

# Divine play: Religious interpretation of play philosophy

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This article explores the religious interpretation of play philosophy across different historical periods and contexts, from ancient Greek thought to contemporary digital media. Drawing on the works of prominent philosophers such as Heraclitus, Plato, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Huizinga, as well as recent scholarship on digital media and religion, the article examines the role of play in shaping religious thought, practice and experience. It consists of three main sections, focusing on divine play in ancient Greek philosophy, the religious connotations of the 'playful order' in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Huizinga, and the transformative potential of video games as a medium for religious expression and exploration.

**Contribution:** By synthesising diverse perspectives and examining the religious implications of play philosophy in various contexts, this study offers new insights into the relationship between the divine and humanity, and the significance of play in religious life. It also highlights the potential of digital media to provide innovative avenues for religious exploration, fostering a deeper understanding of the role of play in both historical and contemporary religious contexts.

**Keywords:** divine play; philosophy of play; religious interpretation; playful order; video games; digital age.

## Introduction

The concept of play has long been an integral part of human culture, encompassing a wide range of activities and experiences. From the playful interactions of children to the complex cultural rituals and practices, play has served as a means for individuals and societies to explore their relationships with the world and the divine. Throughout history, philosophers, theologians and scholars have explored the intersection of play and religion, seeking to understand the role of play in shaping religious thought, practice and experience (Caillois 2001; Huizinga 2007; Turner 1998). In recent years, advances in digital technology have given rise to new forms of play, such as video games, which have the potential to redefine our understanding of the relationship between the divine and humanity (Campbell 2012; Geraci 2014). This article aims to explore the religious interpretation of play philosophy from ancient Greek thought to contemporary digital media.

Existing research on play philosophy and religion has primarily focused on the works of individual philosophers, such as Plato (Cornford 1935), Nietzsche (Hinman 1974; Kaufmann 1974), and Huizinga (Anchor 1978), or examined specific religious practices and rituals through the lens of play (Bell 1997; Turner 1998). However, few studies have attempted to establish a comprehensive understanding of the religious implications of play philosophy across different historical periods and contexts (Saler 2012). Furthermore, the potential of digital media, such as video games, to transform religious expression and exploration has only recently begun to be explored by scholars (Bosman 2019; Campbell & Geraci 2014).

This study seeks to bridge the gap in existing research by examining the religious interpretation of play philosophy across a broad historical and cultural spectrum, from ancient Greece to the digital age. By examining the works of key philosophers and theologians, as well as the transformative potential of digital media, this article aims to shed light on the religious significance of play and its role in shaping human understanding of the divine. Furthermore, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of religion and digital media by investigating the ways in which video games, as a new form of play, can reshape our understanding of religious expression and exploration.

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The framework of the thesis is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between play and religious experience, from ancient Greek thought to contemporary digital culture. Each section builds on the insights of the previous one, illustrating the continuity and evolution of play philosophy in religious thought and practice. The connection between the sections highlights the transformative potential of play in shaping our understanding of the divine, emphasising the need for a reevaluation of the relationship between the sacred and the secular in the contemporary world.

In conclusion, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the religious interpretation of play philosophy, from ancient Greek thought to contemporary digital media. By examining the works of key philosophers and theologians, as well as the transformative potential of digital media, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the intersection of religion and play, fostering a deeper understanding of the religious significance of play and its role in shaping human understanding of the divine.

## The origins of divine play: Humans as God's plaything

This section explores the concept of divine play, focusing on the works of ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Heraclitus and Plato. The purpose of the section is to examine the notion of play within the context of human–divine relations, highlighting the dual dimensions of play in ancient Greek civilisation. The section is organised into three main sections: an overview of the divine play concept, a discussion of Heraclitus' view on play, and an analysis of Plato's perspective on play. Finally, the section concludes with a synthesis of the key points and arguments presented in the text.

### The divine play concept

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga found that the root *Spielen* and *Spell* in Germanic language contained 'play' (as a verb) and 'game' (as a noun) at the same time. However, this connection between verb and noun 'to some extent this is lost in English by the doublet play and game' (Huizinga 2007:37). German philosopher Gadamer (2006:104) once explained that the original meaning of the term 'game' is an intermediate concept that denotes both the act of entering into a game and becoming part of an ongoing game for the players involved. In other words, the verb and noun forms of game have coexisted and blended throughout history. 'Game' not only has the verb meaning of passive participation, that is, 'being played', but also includes the noun meaning of active participation, that is, 'engaging in a game'.

In ancient Greek civilisation, play served as an overarching metaphor for the relationship between humans and deities. It primarily encompassed two dimensions: firstly, gods manipulated human destinies through play, rendering

humans as mere components of divine plays, and consequently, the objects of play. Secondly, humans approached and comprehended the divine through play, establishing themselves as the subjects of the game, with play residing within the realm of human activity.

### Heraclitus' view on play

Heraclitus was one of the first philosophers to use 'play' to explore the cosmic order and the relationship between the human and the divine (Krell 1972:66). He conceived of the cosmos and the eternal changes of human existence as a playful interaction between the divine and the mortal realm, in which human beings are, without doubt, the objects of divine play. He posited that the cosmic order, or Logos, governed the universe, with fire as the primordial element responsible for the ceaseless processes of creation and destruction. Fire symbolised the deity judging all things, from which everything arose and ultimately perished. This divinely administered cosmic order, steered by the sacred Logos, can be perceived as an intricate game shaping human life and the world around us. Heraclitus famously said, 'Lifetime is a child at play, moving pieces in a game. Kingship belongs to the child' (Kahn 2004:227). The American scholar Charles Kahn believes that 'movement' here represents a kind of cosmic order, including the three processes of life and death, sleep and wakefulness, and youth and aging. These three pairs of human experiences also represent an alternating process of 'fire' being ignited and extinguished. In other words, the transformation of these three important human experiences, which determine human nature, is as easy as the supreme ruler moving pieces on a chessboard in a game.

### Plato's perspective on play

Plato's works, such as *The Republic* and *Laws*, also explore the perspective of humans as objects of play. In the past, Plato has been seen as a symbol of secularist philosophy, but in fact, Plato's thought is full of divine and religious implications (Nightingale 2021:8–9). This is especially true of Plato's view of 'play'. Plato portrays gods as architects crafting human souls and the material world, emphasising that divine beings can shape human existence through play. In his work *Laws*, Plato (1988:193) said that human 'has been devised as a certain play-thing of god...Every man and woman should spend life in this way, playing the noblest possible games'. From this account, it is clear that Plato's thoughts not only align with the attribute of humans being 'played' – as mere puppets in God's game – but also introduce the notion that humans can approach the divine through the attribute of play.

In the second dimension of play, 'human play', Plato posits that the objective of play is singular and definite, serving as a means for people to comprehend the divine and the cosmic order they manipulate. Simultaneously, it constitutes a human activity, with the goal being achievable only through the process of playing. Here, Plato sees all education

(play) as promoting the understanding of divine matters (Mueller 2005:114). In Plato's view, contrary to the singular purpose of play, the varieties of play are manifold, encompassing offerings, dancing, singing and imitative arts (such as epics, tragedies and music). He states: 'one should live out one's days playing at certain games – sacrificing, singing and dancing – with the result that one can make the gods propitious to oneself' (Plato 1988:193). Plato also believed that children should learn all skills and knowledge through play: 'don't use force in training the children in the studies, but rather play' (Plato 1991:216).

In summary, the ancient Greek concept of divine play comprises two dimensions: humans as objects of play in the divine realm, and humans as subjects of play, using play to approach and comprehend the divine. Both Heraclitus and Plato acknowledge the notion of humans as components of the divine play, with Heraclitus emphasising the ceaseless transformation of the world and human existence as a product of divine interaction. Plato, on the other hand, describes gods as architects shaping human destinies through play.

## The divine playgrounds: Rethinking the religious connotation of the 'playful order'

It is widely believed that Nietzsche's 'Death of God' constitutes a complete repudiation of religious thought. In reality, the concept of the 'world as play' posited in his works is replete with religious significance, perpetuating ancient Greek discourses on the playful relationship between humans and the divine. Heidegger and Huizinga, like Nietzsche, utilise the notion of play to depict the order of the world, not only evoking an atmosphere of religious mysticism but also embodying the unique connotations of a 'divine playground'. In this section, the essay will demonstrate the profound influence of religious thought on atheistic philosophers by comparing the discourses of these three thinkers on the 'playful order of the divine'.

### The divinity of Nietzsche's 'World Game'

Nietzsche's idea of the world as a game is closely connected to his concept of eternal recurrence, which suggests that the universe and all events within it recur infinitely. He said, 'the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game in infinitum' (Nietzsche 1968:549). As the game of the world exceeds human existence, the world never began and will not end. All states of ending are temporary, and everything exists in an infinite cycle of generation and extinction. Humans never need to worry about the world's creation.

Generally, it is assumed that this concept of eternal recurrence bears significant implications for human existence, challenging traditional religious and moral systems (Salaquarda 1996:107). By proposing that all events repeat

infinitely, Nietzsche questions the ideas of linear progress and divine intervention, urging individuals to embrace the ever-changing nature of reality and its inherent uncertainties. Contrary to popular belief, Welson (2004:186) argues that Nietzsche's view of the world as a game of eternal recurrence is an affirmation of an eternal world and a validation of religious metaphysics. Within religious thought, the universe persists, and it is only the form of the world that transitions between life and death, not its essence. Heaven and hell in religion serve as extensions of the real world. Consequently, Nietzsche's concept of the game is imbued with profound religious significance.

However, unlike traditional religious thought, Nietzsche does not advocate a painful or negative attitude but rather encourages a joyful, affirmative approach to eternal recurrence. As the world is an eternal game of recurrence, the birth and demise of individuals are filled with chance and diversity, akin to a game. People should not treat life's randomness with a solemn or grave demeanour; instead, they ought to adopt a joyful and affirmative attitude. In essence, Nietzsche expands the understanding of divinity as an affirmation of life, encompassing all its struggles, joys and contradictions. Deleuze's (2002:197) appraisal of Nietzsche's philosophy resides in the idea that 'multiplicity, becoming, and chance are objects of pure affirmation'.

In this way, Nietzsche's ideas on the world as a game and eternal recurrence resonate with the theme of divine play, offering an alternative understanding of the divine that emphasises the affirmation of life, including all its struggles, joys and contradictions. In relation to the broader theme of divine play in religious studies, Nietzsche's ideas stand out for their emphasis on the playfulness and dynamism of existence, which contrasts with more traditional perspectives that often emphasise divine control and order. However, this observation provides a novel perspective for understanding the religious order of the world.

### The divinity of Heidegger's 'Fourfold Play'

Heidegger (2001:177) sees the fourfold consisting of heaven, earth, divinities and humans as the space of play; he said: 'This appropriating mirror-play of the simple onefold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals, we call the world'. Fourfold Play has similarities with Nietzsche's concept of world play. However, Heidegger's concept of 'play' is more mystical and sacred; some scholars even say that the holy is the basic medium through which Heidegger thinks about the 'fourfold play' (Mitchell 2015:163–164).

The strongest evidence of this is Heidegger's (2001) explanation of the divinities in the Fourfold Play, where he says:

The divinities are the beckoning messengers of the godhead. Out of the hidden sway of the divinities the god emerges as what he is, which removes him from any comparison with beings that are present. (p. 176)

As the religious scholar Ben Vedder has examined, the influence of religious thought on Heidegger was enormous, and he summarised the whole set of existential ideas from religious phenomena as well as from religious contexts. When Vedder (2014) explicates Heidegger's concept of the fourfold from a religious perspective, he finds that:

It seems as though the godhead steps out of the whole of the fourfold, and is not to be found in it, but in the holy. However, the holy does not inhere in the fourfold, nor in the divinities or the mortals. Rather, the holy is the whole relation that comes to be as the fourfold. (p. 229)

This means that divinities are the messengers who summon the godhead, that it is the godhead that resides above the fourfold, and that therefore, among the fourfold play, divinities act as the dominant position.

Thus, Heidegger's concept of fourfold emphasises the interconnectedness and dynamic relationship between earth, sky, mortality and divinities. This playful interplay of elements, unfolding through continuous transformation and interaction, reflects a deep reverence for the world and its various dimensions. Although Heidegger's fourfold concept does not explicitly endorse any specific religious tradition, it acknowledges the presence of the divine or transcendent within the world and offers an alternative understanding of spirituality as an integral part of the interconnected whole of existence.

This can further explain why Heidegger associates the concept of fourfold with the concept of *Spiel* (play) and calls it a mode of engagement with the world that is authentic, open, and free of predetermined expectations. For this notion of play can be applied to the human encounter with the divine. Heidegger suggests that the divine can be understood as a 'clearing' or 'opening' in which the truth of being can be revealed. By engaging in a playful mode of existence, individuals can open themselves to these moments of revelation, allowing for a more profound and direct experience of the divine. Through play, humans can transcend the limitations of conventional religious structures and enter into a more authentic relationship with the divine presence.

Here, Heidegger's fourfold play has gone beyond Plato's connotation of play, where man maintains an open connection with the divine within the order of play, rather than merely being a plaything of the divine (Caputo 1970:39–40). Heidegger's renewal of the concept of play inspired Johan Huizinga's new understanding of the connection between play and religion, and gave rise to the concept of the 'magic circle', a blend of the sacred and the secular.

### The divinity of Johan Huizinga's 'Magic Circle'

Huizinga's concept of the 'magic circle' refers to a space or domain within which plays occur. This space is separated from the ordinary world by a set of rules, conventions and

boundaries that define the limits of the play and the roles and actions of its participants. Within the magic circle, players can engage in activities that are distinct from their everyday lives, adopting new identities and exploring alternative realities. In religious rituals and experiences, sacred spaces function as a special domain set apart from the ordinary world. These spaces, which may include temples, churches, mosques or natural locations like sacred groves, are imbued with a sense of the divine and often marked by distinct boundaries that separate them from the profane world.

By adopting Huizinga's concept of the magic circle and understanding religious rituals as a form of play, we can gain new insights into the nature and function of these rituals. Participants in religious rituals enter a sacred space, separate from the everyday world, and engage in activities that are governed by a set of rules and conventions. Within this space, they can explore and engage with religious themes and ideas, and experience a sense of connection to the divine and their religious community.

In fact, the religious rituals of many religious traditions embody the concept of what Huizinga calls the 'magic circle'. For instance, consider the Hindu practice of creating a rangoli – a sacred art form made of coloured powders, rice or flower petals – outside the entrance of a home or temple. The creation of the rangoli represents the establishment of a sacred space, or a magic circle, that invites divine blessings and symbolically separates the space from the profane world. The Hindu scholar Coomaraswamy (1942:550), in his essay 'Play and Seriousness', noted the important role of play in Hindu practice and cosmological construction. In particular, the word 'Lila' in Hinduism means divine play. The Bhagavad Gita also often describes the playful activities of Krishna and his followers. In this regard, plays are indeed an important spiritual core of religious rituals, as Huizinga suggests, leading the devotee into a divine 'magic circle' separate from the secular world.

Huizinga emphasises the transformative nature of play in religious contexts, explaining that through play, individuals and societies can transcend the secular world and engage with the divine aspects of their culture. For example, religious rituals often contain elements of play, such as rules, structure and a sense of competition. As he said: there is 'play-element in archaic ritual' (Huizinga 2007:15), and 'our ideas of ritual, magic, liturgy, sacrament and mystery would all fall within the play-concept' (Huizinga 2007:18). Huizinga emphasises that these playful aspects of rituals create a sense of order and meaning, fostering a sense of community among participants. In this way, play contributes to the cohesion and continuity of religious communities and their shared beliefs.

Analysing the ideas of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Huizinga, we can uncover a spiritual principle that emphasises the interconnectedness and transformation of existence. By presenting the world as a play and giving it divinity,

Nietzsche, Heidegger and Huizinga offer alternative ways of experiencing and understanding spirituality that challenge traditional religious frameworks and encourage individuals to embrace the complexities and uncertainties of existence, rather than relying on fixed meanings or ultimate purposes.

In conclusion, by integrating the ideas of Nietzsche's world game, Heidegger's fourfold play, and Huizinga's magic circle, we can discover the profound connections between play, religion and the nature of reality. This exploration of the interconnectedness and transformation of existence provides a new lens through which to understand and reimagine the spiritual dimensions of our lives, offering alternative perspectives on the divine and the sacred that transcend traditional religious boundaries.

## Video game as medium for religious expression in the digital age

The digital era has given birth to novel forms of gaming and interaction, fundamentally altering the way we experience and comprehend the world around us, encompassing our experiences and interpretations of religion (Campbell & Geraci 2014:2). The religious scholar Brent Plate inherits the perspective of defining human existence's purpose as a 'game' from Plato and Huizinga, applying it to the study of video games. Video game is an electronic, interactive medium that utilises interactive user interfaces to produce audio-visual feedback across multiple platforms. He believes that video games have expanded the connotations of humanity and religion, rendering the revaluation of video games from a religious perspective a valuable endeavour (Plate 2010:214–215). In this section, I will explore the transformative potential of video games as a new medium for religious expression and exploration. The immersive and interactive nature of video games allows players to engage with complex religious concepts and beliefs in novel ways. I will delve into the ways in which video games are reshaping our understanding of the relationship between the divine and humanity in the digital age, drawing on the works of various scholars.

The immersive environments and virtual spaces created within video games provide players with a unique platform for religious exploration. Immersion in a video game refers to a player's sense of being fully absorbed in the game world, often losing awareness of the outside world. Interactivity, on the other hand, allows players to actively participate in and shape the narratives, forging a more personalised and participatory experience. These features of video games set them apart from traditional forms of media, allowing for deeper engagement with religious themes and experiences. For instance, games such as 'The Elder Scrolls' and 'Final Fantasy' offer intricate mythologies and cosmologies, encouraging players to grapple with questions of morality, ethics and divinity within an immersive context.

Simultaneously, as a new medium for religious expression and transformation, the interactivity of video games

possesses the capacity to reshape human collective relationships. Video games provide a platform for believers to congregate, interact and forge new relationships based on shared interests and values. Through video games, devotees can connect with others of similar convictions, engage in discussions and activities, and establish a sense of community surpassing traditional constraints (Morehead 2010:185–186). For instance, the game 'Civilization V' allows players to lead nations with various religious affiliations, promoting dialogue and understanding between different faiths as they navigate through historical and cultural challenges (Schut 2016:87). This, in turn, contributes to a broader and richer understanding of the world and its various religious traditions. Believers exchange ideas with different religious perspectives within games, fostering a more inclusive global religious development.

In addition to the immersive and interactive aspects of video games, the transformative power of these digital experiences can be further understood by examining their use of religious symbols and narrative structures (Geraci 2014:128). Video games offer a medium for the transformation of religious experience. 'Many video games utilise religious symbols or construct symbolic social and religious universes' (Šisler 2017:129). For instance, the 2007 video game Quraish, developed by a Syrian gaming company, invites players to explore religious historical sites such as Jerusalem, Medina and Mecca, fostering a deeper understanding of religious culture through gameplay.

Religious individuals gain novel insights into doctrines and practices through their experiences while playing video games. Many contemporary games incorporate elements of religious symbolism, narrative, and ritual, inviting players to explore and engage with the divine in innovative and fresh ways. For instance, the church in Mad Max (2015) creates an immersive environment by simulating the experience of being in a sacred space. In Assassin's Creed II (2010), players interact with virtual renditions of religious artefacts and rituals during the celebration of the holy, deepening their understanding of their significance.

Moreover, some video games directly address religious themes, such as 'Journey', where players embark on a spiritual pilgrimage through vast, desolate landscapes. These games not only prompt players to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences but also foster a new relationship between humans and the divine, mediated through the immersive and interactive nature of digital media. As Mark Coeckelbergh notes, the game world represents a mode of existing in reality, where 'the gamer exercises agency and personality in the new world' (Coeckelbergh 2017:165), subsequently updating and transforming their prior experiences. Through video games, the religious can explore and deepen their faith in a novel, immersive manner. By utilising religious symbols, narratives and rituals, video games can enhance players' comprehension of religious teachings, promoting spiritual growth.

As traditional symbols and rituals increasingly permeate the realms of virtual reality and electronic media, they may have profound implications for religion. For example, video games prompt a new understanding of the relationship between the material and the spiritual, a previously significant religious concern. During gameplay, game avatars enable a temporary separation of subjective and objective corporeality, fostering a diverse existence that blurs the boundaries between the material and the spiritual. Through video game avatars, religious individuals may hope to achieve a complete detachment from their bodies, moving towards an ideal divine order. Both video games and religion reveal humanity's fascination with ordered spaces and guarantee the world as a meaningful place (Campbell 2012). As players can construct and realise their ideal order in the digital world, Wagner (2013:250) suggests that video games 'can work as a kind of religious performance of world-building'.

In summary, video games have emerged as a powerful medium for religious expression and transformation in the digital age. By offering immersive interactive experiences, video games encourage players to engage with religious themes and ideas in innovative ways while providing opportunities for contemplation, introspection and spiritual growth. Religious individuals can also establish new communities within video games, deepen their faith, and explore the relationship between the material and the spiritual. These novel gaming forms reshape our understanding of the sacred and the secular, fostering new modes of spiritual expression and participation. Ultimately, video games redefine the nature of the relationship between the divine and humanity in the contemporary world, opening new possibilities for understanding and engaging with the divine in the digital age.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated the importance of play philosophy in understanding the complex relationship between the divine and humanity throughout history. From ancient Greek thought, where divine play served as a significant metaphor for the interconnectedness of human and divine realms, to the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Huizinga, which rethought the religious connotation of the 'playful order', the concept of play has consistently shaped religious thought and practice. Moreover, the emergence of digital media, particularly video games, has opened new possibilities for engaging with and understanding the divine, blurring the boundaries between the sacred and the secular and redefining the nature of religious experience.

By examining the religious implications of play philosophy across different historical periods and contexts, this article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the role of play in shaping religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, it highlights the transformative potential of

digital media in facilitating novel forms of religious expression and exploration, fostering a deeper connection between the virtual realm and spiritual understanding. Ultimately, this study underscores the enduring significance of play as a lens through which to explore the complex, dynamic relationship between the divine and humanity.

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## Author's contributions

Y.H. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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