning systems…provided by religious beliefs" and that if these "meaning systems are no longer very socially effective, funeral rites without a body risk making all too clear an unnerving fact – that rites are primarily for the living, not the benefit for the dead." Bell reassures us, however, in support of innovations like Neptune and the Incube, that "ritualization is a very creative activity. A rite without a body must, by eulogy or gesture or metonymic association, create a type of body that can be mourned, fondled by grief, and then laid very clearly to rest."[236]

While it must be acknowledged that choosing a natural burial is deciding to have a placeless burial, where as losing a body in war, mass tragedy, or the like lack this kind of agency or sense of autonomy, mourning and memorialization require place, and digital interfaces create that place, through three acts of ritualization: Placing, Domestication, and Performance. These three kinds of ritualizing posthumanism will be the focus of the following analysis. Each ritual aspect of the digital interface (here exemplified by the Incube) highlights interactions between new media and ritual, ways of thinking new media and ritual through posthumanism, and forms what this can say about death rituals and mediation in contemporary American cultures.

Ritualizations: Place, Domestication, Performance

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[236] Catherine Bell, "Embodiment," in *Theorizing Rituals: Issues, Topics, Approaches, Concepts*, ed. Jens Kreinath, Jan Snoek, and Michael Stausberg (Boston, MA: Brill, 2006), 542.

Whether at the distance of the sea or the immediacy of the Incube, places of memorialization are *performed,* in that they are set apart, paid attention to, and acted upon. Ritualization, then, is primarily about setting things apart in culturally specific ways within societal contexts. Ritualization is a social process, one that, while focused on setting *apart*, does not take place apart from societal cues, norms, structures, and influences. I would like to focus on three of these societal influences for ritualization within the posthuman digital religious practice around the Incube: place-making, domestication (or intensification), and transformative performance, which emerge from Bell, Smith, and performance and ritual theorist Richard Schechner towards a ritual analysis of the Incube, asking: how does the Incube work within funerary rites? Living and dead bodies moving through space (organic, urban, and technological) compose the kind of techno-ecology put forth by Rosi Braidotti. How is the posthuman performed or situated here? Through these questions, three forms emerge – the Incube ritualizes the posthuman in three distinct ways: the tree places, the planter domesticates, and the digital performs.

Trees: Placing

Planting trees with cremains is not unique to the Incube as a non-invasive way to mark the place of the dead. Associating trees with death at all is not particular to any postmodern or even modern funeral practice. Even only in western traditions, the Yew tree was held to be the "tree of the dead" frequently overhanging European churchyards, and trees have marked spaces for ashes within the modern funeral since at least 1945.[237] Trees and their associations with longevity, endurance, regeneration, and transformation all ground trees trees in a wide spectrum of associations with life, death, and rebirth. Just this partially inclusive history makes the tree the

[237] Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*,133, 546.

least unique aspect of the entire assemblage. But, by sharing aspects with other burial practices, it is recognizable, where the Incube indexes the larger natural burial movement, where it brings itself to these cultural significations.

The *type* of tree planted receives much attention on the Incube website – a choice of six seeds (Maple, Honey Locust, Pine, Oak, Tree of Life, Redwood). Each option pairs with a write - up on its symbolism along with specific planting instructions. The symbolism provided for each tree is broad:

> The Honey locust Tree is a symbol of beauty, tolerance, and protection. Its name comes from the sweet legume found in the tree's pods, which serve as a food source for wildlife. Aside from being used by wildlife and animal for food, the sweet legumes were also consumed by Native Americans as a food source. The first scientific observations of the honey locust were made in the 1700s and was subsequently named "honey locust" due to the sweet honey-like substance contained in the legume pods. These legumes have a sweet and fragrant aroma. Flowers of this plant are also a target of many insect species and are important source of food for bees. [238]

By ascribing definite characteristics to each seedling and leaving open the option for planting a tree of your own choosing, the Incube calls attention to the unique status of the tree itself (above the planter and the cremains) as the *marker* of memorialization and mourning, in Smith's sense of "paying attention" – that is, the tree (as part of the funerary ritual structure that is the Incube) sets itself apart as part of a network of ritualized meanings and understandings, by calling attention to both a cultural movement and a human body and by being within the ritualized structure at all, the tree calls attention to a unique place.

[238] Bios Urn, March 6, 2018, https://urnabios.com/honey-locust-planting-instructions/.

The Incube's tree sapling makes place, setting things apart for a means of paying attention, by making the unseen cremains seen and by placing itself within the natural burial movement. The tree combined with cremains makes each Incube unique – with the tree the only *visible* marker of this uniqueness as it branches out from the blank cube. The tree marks not only death (as the marker both of the body itself and the cultural movement of natural burial) but individual human death, a distinct death, as the focusing point of the Incube assemblage monitored and tended to. Smith reminds us that in ritualized spaces and places, "nothing is accidental. "[239] The tree makes visible the invisible human materiality buried beneath it. The biological needs of the tree call attention to itself, demanding action, demanding care. The tree also calls attention to itself (sets itself apart) as part of the larger movement of natural burial, carrying implications and inferences to the discussion above regarding ecologies and economies as a part of this network of meaning. Every Incube is identical in its smooth, blank whiteness: the tree (within its capacity as a marker or natural burial) serves as the memorial marker – the headstone, the plaque. The tree not only gives place to the human cremains but the mode of ritualization – natural burial. The tree within the Incube adapts the common imagery of natural burial, this symbol, and places itself within that movement.

The tree gives place to posthuman ritualizations of the Incube at the intersection of plant life, memorialized life, cremated materiality, tree materiality, with the tree as a place holder for the ethical implications of and for that human body located within a natural burial movement. This intersection charts human being as an "emergent condition," a process rather than a stable sense of being – a marker of posthuman subjectivity. [240] Where the tree's life is interdependent with

[239] Smith, *Imagining Religion : From Babylon to Jonestown*,54.
[240] Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, 35.

material human death and caring for both through data provided to the interface performs this contingency: in caring for the dead, one is caring for the tree, and in caring for the tree, one is caring for the dead. This contingency makes the tree functionally more than a tree alone and makes it a marker of place and interaction, a marker of life and death. In that for Smith, ritual is so much about making place, and for Bell so much about interaction, this interaction designation gives place to the tree through ritualization. By setting the tree apart, the Incube not only gives place to memorialization but also to posthumanism.

Planters: Domesticating

The Incube is designed something like older Apple products, described by the manufacturer as "[s]oftly Personal: Add a human touch that only those who need to know will recognize," white, smooth edges, minimal visible ports, wires, or buttons. The simple, minimalist design makes it "softly personal," but also homogenous with smart home products like Amazon's Echo, Apple's HomePod, or Google's Home.[241] The Incube is recognizable within this genre of technological devices, signaling their approachable, user-friendly interactivity, as the Incube becomes part of a smart-home aesthetic. In ways that the tree sets itself *apart* as a ritual object, the planter *assimilates* itself into a recognizable set of material and technological practices. It is interesting to note here the "only those who need to know will recognize" latter half of the product description: it contains both the idea that this device has seamless integration with the rest of your home and they acknowledge that it is an urn is privileged information. Such homogeneity domesticates natural tree burial by bringing it into the home in a recognizable (and unrecognizable?) way.

[241] "Bios Incube," Bios Urn, accessed March 16, 2018, https://urnabios.com/incube/.

The Incube brings natural burial indoors and brings cremains closer to mourning bodies, both domesticating and making intimate the memorialization tree. [242] Smith points to domestication as another movement of ritual, with animal sacrifice as a ritualized intensification of the domestication of plants and animals. Sacrifice intensifies (places apart, calls attention to) the selections, attentions, and controls over reproduction, health, and death common to domestication processes and condenses more unpredictable processes into controlled and controllable circumstances and gives agency back to the ritual performer. [243] Ritual, then, could be described (using both senses of the word) as the domestication of domestication, bringing larger processes into the home. Intensification of domestication *domesticates* by cultivating, taming, and controlling unpredictable social and natural events. Like sacrifice domesticating domestication, the Incube planter intensifies and domesticates caring for the plant and the dead through the comprehensible design of the planter and increased modes of interaction made possible by the digital interface. In the way that Smith argues that the sacrifice is the domestication of domestication the Incube planter is the domestication of care for the dead.

Along with the familiar aesthetic, the Incube's interactivity ritualizes through an intensification of interaction: "The Bios Incube+ brings a whole new level of detail adding environmental capabilities to the product. Bios Incube+ also watches for air temperature, humidity, and solar irradiance."[244] This additional "level of detail" (a careful kind of attention) intensifies (in the sense that Smith talks about ritualization as a mode of intensification) the ways one can attend to the tree (and via the tree, the dead) by increasing ways of analyzing, assessing, and knowing the tree. In addition, the Incube uses a Wi-Fi connection to update the "profile" of

[242] "Bios Incube."
[243] Smith, *Relating Religion : Essays in the Study of Religion*. 152 - Smith too, argues that pre-hunting rituals are an intensification of the hunt itself, made perfect and safe by way of its ritual attentions.
[244]Bios Incube."

your tree and its specific needs based on the seedling selected. Increased interactivity is frequently pointed to as unique to digital mediation, along with increased data collection and production, as well as communicating that data across space and time. This so-called "datafication" intensifies interactions with the tree through points of and for control and management of the tree assemblage. Smith too calls ritualization a form of "elaborating obsessively" over a commonplace activity – perhaps in this case caring for a houseplant – as a means of creating greater meaning or networking this ritual activity with broader cultural or social forms.

By bringing the tree inside into a comprehensible container and by multiplying means for interacting with and caring for it, the Incube tames natural burial in the way that Smith speaks of domestication, and in turn, domesticates posthumanism through its design interventions. The Incube's intentional design aligns itself visually with other smart-home devices and interactive functionality and domesticates posthumanism by making it both approachable and explicit. Again, dual meanings here are helpful – both of 'posthuman' and 'approachable': the Incube makes the posthuman-as-dead-human approachable in a literal sense. The proximity of the cremains to quotidian life increases as cremains are brought into the home via the planter and making the cremains accessible through a smartphone also makes death more approachable as accessible through an object increasingly becoming part of the everyday body schema – the smartphone. The dead are only a click or a swipe away, part of everyday communication techniques. The Incube communicates with you through the "same channels you use to communicate with other people."[245] The ambiguity or confusion of the subject here is helpful for

[245] Bios Urn, *Bios Incube - World's First Incubator Designed for the after Life.*, accessed March 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMynd1oplC8.

thinking the posthuman position: What or who is communicating with the user through these "same channels"? The Incube as object? The dead? Both/and?

Interfaces: Performing

The Incube also makes the posthuman approachable by materializing a posthuman network into discrete, interactive objects. The cremains/dirt, dirt/tree, tree/planter, planter/smartphone make up a series of interfaced relationships that are independent aspects of a whole assemblage. Each relation is approachable, comprehensible, and tactile. They combine, through ritualized performance, as a functioning Incube. In other words, the Incube *only functions* as a memorializing, funerary object *if* the assemblage is intact, is interactive and interacting, where ritualization brings these objects into a functional assemblage that is the Incube. Interfacing here then is key to the Incube as a functioning, posthuman, domestic assemblage.

All of these means of domestication, of bringing death closer while simultaneously setting it apart through its ritual function, echo when Smith claims that "[r]itual is a relationship of difference between "nows" – the now of everyday life and the now of ritual place; the simultaneity, but not coexistence, of "here" and "there"…one is invited to think of the potentialities of the one "now" in terms of the other; but the one cannot become the other. Ritual precises ambiguities; it nether overcomes nor relaxes them."[246] Here, closeness is not equal to sameness: in practice, the Incube depends upon closeness without sameness – by highlighting the interfacing of each discrete aspect (tree, dirt, planter, cremains) of its makeup, the Incube class attention to their interaction through its unique interfacing. The process of the Incube as an

[246] Smith, *To Take Place : Toward Theory in Ritual*,110.

object of mourning and memorialization performs of ritualized interactivity between these distinct materialities, and it is the digital interface that makes visible and tactile, that realizes these networked relations.

This digital interface distributes the location of the cremains across plant life and digital material through interaction as mediated by digital sensors, data, and the smartphone application to create a third form of place. The digital interface facilitates a network between plant and human life, through which a mourner can interact with the cremains, and by unifying dispersed aspects of the plant, cremains, and environmental factors as data points. This interactive attention ritualizes the human body as a posthuman network, as part of this ritualized transaction and exchange. Catherine Bell tells us interaction and exchange anchor performance-based theories of ritual: "Among the most influential formulations were Victor Turner's ethnographic descriptions of ritual as a processual form of 'social drama' J. L. Austin's linguistic theory of 'performative utterances,' and Erving Goffman's analyses of the scenarios of 'social interaction."[247]

From Van Gennep onward, ritual theory focused on performances of transformation (as Smith notes, coming of age rituals and sacrifice have always been of great interest to ritual theorists). Interaction activates a ritual structure into a ritual transformation: where ritual structures *demarcate* potential, ritual actions *realize* potential. Performance is what activates 'ritual' towards 'ritualization'; performance realizes ritual potential, performance is the doing of ritual. Performance theory helps elaborate ritualization as a concept by focusing on the creation and activation of ritual structures through performative ritualizations of objects (that is, folding

[247] Bell, Catherine. "Performance." In *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, edited by Mark C. Taylor. The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

objects like the aspects of the Incube into ritual structures through performance and paying attention).[248]

Such ritualized performances are transformative in two senses: first in Smith's sense of "intensification" (the transformation of domestication into sacrifice) and second through the transformation of social or material status. First, performance intensifies action: the actions of sacrificing (binding, cutting, bleeding, cleaning) compound, intensify, magnify, and embed larger processes of domestication into concentrated, extreme actions of control over life and death through and as the sacrifice. Second, performance transforms status: performance within ritual boundaries (and the witnessing of that performance) creates new temporary and permanent social relations.[249]

Ritualization transforms one stable state of relation towards a new state of relation. Nascent ritual theory paid particular attention to both these transformations in social relation within coming-of-age rituals, which encapsulate both temporary (performative) and permanent (social) changes for Van Gennep and Turner. Director, producer, and theater theorist Richard Schechner names these pre and post ritual states of relation "actualities."[250] Ritualization transforms states of relation through transactions – transactions of materials, of status, of knowledge. [251] Rituals transform material and social status through ritual transactions, depending upon existent ecosystems and create new ones. Like posthumanism, ritual necessitates seeing human being as fully relational, with an ability to transform material and social status through networks of exchange and performative interaction.

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[248] Schechner, *Performance Theory*, 118-9.
[249] Ibid., 119.
[250] Ibid., 143.
[251] Ibid., 119.

Ronald Grimes, in an essay encapsulating transactional and relational views on ritual from indigenous traditions and Roy Rappaport's ecological anthropology to biogenetic structuralism, argues in the end that ritual is in no one way relational – it is in many ways relational, determined by the places we live and the cosmologies that make sense of them, the conditions of our lived world and the needs and necessities they and we demand of each other, where "religious ritual is the predication of identities and differences (metaphors) so profoundly enacted that they suffuse bone and blood, thereby generating cosmos, an oriented habitat."[252] These "oriented habitats" make up the ecologies and materials that ritualizations use to reshape the world through transformative transaction. Transactional ritualizations correspond to how posthumanism makes networks of social and material transformation, and provides a sense of "ecology'" here that combines the ecological and network thinking of posthuman embodiments within eco-burial rituals and materials.

Interaction is not only part of the process of ritualizing the Incube, but as Mark Hansen insists, interaction is inherent to new media interfaces, and a changing a sense of "the image":

> …we must accept that the image, rather than finding instantiation in a privileged technical form (including the computer interface), now demarcates the very process through which the body, in conjugation with the various apparatuses for rendering information perceptible, gives form to, *in-forms* information. In sum, the image can no longer be restricted to the level of surface appearance but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience.[253]

As discussed in the last chapter, the definitional realm for the digital "image" has expanded beyond visual regimes of representation in new media studies. Alexander Galloway notes "[t]he

[252] Grimes, *Rite out of Place: Ritual, Media, and the Arts*, 146.
[253] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*, 9.

history of visuality and computing is a complicated one," and while it is dangerous to wholly divorce one from the other, he is

> …sympathetic to a certain minoritarian refrain running through recent media theory on the specificity of computers as non-optical if not altogether non-visual media, for anyone wishing to cram computers into the framework of 'visual culture' is certainly suffering from an unfortunate fetishization of the physical interface, as if the computer monitor were an adequate substitute for the medium as a whole, which in addition to screens of various shapes and sizes, consists of any number of other technologies: nonoptical interface (keyboard, mouse, controller, sensor); data in memory and data on disk; executable algorithms; networking technologies and protocols and the list continues.[254]

As Lev Manovich points out, "new media today can be understood as the mix between older cultural conventions for data representation, access, and manipulation and never conventions of data representation, access and manipulation. The "old" data are representations of visual reality and human experience, i.e. images, text-based and audio-visual narratives – what we normally understand by "culture." The "new" data is numerical data."[255] Both Manovich and Galloway see earlier theorists of new media like Fredrich Kittler as recognizing even television as moving away from optics towards signal codification and the importance of keeping the concept of the computer or digital "image" always contextualized and complicated by the technologies that support and produce visualized or optical data.

These changing senses of the image allow Hansen to tell us that the image "now demarcates the very process through which the body, in conjugation with the various apparatuses for rendering information perceptible, gives form to, *in-forms* information."[256] Embodiment is central to Hansen's interpretation of how within the digital turn media lose their material specificity and the body takes on the function as the processor of images: the same digital

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[254] Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 63-4.
[255] Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 19.
[256] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*,9.

photograph can be imaged on a PC screen or a smartphone or watch, or printed on paper, or projected onto a wall. [257] The representational media has lost its specific form and this framing function is put back on the body. As Hansen puts it: "Because digitization allows for almost limitless potential to modify the image, that is *any* image – and specifically, to modify the image in ways that disjoin it from any fixed technical frame – the digital calls on us to invest the body as the "place" where the self-differing of media gets concretized."[258] In other words, the body becomes the place where digital information becomes sensible through interaction with digital interfaces. Interfaces, like the image, also take on a processual role in new media literature. The image is no longer restricted to the level of surface appearance but must be extended to encompass the entire process by which information is made perceivable through embodied experience.[259]

For the Incube, the smartphone's digital interface (as interaction) performs the plant/cremains assemblage by way of the digital sensor data by positioning the body as a node in this processual relationship with technological apparatus. The digital image is a *process* of interaction between the body, apparatus, and information. This process of interaction taking place through the Incube includes bodies living and dead, human and non, the planter, and the smartphone appendage. Here Hansen and Galloways' approach to the digital image helps conceptualize both posthumanism and ritualization in the present context. As prefaced in the previous chapter on ritual and new media, these new media theorists have raised up embodiment, and like the feminist posthumanists, they have emphasized embodiment as processual and contingent, as part of a material relationship with, in this case, digital technologies and data. Second, this emphasis

[257] Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media,* 21
[258] Ibid., 30.
[259] Ibid., 9

on process and processual relationships invites a ritual analysis of the ways digital images are processed with and through the body as both theories prioritize the interaction of bodies and objects as a process that creates new ways of thinking and being about subject integrity, place, and mediation.

New media theorizations of the digital image as embodied interactivity help read this as part of a process of ritualization of transformation. The digital appendage of the Incube allows such potential ritualizations of the tree/planter through its performative demand: software analyses data from the tree, visualizes this data as a digital image mediated by the smartphone application, and calls attention to the needs of the tree (and via the tree the cremains). This calling of attention is a call for human interaction, making the needs of the tree known. Following Hansen's reading of the digital image as networked, transactional, and embodied the digital aspects of the Incube visualize posthumanism as a digital image, as a relationship between plant and human materiality. Only through the data gathered by the sensors in the planter could one know particular environmental conditions of the tree, and only through the digital apparatus can these particular conditions be visualized and viewed across space and time from a material remove. Visualizing this information through a digital image visualizes the posthuman as an interaction between imaged data and what it demands. Digital interventions within this interaction make death visible through the data, the unknowable knowable through the application. By imaging data about the plant, the application performs the demands of the tree (for water, light, temperature change) and, beyond that, an interaction between living and dead human material and a living tree. This kind of posthuman interaction, this kind of posthuman image, is performed and ritualized only by way of these apparatus.

Lev Manovich, in later theorizations of new media going beyond the linguistic, spatializes this kind of data availability, naming it "cellspace" - space overlaid with accessible information and contrasts cellspace to digital surveillance technology, writing: "[i]f video and other types of surveillance technologies translate the physical space and its dwellers into data, *cellspace technologies* (also referred to as mobile media, wireless media, or location-based media) work in the opposite direction: delivering data to the mobile physical space dwellers."[260] For Manovich, translating material into data and then dispersing it into available networks spatializes information *and* materiality. Thinking with this cell space captures the placing, domesticating, and performative ritualization of the Incube in one *place* by reformatting it all into available data and forcing us to rethink where the limits of materiality lie. In other words, if we follow Manovich that datified space is cell space (dispersed and available), then these mediations and translations of human cremains and plant life into cell space make this space available to users in an extended, posthuman sense.

Conclusions

Ritualizations of the tree, the planter, and the digital application as a place-making, intensifying, and performative digital artifact activate a posthuman network of relations between human and non-human life by creating new ethical, ontological, and ultimately epistemological relations between the living and dead, human and nonhuman. Posthumanism (as a heuristic and experimental concept) pays attention to processual and contingent relationships between the human and the non-human, and the Incube's operation is dependent upon these interrelations. The performance of these networks as mediations that place, intensify, and transform bodies

[260] Manovich, "The Poetics of Augmented Space.", 4.

living and dead, technological and biological, makes the Incube an object of posthuman analysis of digital religious practice. Theorizing such processual emergent posthumanism requires analyzing the performative interactions that ritual theory helps elucidate, and posthumanism (as both a method and subjectivity) calls attention to contingent relations between biological and technological *forms*. The three ritualizations above offer a few pathways towards understanding posthuman burial and ritualization by illustrating ritual ways of doing and posthuman ways of knowing.[261]

The Incube helps understand digital religious practice as *posthuman* religious practice by providing an intimate blending of materialities in the cremains and the tree soil and a ritual structure to observe interactions between the human, plant, and digital, the biological and the technological. In other words, the Incube's ritualization of death makes explicit the material connections theorized through posthumanisms. The Incube is a place where present theories of the posthuman and ritual and new media combine to form a methodology that allows for object and media analysis beyond the screen to congregate the resources and inclinations of religious studies, and attend to form, performance, and interrelations of the human and non-human.

The Bios Incube's commercially attuned design unveils posthuman material links between ecologies of life and death taking place within the broader natural burial movement and gives place to bodies within natural burial rites. The Incube's visualization and imaging of the networks entangles a history of funerary rites through the modern, postmodern and posthuman, like the natural and sea burial like the Neptune reef's material nodes of ecological and economic crisis.

[261] Sea burials, reefs, and cemetery apps, offer other such inroads.

As an assemblage of tree, planter, and interface ritualizes posthumanism through place-making, intensification or domestication, and transactional performance: the tree makes place both within a movement and for the placeless burial—the planter domesticates by both familiarizing and intensifying. The digital interface performs transactions between these discrete objects. These three ritualizations taking place around and through the Incube emphasize the posthuman aspects of this digital religious practice by exposing ecologies of relation and material interdependence, where the Incube is not a single object, is not human or non-human, but is posthuman, in that its performance requires a network and extended sense of materiality and subjectivity.

For the study of *digital* religion, in particular, the Incube offers an instance of having to think beyond an on/off divide and instead think in the between spaces of division of life and death, human and nonhuman, plant, and animal. Taking what the roots of a posthumanism (Anti-Humanism, Material Feminism, STS, and Cybernetics) can offer, through a new understanding of media and a functional theory of ritual, this posthuman, heuristic epistemology reveals a material, networked, and performative practice of mourning.

CHAPTER FOUR - Playing with Death in Video Games

"Let me play when you are dead," "Let's switch-off deaths," "Can we wait until I die?" – Such phrases have wafted from arcades, living rooms, and basement refuges since the 1970s. Luckily, the deaths discussed were not permanent human deaths but the markers of failure in video games – the death of characters, avatars, or any other representation of the player in the game. Death has always been a marker of video games, a way of dividing up playtime, effort, accuracy, and accomplishment.[262] In many ways, we measure our success in video gaming by our deaths (or lack thereof). Video gaming deaths have been around for decades, but as the possibility for gaming pervades our everyday lives more and more through advanced and more portable devices, the rise of games and their deaths comes looming into view.

The twenty-first century marked the rise of video-gaming to cultural dominance. By 2008, global video games sales surpassed global box office sales for the first time.[263] As of 2017, all digital gaming combined (mobile, PC, and console) generated $100.5 billion in global sales where, in the same year, the global box office brought in $40 billion: in less than ten years, the market impact of video games over box office films more than doubled.[264] Video game's social pervasiveness is no less complete. In 2012, 58% of Americans played video games, with women making up 45% of these players, at an average age of 31.[265] A 2010 Pew poll found that in the

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[262] Frank Bosman offers a typology of types of death and dying in games, calling death "the most prominent feedback systems of almost all digital games. It communicates to the player his or her (in)ability to achieve the positive goals that the game has set." Frank G. Bosman, "Death Narratives : A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games," 2018, https://media.suub.uni-bremen.de/handle/elib/3491.

[263] Heidi A. Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (September 1, 2016) ,647.

[264] Of course, we have to consider the impact of other factors on the box office including streaming services.

[265] Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming,"654.

United States, "fully 97% of teens age 12-17 play computer, web, portable, or console games."[266] As foundational video game and religion scholar Gregory Grieve puts it, "[d]igital games are to the twenty-first century what films were to the twentieth century."[267] Simply speaking, video games have become a dominant form of culture.

The precipitous and pervasive influence of video-gaming as a cultural form is reason enough for religion scholars to take an interest, but, as Heidi Campbell et al. point out in a cover article for the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, valuative and formal reasons warrant investigation as well. The religious content of games and religious institutions' engagement with gaming, games formal comparison to ritual, and existing connections between religion and play are all different inroads to approaching religion and video games. Studying religious symbols in games and religious institutions' use of games means a focus on content. Looking into ritual and play means looking at form. Investments of categorization breaks down into its interest in either the *form* or the *content* of religion and video-gaming. "religion in" and "gaming in" both look towards religious or gaming content. "Religion as" and "gaming as" look to form.

This divide between form and content falls across the same lines as a long-held argument in game studies around the primacy of "narratology" versus "ludology" (gameplay), with the question being: which is that which makes a game, its narrative form or its play form and which is that worth studying? The divide began after emerging game scholarship saw narrative scholarship lacking the ability to capture what was unique about games. Espen Aarseth,

[266] "Teens, Video Games and Civics," *Pew Research Center Internet & Technology* (blog), September 16, 2008, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics/.
[267] Campbell et al., "Gaming Religionworlds: Why Religious Studies Should Pay Attention to Religion in Gaming,"654.

described it this way in 2004: "One side argues that computer games are media for telling stories, while the opposing side claims that stories and games are different structures that are doing opposing things…Here we find the political question of the genre at play: the fight over games generic categorization is a fight for academic influence over what is perhaps the dominant contemporary form of cultural expression."[268]

Aarseth sums up the weight and relevance of this division well – it is less a debate about the essential nature of video games and more a land grab for academic and disciplinary territory. As the study of video games has moved forward, the stated division between narratology and ludology has become more of a trope than a true divide, with the ludological approach largely winning out in terms of publication and focus, as the narratological approach takes new form, focusing less on something strictly like narrative and instead transforming into synthetic studies like Flanagan and Nissenbaum's *Values at Play in Digital Games* (cited above), which takes both narratological and ludological approaches to games, dividing them along functional rather than essential lines to account for how games can shape our thinking.

As a central and influential part of popular culture, digital games reflect and shape the performance of norms and values and studying both video games' content *and* form attends to values *and* performance within gaming.[269] Science and technology studies and social shaping of technology theories show us that not only do technologies shape our norms and values, but technologies themselves are embedded with these values, and games are no different. In their introduction to *Values at Play,* Flanagan and Nissenbaum point out that "just as narrative and

[268] Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004). 45.
[269] Mary Flanagan and Helen Fay Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014), 3-4.

game rules carry values, so do lines of code, game engines, mechanics, and hardware."[270] These formal elements shape how digital games evaluate and value cultures and human beings. "Unlike traditional forms of other media, which do not responds to player's journey or to their readings and interpretations, digital games are particularly compelling environments in which players explore and act based on at least a partial understanding of a systems relational dynamics."[271] In other words, video gaming opens up digital systems to a new level of interactivity that explicitly performs value systems by way of this formal interaction.

One such value system performed through games surrounds attitudes towards death and dying – as Frank Bosman puts it, death is perhaps the most "prominent feedback system of almost all digital games."[272] This chapter investigates the attitudes and ritualizations of death in games through a model for understanding religion and video gaming dubbed the "gamevironmental" model, one that (like posthumanism) incorporates the technical and socio-cultural aspects of gaming and play into a networked sense of what is a "game" (as an object of play). Beginning with primary conceptual relationships between religion and play to specific inquests into religion and video gaming, this chapter concludes with a case study on "No-Death-Runs," the attempt to complete a game with not dying at all. No-Death-Runs (or NDRs) exemplify a posthuman approach to play and death, as playing with digital architectures of being in full awareness of and in spite of the constant presence of death.

By ritualizing the game through posthuman modes, NDRs perform posthuman ways of being with and through mediated death. No-death illustrates death at play through three unique

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[270] Ibid., 9.
[271] Ibid., 5.
[272] Frank G. Bosman, "Death Narratives: A Typology of Narratological Embeddings of Player's Death in Digital Games," ed. John W. Borchert, *Gamevironments*, 2018,5.

relations of a player to death made possible through digital technologies and posthuman subjectivities by way of ritualization and material assemblages. These negotiations of death and (alternative) life are performances of posthuman ritualization and show the value of play in illumination religion in and as a technology of mediation human experience and ontology. This human experience of death, as Ernest Becker notes in his treatise on psychoanalysis, religion, and modernity *The Denial of Death*, is "one of the great rediscoveries of modem thought: that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death."[273] Becker marks human experience as a cycle of denying and confronting death, through what he calls the "hero-quest.".[274] In this quasi-Campbellian language, Becker claims that to become conscious of what one is doing to earn his feeling of heroism is the main self-analytic problem of life."[275] While the psycho-analytic and gendered aspects of this argument cannot be accounted for in my treatment of NDRs, it is worth placing Becker here as a backdrop to the hero-like quest of video-gaming and in the ways it allows players to confront death.

Play and Religion

Before arriving at the subtleties of NDRs and how they "play" with death, we first must appreciate the intertwined history of the study of play and religion in general. The study of play and the study of play alongside religion have entangled histories where scholars have wrestled over claims as to the importance of play, as pre-eminent play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith points out in his cumulative 1997 work *The Ambiguity of Play*

> …biologists, psychologists, educators, and sociologists tend to focus on how play is adaptive or contributes to growth, development, and socialization…. Sociologists say that play is an imperial social system that is typically manipulated by those with power for

[273] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: Free Press, 1973), 11.
[274] Ibid., 5.
[275] Ibid., 6.

> their own benefit… Art and literature, by contrast, have a major focus on playas a spur to creativity. … In psychiatry, play offers a way to diagnose and provide therapy for the inner conflicts of young and old patients alike. And in the leisure sciences, play is about qualities of personal experience, such as intrinsic motivation, fun, relaxation, escape, and so on.[276]

Sutton-Smith points out that each of these approaches to play reveal different attentions rather than unique essences – in other words, each of these studies, in arriving from individual disciplines, aim at different goal and therefore make and take different types of play. The category of play, then, has always been up for debate.

Since its colloquial beginnings within different fields and disciplines, play studies has gained its independence, thanks in no small part to the works of Sutton-Smith, and his lasting influence. His *Ambiguity of Play* is itself an ode to the study of play, to the ways it appears, and the approaches taken to it. As the study of play and play theory has evolved, almost all studies of play (not unlike studies of religion) balk at the idea of defining play in and of itself but rather choose to define play in relation to other things or as a process of relationships. Ian Bogost, popular game designer, and philosopher of games and play does find some common ground amongst these definitions however in his comparison of Derrida, Sutton-Smith, and Salen and Zimmerman "For Derrida, play is a name for a text's ability to bear new meanings for different readers in different contexts. The play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith discusses a similar phenomenon the 'play of light, the play of waves, the play of components in a bearing case, the inner play of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words... the game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman adopt this sense of play too, in their formal definition of the concept, which is really the same as Derrida's but without the philosophical

[276] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001). 7.

window dressing: 'free movement within a more rigid structure.'"[277] Such definitions (or the realm of definitions – getting close without a commitment) is where a lot of folks studying video gaming and culture have landed – that play is the movement within a structure. Bogost goes on to point out that such a definition works particularly well for studying technological apparatus (like video games) and play: "Machines and apparatuses are good metaphors of understanding play. When you operate a mechanism like a steering wheel, the device has some "play" built in: a space through which the steering wheel can be turned before the steering shaft couples with and turns the pinion at its end."[278] Rather than an essential definition of play, contemporary play studies instead turns to its functional and relational role.

Thinkers like Bogost, Jan Rune Holmevik, and Miguel Sicart represent contemporary concerns and methods in the study of play, and not necessarily just play and video games.[279] The going concern between Bogost and Sicart is where to *place* play – that is, in other words, where does play take place, rather than what is play. Bogost places play firmly in *things*, whereas Sicart places it in human *being* when he says: "Instead of deriving an understanding of play from a particular object or activity, like war, ritual, or games, I see play as a portable tool for being. It is not tied to objects but brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life."[280] So, where Bogost might find play as essential to an object or a form (like

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[277] Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016)., 94.
[278] Bogost, *Play Anything*,95.
[279] Jan Rune Holmevik, Ian Bogost, and Gregory Ulmer, *Inter/Vention: Free Play in the Age of Electracy*, Illustrated edition (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2012); Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts London: The MIT Press, 2017); Bogost, *Play Anything*. These three texts and three thinkers make up a fragment of play studies. I pick these three here as contemporary amendments to Brian Sutton-Smith, Johan Huizinga, and Robert E. Neale as the represent the particular intersection between play studies and video game studies, where they are able to synthesize both worlds for best use here. For other influential theorists of play see: Patrick Bateson, *Play, Playfulness, Creativity and Innovation*, 1st edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, Reprint edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Thomas S. Henricks, *Play and the Human Condition*, 1st edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).
[280] Sicart, *Play Matters*, 5.

a game), thinkers like Sicart see play as a function of being human. Like many other territories for critical or cultural theory, play theory has moved into debates around material culture and essential versus functional definitions – asking: where is play? What is play? And how does it effect/affect?

Specific to the study of religion and play, in the 1960s and 70s, along with the turn of postmodern scholarship and the development of formal departments for the study of religion, came a renewed interest in the seriousness of play and in the value of play as a subject for academic study. David L. Miller, in his 1970 *Gods and Games*, charts this emergence not only in the humanities but specifically in the study of religion. Along with books like Roger Callois *Man, Play, and Games* and Robert E. Neale's *In Praise of Play*, the 1960s and 70s saw an influx of serious investment in play in the study of religion and culture.[281] Citing the likes of Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Sigmund Freud, and Erving Goffman, these works on religion and play rely heavily on psychological and history of religions approaches to reach chart play as a "modern mythology" and play and work as the sacred and profane.[282]

The study of religion and play has expanded from an interest in mythologies and psychologies of games and play to more inclusive models of play and religion, including frequent comparisons between game and ritual. Studying play and religion as shared territories began with sociologist Johan Huizinga's early comparisons between ritual and play, and his focus on the formal and structural elements of both, finding no *formal* difference between play and ritual, where the " 'consecrated spot' cannot be formally distinguished from the 'play-

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[281] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (Stillpoint Digital Press, 2013); Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*; Robert E. Neale, *In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion*, 1st edition (Harper & Row, 1969).
[282] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 4; Neale, *In Praise of Play*,101.

ground.'"[283] This idea of a set-apart world (or "magic circle") as a space within which both religion and play take place is frequently picked up as a model for both ritual *and* play spaces. In their introduction to their edited collection *Religions in Play,* Phillipe Bornet and Maya Burger note the advantages to studying games and religion for the study of religion itself, including "one step back from the traditional textualist paradigm "the universality of play and games as compared to terms like "sacred," "religion," and "church," and the sustainable comparison between games and ritual and bounded and bordered activities.[284] Within the American Academy of Religion, religion and play come together with religion and sports to form a unit of study, gathered around texts and concepts that bind play, sport, and games to nationalism, gender, identity, and the like.[285]

Play theory and the study of play entangles itself in the humanities, and its foci and debates have traveled along with the trends in scholarship – particularly in the study of religion, from Miller's occupation with myth and symbol to contemporary debates about agency and materiality. I sketch this very brief history of game and play studies not to make some enduring point about its *own* essence or function, but more humbly to point out that there is nothing unique about the study of play per se, either to the digital or religious studies. Rather, pointing out that it is *not* particularly unique to either frees me to look at what interventions digital games and scholarship around digital games and religion has made into these arenas of games and play,

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[283] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Martino Fine Books, 2014),10.
[284] Maya Burger, *Religions in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds*, ed. Philippe Bornet (Zürich: TVZ - Theologischer Verlag Z|rich, 2012),7.
[285]Alter, Joseph. *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India*; Baker, William J. *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sports*; Byrne, Julie. *O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs*; Price, Joseph. *From Season to Season: Sport as American Religion*.

and from there point to the additional lengths posthuman theories of new media and ritual can take these explorations of play, digital games, and religious studies.

The Magic Circle Problem

Where to begin this parsing then, of play studies and digital religion studies, ritual, and new media? Why not with the one sticking point that has endured from early sociological, anthropological, and psychological studies of games up until the latest manuscripts on digital games and religion: Huizinga's magic circle. Johan Huizinga's "magic circle" has become a locus for understanding the limits of play and game spaces, in game studies writ large and within the study of gaming and religion. His 1938 *Homo Ludens* has a singular influence in the field of game studies as a work of cultural theory and history that began a serious and encyclopedic interrogation of play both in and as culture, covering play and war, play and law, and play and poetry. The most enduring and influential concept from all this is that of the magic circle, the most-often quoted passage being

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the "consecrated spot" cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[286]

Huizinga's language of marking off, setting, apart, materially, ideally, deliberate, or matter of course have all embedded themselves within enduring game studies discourses around what

[286] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*,10.

is play, and what is a game and the term "magic circle" has come to encapsulate all these debates.

The "magic circle" as a term itself began with Salen and Zimmerman's work on Huizinga, making its most prominent appearance in *Rules of Play*

> Although the magic circle is merely one of the examples in Huizinga's list of "play-grounds," the term is used here as shorthand for the idea of a special place in time and space created by a game. The fact that the magic circle is just that—a circle—is an important feature of this concept. As a closed circle, the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world. As a marker of time, the magic circle is like a clock: it simultaneously represents a path with a beginning and end, but one without beginning and end. The magic circle inscribes a space that is repeatable, a space both limited and limitless. In short, a finite space with infinite possibility.[287]

For Salen and Zimmerman, the magic circle is both a place and an attitude. It is a space in that "the magic circle of a game is where the game takes place. To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one as a game begins. The magic circle of a game might have a physical component, like the board of a board game or the playing field of an athletic contest. But many games have no physical boundaries—arm wrestling, for example, doesn't require much in the way of special spaces or material."[288] The magic circle is an attitude or orientation, for "[w]ithin the magic circle, special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviors. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game, and inhabited by its players…Suddenly, the materials represent something quite specific. This plastic token is *These.* These rules tell you how to roll the die and move. Suddenly, it matters very much which plastic token reaches the end first."[289]

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[287] Tekinbas and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 95.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.

The idea of the magic circle holds particular currency for the study of religion and games, parceling along with it Huizinga's initial direct comparison between ritual and game spaces. Huizinga's own fascination with religion invites his use (and subsequently for the study of religion and video games the use of Salen and Zimmerman's adaptation of his magic circle) for understanding the functional and formal relationships of ritual and game. Rachel Wagner, Gregory Grieve, and others directly leverage the magic circle or the discussion of the magic circle to justify arguments about game spaces as ritual spaces by leveraging the spatially dependent work on sacred spaces and rituals places by the likes of Emilie Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, and Jonathan Z. Smith and extend the metaphor of the magic circle to reach broader conclusions about ritual space and action.[290] I do not disagree with these uses for the concept of a magic circle, nor do I disagree with the conclusions reached by way of these uses – in fact, much of the scholarship below is leveraged on just this kind of work.

The magic circle problem begins when the concept of the magic circle *itself* is leveraged as content for critique rather than used as a tool for description. That is, in other words, when the binary nature (or the perceived binary nature) of the magic circle (you are either in the circle or out of the circle) becomes an object for ridicule or critique. T.L. Taylor's 2006 *Play Between Worlds*, an achievement itself in sober scholarship on multi-player games, begins one such critique. Taylor notes that while "Salen and Zimmerman suggest that this boundary is open or closed depending on the approach used to understand the game, that is, where viewed through the lens of rules, play, or culture…there remains a somewhat implicit divide at work in their

[290]Heidi Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve, eds., *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, Digital Game Studies (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014); Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*, Media, Religion and Culture, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 2012).

model."[291] This critique, and ones like it, unfortunately, represent a concretizing or solidifying of the magic circle that not only misrepresents it's critical utility but also begins the construction of a magic circle strawman, one which is rigid, binary, and absolute – the enemy of the postmodern critic.

In 2012, Eric Zimmerman directly responded to these critiques of the magic circle, citing his encounters with them at various conferences: "Invariably, these presentations have a single aim: to devalue, dethrone, or otherwise take down the oppressive regime of the magic circle. They begin by citing either Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* or *Rules of Play* (the game design textbook I co-authored with Katie Salen), and then elaborate mightily on the dangers of the magic circle approach. They proceed to supplant the narrow magic circle point of view with one of their own – an approach that emphasizes something like social interaction between players, a wider cultural context, or concrete sociopolitical reality. Dragon slain."[292] The dragon, Zimmerman reinforces, is the kind of straw man binary debate first alluded to above by Taylor, but then reinforced and attacked by the very kind of critiques Zimmerman cites. "The argument goes something like this: the idea of the magic circle is the idea that games are formal structures wholly and completely separate from ordinary life. The magic circle naively champions the preexisting rules of a game, and ignores the fact that games are lived experiences, that games are actually played by human beings in some kind of real social and cultural context."[293] This is the essence of the magic circle

[291] T. L. Taylor, "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds," in *The Social Life of Avatars:Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments.*, ed. Ralph Schroeder, Book, Section vols. (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002)., 152.
[292]"Jerked Around by the Magic Circle - Clearing the Air Ten Years Later," accessed July 8, 2019, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/135063/jerked_around_by_the_magic_circle_.php.
[293] Ibid.

critique – that it is sterile, rule-based, and exclusive of particular contexts. It is hard to disagree with such a straw man debate if you do not know the straw man.

Zimmerman writes in his response to these critiques that, ultimately, things like the magic circle were intended to and should be used as game design *tools* and *heuristic devices* that "derive their value from their utility to solve problems. Their value is not derived from their scientific accuracy or proximity to truth", and that "The magic circle, as put forward in *Rules of Play,* is the relatively simple idea that when a game is being played, new meanings are generated. These meanings mix elements intrinsic to the game and elements outside the game."[294] A skeptic could assert that what looks like a response from Zimmerman could, in fact, be a corrective and a softening of his own stance to appease the critics. But, in the end, that matters less than how game scholars continue to move forward with (or without) the magic circle.

Here I will admit to my own paradox: I am one of the "earnest graduate students" that Zimmerman cites as launching these full-throated but short cited attacks, and in dealing with religion and video games, it is irresponsible *not* to mention the magic circle. But, at the same time – I do not want to deal with it. I am tired of it, and I think it is tired of us. [295] So instead, I will suggest ways not of going *beyond* the magic circle or *breaking* the magic circle, but rather suggest that posthumanism for the study of religion and video games is a way of going beyond the magic circle *debate*. In other words, a way of giving up the ghost on the magic circle while still keeping its heuristic efficacy firmly in our memories. I believe Zimmerman and follow his assertion: to see the magic circle as a heuristic device rather than a structural or functional truth and carry on beyond a debate about its veracity or utility.

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[294] Ibid.
[295] Ibid.

Posthumanism (*itself* a heuristic device for understanding digital practices of religion) bridges gaps remaining in the magic circle by repositioning *self* or *subject* rather than *space* or *place* and creating an expansive sense of both agency and embodiment, self and structure. By including technological devices, cultural systems (like rules and ideals), and the human body in one networked understanding of subject formation (or an enlarged sense of the subject), posthumanism allows the magic circle to not be such a problem. It is simply a parsing of the larger incorruptible web of relations, a way of seeing or thinking rather than an ontological or epistemological *truth*. Thinking through posthumanism breaks down not only binaries like human/non-human but the concern or need to so strongly think such binaries like those painted in the image of a magic circle strawman. Religious studies itself offers one such alternative methodology coinciding with both a posthuman and game studies model for understanding religion, ritual, and video games: gamevironments – which look both at the games and the cultural worlds they create.

Religious Studies and Studying Video Games

Beyond the narratology and ludology and magic circle debates, cultural and critical studies need methodologies to study video games – a common language or at least a set of priorities for a critical approach to video games. Even if we forgo the magic circle, an interdisciplinary approach to video gaming needs a shared language. In their *Rules of Play*, game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman offer three schemas for studying relations of form and value, focusing on different aspects of games, with "*formal* schema focused on rules (i.e., games as systems of uncertainty or as cybernetic feedback loops), *experiential* schema focused

on play (games as social play or as the play of desire), and *cultural* schema focused on context (games as cultural rhetoric or as ideological resistance)."[296]

"Form," "Experience," and "Culture" mark territories for understanding video games, and these landmarks have largely held in place since Salen and Zimmerman's 2003 text. Recent critical video games studies work on time, space, place, affect, disability, and queerness in and around games largely follow these schemas, identifying how they place themselves within these concerns.[297] Considering form means considering things like the hardware and software, the programming, the rules, and the interface. Considering experience means considering things like play, performance, temporality, and spatiality, and affect. Considering culture means considering things like fandoms, tropes, and symbols. Altogether, these three schemas (and their accordant territories) largely make up current approaches to studying digital games.

Religion scholars adapted these approaches towards gaming and religion specifically, as the study of games evolved and then moved into the study of religion. As Greg Grieve and Heidi Campbell point out in their cumulative monograph *Playing with Religion in Digital Games,* the study of video games began in earnest in 2007 at an American Academy of Religion panel, which brought together new scholars wrestling with how to study religion and video games.[298] In

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[296] Ibid.
[297] Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), The MIT Press, "The Art of Failure," The MIT Press, accessed January 13, 2020, https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/art-failure; Kristine Jorgensen and Faltin Karlsen, eds., *Transgression in Games and Play* (Cambride MA: The MIT Press, 2018); Christopher Hanson, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games*, Illustrated edition (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018); Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: NYU Press, 2019); Bonnie Ruberg, ed., *Queer Game Studies*, 1st edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[298] Campbell and Grieve, *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*.

the last decade or so, the study has increased, with a number of full-length book projects and a journal dedicated solely to religion and video gaming.[299]

A dominant methodological approach to studying religion and video games is what Vit Sisler, Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, and Xenia Zeiler named their "gamevironments" model for understanding gaming: focusing on the formal, technical, and cultural environments of a game. As Radde-Antweiler puts it, gamevironments "focuses on actors within or outside the game. They do not necessarily have to be gamers, but they can also be actors that are confronted with game content."[300] The gamevironments model is synthetic rather than systemic, as it looks at how schemas like Salen and Zimmerman's interact to locate how a game functions *in context* by focusing not only on the object of play but the social and material worlds in which they are embedded and reflected. It theorizes games as playing out through, in, and as a part of broader material and social worlds. Working through a gamevironments methodology means accounting not only for game content and game actors but those encountering game content and game actors, and the game itself as a material and cultural object. By understanding games beyond the screen and beyond the narrative, gamevironmental thinking reveals games as spaces where death is contested, an object of play, and subject to playfulness.

The gamevironmental model lends itself to the SST and STS model which inform my own present posthuman methodologies by focusing on the formal elements of a game and tracing their influence on values outside of the game space itself. Salen and Zimmerman and the gamevironmental model bolster SST's claim that formal factors of technologies are value-laden

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[299] Šisler et al., *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*, (Milton: Routledge Ltd, 2017), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315518336; Frank G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine: A New Systematic Theology of Video Games*, (Routledge, 2019); Chris Hansen, *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler, 1st edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).
[300] Šisler et al., *Methods for Studying Video Games and Religion*,210.

and ideological. By attending to the material and performative elements of religion and gaming, this chapter emphasizes that posthuman lineage of thinking within the gamevironmental model, fulfilling Zeiler's hope "…to critically reflect on the issues of how to study the field in a more organized way, with suitable methods, and to systematize and develop adequate methodological approaches."[301]

Playing with Death

Studying play and religion through this gamevironmental model means finding a middle ground, a networked place for thinking through the deep meaning of play in relation to religious practice. One shared space of both religion and play is the negotiation of death. Play theorists Neale, Sicart, and Bernard Suits all see play as in relation to (or in spite of) the omnipresence of death. For Neale and Sicart alike, writing some forty years apart, the former on religion and play and the latter on play and video games, play is a direct response to death, an affirmation of being a live in spite of the reality of death, and a way of living in direct opposition to this reality. Explicit modes of play like NDRs demonstrate an explicit ritualization of these relationships between play and death.

Why do we play? Sicart writes: "Brian Sutton-Smith gave one possible answer to this question: we play because life is crap. I propose another answer: we play because we're all going to die….Being conscious is knowing that self-reflection itself will go away… Playing is an affirmation that we are living, and not just surviving…We play because life is crap, and it will end, but we can be more than slaves to those inescapable facts. Mortality gives us meaning and purpose and being human is embracing that meaning and purpose as forms of expression, of

[301] Ibid.,4.

celebration, as a victory."[302] Similarly, Neale posits that "[T]he player lives a sanctified life. He does not alternatively fight the world and escape from it as the secular worker does, nor does he usefully and abusively covenant with it as the magical worker does. Rather, the full adult adventurer is in communion with the world, demonstrating the love that is identical to that expressed by the gods in their creation of the world in the beginning. The paradise of play is here and now. What happens to the child in play can happen to the adult, and when it does, paradise is present."[303]

For both Neale and Sicart, play functions as a kind of coming to terms with death, as a recognition of the mortality of human being and the need to create meaningful lives through play, not to dwell for too long on either end of a spectrum of euphoria or despair, but to play within the limits of the times and spaces and experiences that we have, in order to realize that death is an end to them, and that escape from death is not possible. Bernard Suits' utopic parable on play and games, *The Grasshopper,* begins with the death of his titular character, who refuses to work during the summer to save for the winter, and would rather die than refuse to be himself, one who does not work. For Suits, games and play are the opposite of work. This book, in large part is a defense of the importance of the act of playing, a focus on inefficient means, the imposing of arbitrary rules, where the rules make possible a certain type of activity.

Together for Suits, Sicart, and Neale to play is to accept death, but not on its terms. To play is to recognize the power of death, but not in this time or place, to play in spite of the power of death. To play is to refuse death, if only for the moment. To play is precisely not to die. Perhaps to play is *to play with being human*, at the limits of being human. Perhaps to play is to

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[302] "Play Matters," accessed July 8, 2019, http://www.playmatters.cc/.
[303] Neale, *In Praise of Play*, 172.

play at being post-human in the face of death. Previous definitions of play hold up under these circumstances and apply under this presence of death. Working off a definition of play as "free movement within a more rigid structure," the movement is a certain kind of living, and the structure is that of death.[304] But what kind of living is made possible by play, and what can play and games teach us about death? What do video games in particular teach us about playing with death?[305]

No Death Runs

Death has been an imminent threat to gamers since the earliest cabinet arcade games, where many early arcade games were no-death runs at their basic structure, with scores based on an ability solely to stay alive – so, No-Death Runs have been around as long as video-gaming and death has always lurked at game's edges, directing negotiations of narrative and play.[306] "You Died," "Dead," and "Wasted" showing up on the screen textualize death as a central and orienting game event, and playing a video game demands repeated death and demand repeated failure. Video games are, in one way, about the constant presence of death as defining the boundaries of play. Game designers have structured in many means of avoiding or forestalling this inevitable death. Health bars, new lives, potions, spells, shields, countdowns, and armor all defer imminent death. After this death, games ask players to try again – video games then, in

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[304] Bogost, *Play Anything*,94.

[305] For even more on explicit relationships between video gaming and death, see John W. Borchert, "Introduction to a Special Issue on Video Gaming and Death," 2018, https://media.suub.uni-bremen.de/handle/elib/3499.

[306] We must also remember here that death (particualry in an arcade game) means you must drop in more coins to play again. For an excellent account of the arcade as a public commercial practice, see C.A. Kocurek, "Coin-Drop Capitalism: Economic Lessons from the Video Game Arcade," 2012, 189–208.

another way, are about overcoming death. Success in games can mean avoiding death in different degrees, and in some cases, avoiding it altogether.

"No Death Runs" (NDRs) are player-imposed and community held sets of rules and structures where players must complete a game (whether that means by completing specific objectives or playing out the narrative) without incurring a single death. NDRs are self-imposed with their own rules and limits – gamers and gaming communities establish what it means to "die," what can and cannot be done or used in avoiding this death (using health packs or certain weapons, for example). The simplest of these rules is a complete run of the game from its opening to the defeat of its final level without dying or respawning: this could mean dashing through dangerous areas to avoid conflict or mastering difficult techniques that break or bend the game's structure to avoid damage unto death.

NDRs derive (especially in their communal aspects) from "Speed Runs," where, rather than being concerned with not dying and completing a game, players are concerned with completing the game in the quickest time possible. This too can involve breaking or bending the rules and structures of the game and its digital architecture (through glitches) in order to complete the task at hand. Speed runs began in earnest in the early 1990s, with PC game *Doom* and its built-in ability to record and share runs (a key to authenticating the veracity of a claim to the fastest time), but has since evolved into a vast online community and set of shared practices, including the annual "Games Done Quick" charity speed run event, which in 2019 raised three million dollars in two days.[307]

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[307]David Snyder, *Speedrunning: Interviews with the Quickest Gamers*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2017).1;"Games Done Quick," accessed July 8, 2019, https://gamesdonequick.com/.

Speed Runs and NDRs mean playing games in ways they were not intended to be played. In "The Importance of Playing in Earnest" Rachel Wagner redraws distinctions for play and games and religion from ones between "seriousness" and "fun" to those between "earnest" and "insincere," where "the error people tend to make the most in thinking about games and religion is to assume that the primary opposition at work is the idea that religion is 'serious' whereas games are 'fun.' I propose that a more accurate distinction is between being earnest as opposed to being insincere in one's engagement with the ordered world views that religions and games can evoke."[308] Wagner defines playing in earnest as "To be earnest in play is to buy into the system willingly and fully, to say yes to the world created by the rules."[309] She goes on to adapt categories from the likes of Suits and Salen and Zimmerman to distinguish four categories of insincere player: triflers, cheaters, spoilsports, and nihilists. Triflers play by the rules (technically) but do not care about or aim at the prescribed outcome. Cheaters actively transgress the prescribed rules of the game. The spoilsport exposes the constructed nature of the game world and the rule system, attempting to create new rules unto themselves, where the nihilist similarly exposes the rule system as a created world but refuse to acknowledge its power and labels it meaningless.

These speed and no death runners are not playing in earnest according to Wagner's model of earnest versus insincere play. But they are certainly more than triflers, cheaters, spoilers, or nihilists. They are not concerned with the game at hand but are up to something else completely. But they are also certainly playful and communal. Going back to defining play as freedom within a system is helpful here, as NDRs certainly exercise freedom – but not within the system of the

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[308] Rachel Wagner, "The Importance of Playing in Earnest," in *Playing with Religion in Digital Games*, ed. Heidi A Campbell and Gregory P. Grieve (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 194.
[309] Ibid.

game itself, but the system of the digital architecture. Rather than playing only *in* the game (that is, going along with the rules, performing a given role, and subjecting to the system of play), no death runners are playing *with* the game (creating space for movement within and outside those rules, the play that moves within the structure without rupturing it, but without exactly following the rules of law), and building an earnest community around it.

NDRs include communities that extend the gamevironments model. In addition to the self-imposed limits making up the death run, no-death gamers on Twitch (an online platform where gamers can live stream gameplay and interact with fans) calculate time and hits taken, as well as personal records (among other things). Such metrics quantify their relationship to the game, to other attempts, and the community of gamers, making new data around the values, and this communal and quantified accountability further extends no-death runs as a ritualized practice. The self-imposed limits, structures, and attentions create new ways of seeing and playing the game, resembling ritualizing structures (following JZ Smith and Catherine Bell) – those limits imposed upon regular activity towards a goal, the paying of attention to certain aspects of an everyday task that then takes on greater meaning.

NDRs are both playing *in* and playing *with* the game and require a facility and knowledge exceeding the game developer's expectations: that a player *will* die more than once. This kind of facility creates new ways of playing and playing with the structures of the games, the kinds of functional re-imaginings advocated by ethical posthumanists like Braidotti.[310] NDRs reimagine possibilities for death through three unique relations. First, death is known as a state (of failure) and as a quantity (of non-life, as quantified by a health meter or hit-points), and this allows a

[310] Braidotti, *The Post Human*, 2.

player to see death clearly, as a known presence, a constant threat, and a visible limit. Second, death is avoidable: avoiding death consumes the play style, with strategies and techniques to avoid death, the focus of the community of players gathering around these attempts and gamers develop expertise in sidestepping death, as death becomes no longer inevitable as a condition of living. Third, death becomes an object of play, and the line between livings and dying becomes a place of play through the processes of knowing and avoiding. Gamers play with rather than in the game by re-orienting the object of play towards the difference between living and dying rather than the narrative structure the developers intended. These ritualized relationships between gamers and death reveal value-laden posthuman thinking that encapsulates STS and SST thinking and turns NDR play into a relationship between player and machine, values and structure. Epistemological, ethical, and ontological thinking combine in the three ritualizations of no-death runs involved here as knowledge, possibilities, and performances.

Such ontological entanglements of digital games and materiality travel via Alexander Galloway's suggestion that games are interactive material systems, where "[t]he work itself is material action. One plays a game. And the software runs. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move" Galloway points to gaming as not only "material action" but material interaction between human and non-human actors.[311] Digital gaming is a material push and pull between machine and human, negotiating bytes and bits of code through material interfaces like controllers and keyboards. Look at this through the gamevironments model beyond game content alone turns material forms as part of the values they form. Part of these formations are the norms of communities of no-death runners.

[311] Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006),2.

Three Types of Death at Play

NDR players and communities gather around particularly technical and difficult games, ones in which completing an NDR (or even a "no-damage run" – where a player takes no damage at all!) is a marked achievement. These games often require defeating many enemies (both normal recurrences of the same type of "bosses," which are unique in their style and difficulty) and take hours to complete. The playstyle is often dense, where a player's memory and technical skill with the material interface (mouse, keyboard, controller) is tested. NDRs are typically not attempted on so-called "casual" games but focus around large-scale, high-budget "AAA" titles – the blockbusters of video games.

One series of games that has attracted the NDR community is the *Souls* series from Japanese developer FromSoftoware. The central trilogy of the series, *Dark Souls I,II,III* combine elements of action and fighting games with role-playing elements. Action games typically focus on a quest, the completion of discrete objectives across a narrative world made up of varying locations and scenarios. Fighting games focus solely on technical combat, with complex controller manipulation and timing elements. Role-playing games demand managing all aspects of the player character, notably the growth of certain skill sets, abilities, and the curation of an inventory of weapons and useful items. *Dark Souls* games combine these elements within a mythical medieval landscape.

Playing *Dark Souls* involves fighting enemies with well-timed dodges, sword strikes, and magic potions and collecting items like armor and spells, which will help you more easily endure these encounters. One unique aspect of the *Souls* series which makes it more difficult is health reduction upon death: each time your character is killed, their overall health bar (indicating their ability to endure a certain amount of damage from enemies) is reduced. So, each time you die, it

becomes more and more difficult to defeat the enemies that killed you. And each of these encounters demands memorizing not only your own movements and capabilities but those of the programmed enemies as well. This feature, along with the game's difficult controls and long play-time, makes it attractive to NDR players. *Dark Souls* and NDRs correspond in form and style and make evident three types of death in or at play in games: death is known, death is avoidable, and death is in play.

First, in the ritualization of death through no-death runs, death is knowable. In the *Dark Souls* series, when your character dies, the screen goes black, and "YOU DIED" appears in red letters – making it pretty clear what has just occurred. This is a stable state, a knowable space. The moment of death is recognizable and coherent. Control disappears, the character falls, and the screen fades to black, bringing you back to your last save point. Death is unmistakably death. In this way, death is a known limit – this is a familiar understanding of death – as all there is, the end.

Fig. 3. *Dark Souls* Death Screen

In *The Art of Failure,* video game theorist Jesper Juul marks this failure as the central paradox of gaming -- where, like in attending a tragedy, we sign up for and submit to unpleasant and painful experiences as part of what we say we enjoy doing. The paradox, Juul admits, is different, in that the game player, *we* are the one who fails, not simply a character through which we are living. Games, however, he notes, offer us a way out: "Games promise us a fair chance of redeeming ourselves. This distinguishes game failure from failure in our regular lives: (good) games are designed such that they give us a fair chance, whereas the regular world makes no such promises."[312] For Juul, failure is inherent to gaming, just as death is an integral part of play. But, so is the chance at overcoming death or failure. In these cases, before overcoming death, we must know death.

Death becomes knowable through the new image of new media – that is, the new ways new media forms like video games allow us to think about the image in relation to the body, the interface, and the performance of both, by making death or dying one type of interface between the image and the embodied experience of playing the game. Death is an intersection, a breaking point where the ability to play in and with the game space becomes interrupted in the player's experience and then becomes known as that intersection between the mechanics of the game, the narrative, and the ludological (or playful) elements of video-gaming. This is, again, what is new about new media – not what or how it is mediating exactly, but how it allows us to rethink mediation points and processes.

[312] Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (The MIT Press, 2013),7.

Dying in the game (and then attempting to overcome that death) is a process rather than a representation of death – through new media forms like video games, it becomes performative. The game itself performs a kind of death in its narrative and ludoloigcal rupture and resetting (to the last place in the game you advanced to before dying), and the player experiences that kind of death through the rupture of their playing and the need to start again. This, as Alexander Galloway notes, is the machine and the human being playing together.[313] By enacting this together, the game and player are creating the lived and experienced world together, somewhere between the idea of death, the performance of dying, and the playing on in spite of death.

Furthermore, the proximity of death and life is a known quantity. The health bar and its rate of depletion as indicators of death are monitored and managed. Life in Dark Souls is a quantity, and the distance to death a known measure. This quantity can be managed and negotiated through knowledge of how quickly the bar will recede when facing certain enemies, and potions and healing spells can directly intervene to bolster this health bar. Death here is known both as a state and as a proximity, both as a condition and a quantity. Quantifying death explicitly turns it into an incremental element for ritualization -- ritualization, as Smith notes, is about an obsession with detail, the making of difference, the setting of things apart. Setting living and dying into proximity, known quantities, particular elements on a scale from "most alive" to "fully dead" makes microcosms out of the essential condition to continue playing – staying alive. The microcosmic conditions are then manageable, and dying and living become *functions* of playing.[314]

[313] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*, 2.
[314] This is not to mention the recent trend in games, i.e "Stay Alive" – whose *sole* objective is not dying, through the management of body temperature, food intake etc..

Second – death is avoidable. NDRs depend upon the possibility of not dying in-game, and the community surrounding no-death runs gather around the sole act of avoiding death. These communities gather on forums, at conventions, and on video streaming platforms to develop strategies and encourage each other. Game streaming platforms like Twitch attract No-Death Runners and fans to share strategies, tips, and develop a shorthand for the game as a no-death game. What items to use, what routes to take, what bosses to run around or fight, are just the crudest examples of the many negotiations taking place towards making that perfect no-death run. "Personal Bests" (or PBs) are one metric to gauge their accomplishments, but time and hits or damage taken become other metrics. Through these metrics developed by these communities, death becomes not only knowable but knowable as avoidable or not necessary to the play of the game. All games present death as avoidable – it is possible but not probable. Most players, when they begin a game, accept the inevitability of death. No-death runs refuse this inevitability. Death becomes negotiable and becomes avoidable.

The avoidance of death through No-Death Runs expresses a crucial mechanic of ritualization—bringing into being the world as it could be in the world as it is, or creating an interface for new conditions for being through practice and performance. The interface is both the game itself (as a process for negotiating in-game death and a broader sense of the inevitability of death) and the communities of no-death runners that gather to discuss correct strategies and processes. Both interfaces ritualize death through performed and playful interaction.

This second interface, the community, is full of ritual expertise and of ritual experts. There are famed No-Death Runners, like Faraaz Khan, whose strategies are studied and

replicated as the proper procedure for creating certain outcomes.[315] Experts like Khan use shorthand, lingo, and elaborate statistics to explain and analyze their own attempts at No-Death Runs, creating metrics and guides for others Guides like these and video playthroughs of NDRs become topics of debate, where best practices for the most effective process are negotiated and contested. These videos and guides then become like ritual texts, where the goal is to achieve the perfect outcome or the flawless attempt.

Ritual expertise interfaces the ability to avoid death within the game as a process towards a particular result (as Galloway defines interface), and expertise becomes a way of parsing things apart (in Smith's sense of ritualization) to make better sense of things and make them more accessible. From simply avoidable to a process of avoidance, quantifying living and dying through the interface of NDRs further ritualizes it towards the way the world should be in contrast to the way the world presents itself. As the game presents itself, you must die. But as the NDR ritualizes it, death is avoidable by way of quantification and ritualization.

Third, through this knowledge and avoidance*, death comes into play*. By stabilizing death as a quantity and negotiating it as a known state, death becomes both an object *of* play and itself *at* play. Bringing death into play by way of new knowledge re-orients life and death by playing with limits between the body of the game and the gamer through the kinds of structure and repetition pointed to by Smith and Bell as structures of ritual. By self-imposing new limits to the game in the form NDRs, gamers create new means of relating between the death of the game body and the successes of their embodiment as gamers. Success and failure are the only two conditions of gameplay. However, through this re-orientation, gamers are always encountering

[315] "Faraaz Khan - YouTube," accessed November 25, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsi0z-rurGV30mc_wFnyA7A.

failure in death and trying to avoid it on the next run. Through this repetition, no-death runs bring death closer to the gaming experience.

Video game theorist Chris Hanson argues that digital games are uniquely constituted of repetition "by their algorithmic materiality…be it via looping conditional statements in code or their structural and sensory reliance on similarity and difference."[316] He goes on to further note that this inherent repetition is made explicit through how players (like Speed Runners and NDRs) use these games. In these cases, he states, "players are not necessarily encouraged to actively replay the game by the game itself, but instead choose to do so for perfecting and ultimately recording their play as demonstrative exposition of their mastery."[317] In these cases, death, as the object of and at play, overrides the narrative, overrides another objective – it becomes the sole objective. The game then itself is at play, now ritualized as a stark contest between living and dying.

NDRs highlight the place death has always had at the center of video-gaming by re-negotiating and re-orienting the role death plays in games through these three discrete ritualizations. In other words, by playing with death, they call attention to its omnipresence in gaming by making it avoidable, and through this, put it into play – in the sense that it *is* now negotiable, as there is now space within the boundaries to move. This kind of negotiation is a ritualized one in that it is done through the regulations of a community of gamers and the regulations of the game architecture itself: through limits of peer monitoring and platform

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[316] Christopher Hanson, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games,* Illustrated edition (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), 111.
[317] Ibid., 131.

restrictions, no death-run gamers construct means of performing beyond the limits of death, or at the least, see death as practically negotiable.

Playing with the predicament of death across mediated space invites a posthuman approach to new media and gaming by welcoming in the material and cultural aspects of subjectivities within gameplay. Posthumanism carries with it a responsibility to account for all material and ontological nodal points along an expanded sense of human and non-human subjectivity and thus brings with it certain ethical and ontological consequences or awareness when considering gaming as a posthuman practice of knowing and or being. Such a posthuman orientation involves both the ethical and ontological aspects of posthumanism as discussed above because NDRs illustrate a comprehensive approach to gaming, a gamevironmental approach. Ritual theory parses these ethics and ontologies, forming the NDR into strategies for negotiation, means of accountability for the task at hand, and metrics of success or failure. By re-making the object of play death, NDRs ritualize gameplay. Thinking of video games as part of a posthuman, cybernetic, and symbiotic relationship between humans and machines, and the no death run as implicated in a ritualized practice of this posthuman ontology, means seeing NDRs as working out a human relationship between life/death machine and human all within and across the social, political and ecological locations of a gamevironment.

Playing with death bleeds outside of the so-called game space or "magic circle." Gamevironmental models for religion in games and new media theories from Alexander Galloway, John Durham-Peters, and others invite an expanded sense of media as ecologically and materially integrated with human and non-human alike. These expanded and material senses of media and mediation may not allow for such bounded ritual spaces at all but instead insist their lines are transparent or at least porous. If we follow along with new media theories and

bolster that with a gamevironments theory of games, these ritual negotiations of death through no-death runs take place across disrupted boundaries between the in-game and out-game spaces – spaces whose discrete categories are contested both within ecological and material models of new media along with the gamevironmental model.

Conclusions: Strawmen, Magic Circles, and Religion

NDRs demonstrate how a posthuman epistemology overcomes a strawman magic circle to bridge divisions between human and machine by relocating the object of focus from ludology or narrative to the material relations and ritualizations taking place through gaming. By attending to what playing with death *does* rather than what it means or represents, a posthuman epistemology does not get bogged down in what is or is not play, what is or is not a game space, what is or is not religion. Mackenzie Wark wrestles with the consequences of this (what she calls) "gamespace" as the overtaking of all spaces as themselves subject to the rules of a game or the rules of play in her 2007 *Gamer Theory*: "[w]hether gamespace is more real or not than some other world is not the question; that even in its unreality it may have real effects on other worlds is. Games are not representations of this world. They are more like allegories of a world made over as gamespace. They encode the abstract principles upon which decisions about the realness of this or that world are now decided."[318] So for Wark, like for posthumanism, gamespace or playing becomes a matter of abstract principles – like epistemologies, as a matter of determining a way of negotiating the world, like death.

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[318] McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2009). 20.

Posthumanism looks to the ways in which the structures of the game and death are re-negotiated through a kind of playing *with* the game. From earlier entanglements of studying religion and play, a posthuman focus remains on both how play and ritual are functionally similar while taking seriously the co-formations of subjectivity and meaning-making potential taking place through human/machine/system interactions and agencies. Just as Rachel Wagner points out, there are various ways to play *with* a game (though trifling, cheating, spoiling, and nihilism), and NDRs demonstrate another type of playing with a game: the freedom of movement and co-expression between machine systems, game systems, and players. By playing in earnest to overcome the aspect of death, the aspect of failure within the game, no-death runs fold in human and machine elements in material and conceptual ways to ritualize death and its defeat, where a posthumanism as inspired by Science and Technology Studies and material feminism can help us better understand these infoldings.

These interactions and agencies in NDRs reinforce what play studies says about play: it is done in full awareness of and in direct reaction to the presence of death, where no-death runs make this explicit by making death the only object of play. For no-death runs, playing in spite of death transforms into playing *with* death by confronting death head-on, as an object to be known and to be played with. It plays with death by ritualizing it through the ways pointed to above – making it known and avoidable through certain expertise, communal knowledge, and machine manipulations.

By making death an object of ritualized play within a digital medium, NDRs are emblematic of how video games function without a magic circle or ludology/narrative divide or function in spite of them. Debates over such methodological and theoretical categories do little to capture how these no-death runs function as an aspect of play and as a response to the presence

of death. Instead, no-death runs point to an interfaced and performative approach to play and games that exceeds capture by anything but a methodology that includes a posthuman lens.

No-Death Runs re-orient thinking about play, games, religion, and death around largely two key intersections of new media, ritual, and posthumanism: interfaces and performance.

As an interface, as a process that effects a "result of whatever kind," NDRs mediate between the world as it is and the world as it could be: one with necessary death and one without.[319] This pulls on both Galloway's concept of the interface and Geertz's idea about the ritual – that it is a mediating factor between a real-world and a possible one, one which uses the resources available to it to shape and make possible that world within a ritual setting. In thinking of digital mediation as an embodied practice (like Galloway or Hansen), NDRs become a material interface between the (game) world as it is and the (game) world as it could be, a (game) world that quickly expands in its consequences beyond the world of a game or play, as it leaves a magic circle debate behind to take on a posthuman form.

Through this interface, performative agency is granted to both machine and player through new relations that further posthuman connections. Machine and human push back and forth, negotiating possible outcomes of death or no death, ritualizing contestations between possible outcomes. The performance of this co-operation between machine and non-machine materiality blurs the lines between what kind of subjectivity is being performed, as lines between game-space, player, and operating systems break down. When no-death runs play both *in and with* the game, they perform this posthuman interface.

Taking video games seriously (as an economic and cultural force) means taking seriously how they can reshape what and how we perform religion and religiosity. By re-

[319] Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*,vii.

orienting thinking about play, games, religion, and death through posthuman interfaces and performances, NDRs further imbricate ritual and new media theories, illustrate the performance of religion as itself mediation, and move the study of religion and video games itself out of its own magic circle, and into a broader conversation regarding death, mediation, and play. My proposed posthuman approach to understanding digital religion and mediation through ritualization and new approaches to new media unfolds across something like no-death runs to reveal their interfacing and performative approaches to death and to how scholars of digital religion can understand gaming without magic circles or ludology, but instead with materiality and ritual.

CONCLUSION

We left Charon at the banks of the river, watching as he stooped low to steer human life and death into the fogs of a technological future, and we lifted our posthuman lens to hopefully clock his path. By now, that lens has become clear, revealing the interfaces between bodies and tools, living and dead. Charon's body shows that through history and form, death and mourning have always been about technological mediation, transportation, information, and moving across boundaries. As the *kybernetes*, the steersmen, of the dead, Charon's body and tools mediate while Norbert Wiener's *cybernetics* carries on a lineage of naming mediation and death together. So as death implicates technological mediation, so does mediation implicate death.

This dissertation's turn to a religious studies of posthuman digital death is one little bend in the banks of Charon's path, an appreciation of the etymological, historical, and material connections between mediation and death as primary to understanding new digital death rituals. The above theories and cases in digital mediation have shown that following technological mediations of death requires a methodology incorporating new media and ritual theories towards a posthuman epistemology.

Having introduced a lineage of posthuman thinking that demands an epistemological bridge between its historically ethical and ontological roots, our lens first realizes the potential for posthumanism in thinking ritual and new media practices. Posthumanism cannot escape humanism. Instead, we must look at it as a heuristic and optimistic *tool* that demands we escape the velocity of humanism's limits towards a contingent and interfaced sense of human being as an action and a mode of being. From here, we can stitch together new media and ritual theories that share a similar imperative towards recognizing function. A posthuman influence on ritual and mediation incorporates materiality and ideology alongside ritual theory and new theories for

mediation alongside digital media. It goes on to see mediation beyond media, a *new* theory for media rather than a new media *theory* – one that sees religious rituals around death as themselves as performed or performative interfaces. The BiosIncube and No-Death Runs go on to illustrative how looking towards materiality and performance in digital cases of mourning reveal these posthuman connections, these interfaces, and material performances of embodied and ritualized mourning by calling attention to place, performance, and embodiment. In all, this dissertation illustrates a posthuman epistemology for digital mourning through these four distinct chapters.

The first chapter allowed us to see past the fuzzy boundaries of techno-utopias and dystopias towards a posthuman methodology by establishing a functional definition of posthumanism. This ethical, ontological, and ultimately epistemological lineage emerges from its own histories as a heuristic that critiques the values of humanism as a paradoxical, exploratory term intended to reveal the human by going beyond it. Such a posthumanism is based on a situated way of knowing and oriented towards a wider horizon of what is sensible or knowable through a networked and interconnected sense of human being. This heuristic methodology opens itself up to the interfacing inherent in the functioning of religious rituals and new mediations of death by basing itself in these networked senses of being. And by basing itself in a particular history of this kind of thinking, this methodology, in turn, grounds its thinking in a post-war, heuristic, posthuman moment. With each of its concurrent trends emerging at this moment, Anti-humanism, Cybernetics, Science and Technology Studies, and Material Feminisms all support such an exploratory posthuman for religious studies. So, both conceptually and historically, posthumanism coalesces around shared concerns about death, mediation, interfacing, and modes of being in communication. In all, this functional

posthumanism serves as a religious studies heuristic for exploring how new mediations of death and mourning take place.

From here, the second chapter relayed convergent concerns for new media and ritual that open up a *new theory* for media rather than a *new media* theory. By folding together emergent or emerging disciplines, this second chapter follows the first by concentrating a posthuman epistemology on the shared concerns of new media and ritual theories, namely: embodiment, performance, and interface. This focus furthers a fuller understanding of the *functional* nature of the proposed heuristic for understanding new mediations of death and mourning by granting a history and depth of theory to a posthuman epistemology. In other words, the second chapter's look into the shared aims of new media and ritual theories further articulates the reach of a posthuman epistemology by grounding it in particular thinkers, histories, and disciplines of thought. As both desiring towards a pattern, ritual and new media share a cybernetic operation by basing themselves off feedback and reintegration of information. Embodiment, Performance, and Interface offer signposts for the remainder of the work, as it moves from shaping the heuristic tools and territories to sampling them over the two case studies that make up the latter half of the work.

From these theoretical chapters, we moved in chapter three to further unfold the specific function and utility of ritual studies in understanding a new media object of death and mourning by focusing on three aspects of ritual within this heuristic framework: place-making, intensification, and performance. Each applies to the BiosIncube as a place to think about the swirling network of connections between human, plant, and digital agency and materiality as an interface through death and mourning. This reveals death and mourning in particular as a location for thinking about posthuman embodiments and methodologies, showing how the

conceptual or theoretical path leads both ways: death leads us to think about mediation, and mediation points us back to thinking about death. In particular, the Incube leaves us remarking on the profound importance of performativity for the functioning of interfaces. Without the ritualizing of the Incube through both the embodied dead and living, there would be no functioning interface, no Incube at all. Rather, it is through the delicate, contingent, and networked relationships of the plant/cremain/digital interface that a posthuman ontology is revealed.

Looking finally at No-Death Runs in chapter four reverses the direction from using ritual to understand digital media (in the case of the Incube) to using digital media to understand ritual in the case of no-death-runs. In other words, instead of beginning from ritual studies as the starting point for understanding, the fourth chapter begins by embedding itself in a history of games, play, and video-game theory to understand and appreciate the place for ritual theory in expanding this understanding. Unraveling this intertwined history of the study of play, games, and religion reveals a shared sticking point around place-making and meaning-making. From the magic circles to the debates about ludology and narratology, play and video-game studies open up a discussion about how playing both in and with ideas around death can retrace the very limits of what is and is not a game space or a space of play. In other words, playing in the face of (and oftentimes in spite of) death reveals the kind of interfaced and performative approach to new media and death rituals emblematic of the proposed posthuman epistemology. Playing with death through no-death runs activates gamevironmental models for studying gaming and religion without the burden of the so-called magic circle, instead focusing on games and play as locations for rethinking ritual and materiality.

These case studies allow a pragmatic application of a heuristic device in epistemological posthumanism for religious studies. It becomes a function of these chapters, a way of speaking across and through disciplinary or conceptual concerns with a constant eye towards the establishment of what is human or non-human interaction. Like its foundational paradox, posthumanism is a way of thinking about the human that emphasizes the non-human, and these examples of digital-ritual behaviors towards death fortify this way of thinking by incorporating a shared history of death and mediation into a theory for its analysis. In other words, epistemological posthumanism allows religious studies an approach to thinking new mediation through an interface of the human and non-human by allowing in a shared etymological, temporal, and conceptual history that grounds digital rituals around death in these shared spaces.

Being a pragmatic and heuristic posthumanism does mean that it comes with certain limitations. In that it is a paradox, posthumanism in these cases can never truly escape the humanism it sets out to critique – it is always applied to that term it is moving against. And being pragmatic, it can only apply to the cases at hand and the discourse in which it exists. For these reasons, an ambivalence can developed around the extended usefulness of posthumanism in all cases around digital religion. So, while posthumanism as developed here is useful for understanding the cases at hand, it does have lurking limits and blind spots in its ability to fully account for the oppressive and exclusionary discourses it sets out to critique in humanism. From here though we can only move forward, with the hope for further comprehensive use of this fruitful typology.

Moving beyond digital death to broader reaches in religious studies, posthumanism and digital religion help understand religion *as* mediation, as embodied and as in direct relation to death. Each of these three insights: mediation, embodiment, and death, both fortify established

and secure new areas of study or interest in the discipline. Attending to religion as mediation can free scholars from a functional/essential dichotomy and instead look to religion in and as that thing in between. Attention to the performances of embodiment now has a stronghold on the discipline, and this work offers an expansion of that into the digital and posthuman spaces for what counts as a body. And as thinking religion in direct relation to death moves the world of death studies closer into an established circle of scholarship around ritual and rites.

This functional approach to the study of religion allows for scholars and teachers to see religion as a form of mediation. Doing so not only escapes definitional problems of essential versus functional by putting religion itself as somewhere in the middle, as an in-between, but it also avoids getting hung up on particular *forms* of mediation and by turning towards an activated and functional sense of religion as mediation of bodies and things in the broadest sense. In other words, by seeing all religious activtiy as always mediated and mediating, scholarship can free itself from prefatory questions of authenticity and originality to instead attend to the material and social realities of the practice at hand. So for both religious studies in general and studies of media and religion, thinking of a posthuman epistemology for *all* religious practice frees scholarship from getting bogged down in questions that precede mediation and instead allows it to look at the function of the mediation itself.

Religion as embodied is nothing new to this project, as shown by the thinkers and theories it has borrowed and built upon throughout. So, this posthuman epistemology instead extends this sense of embodiment across and through a spectrum of what can be considered human and/or non-human. By gathering in the elemental, technological, and plant/animal life into an ecology of being a posthuman epistemology for religious studies broadens this sense of what is or has a body. Religious studies has a distinct investment in extending this sense into the

realms of the divine or supra-human, and posthumanism obliges this investment into other modes of relationality. Where religious studies has long been interested in how human beings commune and communicate with non-human (divine) beings, posthumanism extends this vertical connection horizontally.

Seeing religious practice as in relation to death is a particular facet of this mediating and embodied extension of human being into non-human being or life into non-life. And like with embodiment, seeing religion as inherently tied to anxieties, questions, and relations to and after death is not unique to this project. However, by calling attention to the intervention of death studies and by drawing on these resources to support a material and posthuman sense of relation to death, this project creates a new way to understand death and the afterlife as "posthuman" conditions. As noted before, this wordplay leads to an understanding of posthumanism itself as tied to death, mediation as tied to death, and religious studies investment in death as requiring the shared material and cultural awareness of death studies. As a field largely isolated to small pockets of religious studies (and particularly the United Kingdom), death studies is tremendously helpful for understanding the ecological, political, and social consequences and repercussions of new and emerging death practices. For a religious studies posthumanism, it is invaluable.

These posthuman understandings of religion as mediated, embodied, and tied to death have implications within the study of American religion as well, touching on the American ideal being held up through ideas of technoscientific salvation and the erasure of certain types of bodies and embodiments in and through death. One way to take these posthuman methodologies is to further evaluate the impacts of technology on material religion in American contexts. Archival work and media analysis could examine how the sense of the body has been shaped by American religious reactions and adaptions of technological advances through the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries and how this lineage impacts current theories of religion in the Americas. Charting a genealogy of American religious practice and its interaction and impact on movements of technocratic modernization from the rise of cremation to advanced digital mourning practices could reveal impacts of cultural forces on material embodiments in a moment shaped politically by technological infrastructures and algorithms.

On particular future focus could be further exploring how utopian communities in America historically reacted to technologies of change and how these reactions are reflected (or not reflected) not only in the archives of the communities themselves, but how they are accounted for within religious histories of America, specifically around questions of gender and race, and what these histories of utopian communities include or don't include regarding so-called secular adoptions of similar technologies. Another could be a look at the impact the rare metals making up the material infrastructures of digital technologies have on global ecologies and economies, and how digital religious practice responds to these impacts. Electronic waste (or "e-waste") refers to the un-recyclable waste from disused electronics, mainly consisting of the rare and sometime volatile earth metals that make up circuits and motherboards. One of the largest informal areas for such economic e-waste recycling is in the Agbogbloshie region of Ghana. Each of these cases could lead to greater exploration of race, gender, and class in its confluence with posthuman digital religion.

With both these specific inquiries into American religious history to potential interventions into religious studies around mediation more broadly, the proposed posthuman epistemology and heuristic case studies look to the rituals and tools that mediate death. From the Incube to video gaming, from green burial to magic circles, from Charon to cybernetics, they all

explore and explain the limits of human being and continue telling a story about how we mediate death.

So, as Charon dips his paddle into the stream and floats away, if we want to understand mediations of death, we must attend to every bit of the mediating apparatus and its performance: the stream, the boat, the paddle, the bodies. The digital American psychopomp is posthuman.

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BIOGRAPHY

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EDUCATION

PhD Religion – Syracuse University, Expected May 2021
MPhil Religion – Syracuse University, 2016
MA Religion - Syracuse University, 2013
BA Philosophy and Religion - Ithaca College, 2009

ACADEMIC POSITIONS

Visiting Lecturer - Religious Studies Department, UNC Greensboro 2020-21
Lecturer – Department of Philosophy and Religion, Ithaca College 2019-20
Instructor - Renée Crown Honors Program, Syracuse University 2017-19

COURSES TAUGHT

REL320: "Digital Religion", Syracuse University, Spring 2017
HNR240: "How Religion Makes Bodies", Syracuse University Honors Program, (x3)
RLST104: "Introduction to New Testament", Ithaca College (x2)
RLST207: "Death and Immortality", Ithaca College (x2)
RLST375: "Religion and Film", Ithaca College, Spring 2015
REL 109: "Religion and Contemporary Culture" UNCG (x2)
REL 207: 'Modern Problems of Belief' UNCG Fall 2020
REL 104; "Religion, Ritual, and the Arts" UNCG Spring 2021

PUBLICATIONS

"Navigating Identity and Embodiment in Digital Games" in the Oxford Handbook of Digital Religion, eds. Campbell and Hope-Cheong, (Oxford). forthcoming

"Religion" co-authored with Gregory P. Grieve in Digital Religion 2.0, ed. Heidi Campbell, (New York: Routledge 2020). forthcoming

Editor, Gamevironments special issue "Video Gaming and Post Mortality", 9:1, 2018
https://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de/current-papers-and-archive/

Review, Internet Afterlife: Virtual Salvation in the 21st Century, Kevin O'Neill. In Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture, 7:1, 2018

AWARDS

Syracuse University Teaching Assistant Fellowship 2013-2018
Syracuse University Future Professoriate Stipend 2016,2017

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

Board Member, International Academy for the Study of Gaming and Religions 2018-
Editorial Board, *gamevironments*¸2018-
Editorial Assistant, Journal of Religion, Media, and Digital Culture (Brill) 2018-
Steering Committee, Religion & Media Workshop, AAR 2018-
Steering Committee, Death, Dying & Beyond Unit, AAR 2018-
Editorial Assistant, Political Theology (Taylor and Francis) 2015-2016
Member, Religion Graduate Organization at Syracuse University 2011-
Member, American Academy of Religion 2008-Present

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY SERVICE

Department of Religion Graduate Admissions Committee, Syracuse, 2017-2018
Student Association Senator, Graduate Student Organization, Syracuse, 2016-2017
Co-President, Religion Graduate Organization at Syracuse University 2014-2015
Creator/Organizer, Graduate Symposium: "Theory and Things" Fall 2014.
Organizing Committee, "Undergraduate Conference: Religion and Culture", Spring 2014.
Creator/Organizer, Symposium: "Body, Space and Performance" Spring 2012.