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## CAN GOD FIT IN THIS MACHINE? VIDEO GAMES AND CHRISTIANS

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### SYNOPSIS

Christians typically haven't had much to say about the nearly ubiquitous medium of video games, and often when they do, it's pretty negative. There are certainly real concerns over violence and addiction in video games. This article makes the case, however, that the church needs to give video games a more balanced treatment. Shooting, explosions, and gore in games are a significant problem, but the actual effects of playing violent video games are far from clear. And the moral character of video games is complicated by the many possible interpretations players may have of their involvement. Perhaps most importantly, many video games have no violent content. The issue of addiction is similarly complicated. Some video games employ principles of behavioral psychology to hook players, and other factors have similar effects. However, experts haven't agreed on what counts as video game addiction and whether the medium itself is responsible for compulsive play. Without question, video games are the target of the well-established pattern of moral panics that each new medium encounters. More importantly, however, video games have tremendous positive potential: the escape they provide can be one of healthy renewal of appreciation for God's creation.

In short, Christians need to evaluate both the good and the bad of video games.

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What does the cross have to do with a game controller? For many people in the church today, there doesn't seem to be much of a connection. When I tell Christians that I research and write about video games, I commonly hear two remarks: games are violent, and they are addictive. There is some validity to these worries—and more besides, such as problematic representations of religion or sexuality. Nevertheless, it is time for the church to move past one-sided evaluations of video games. All media afford us the opportunity to corrupt and wound, but they also allow us to bless each other and ourselves. Video games are no exception: representations of violence are

problematic, but complex and sometimes appropriate; and while the risk of addictive play is real, so is the potential to gain a renewed and refreshed view of creation.

## **TODAY'S VIDEO GAMES AND THE CHURCH**

Video games are a huge part of today's cultural landscape. They certainly rival the movie industry in terms of revenue. Big-budget releases like games in the *Halo* or *Call of Duty* series can bring in hundreds of millions of dollars in just a few days.<sup>1</sup> But perhaps more importantly, certain kinds of video games are almost ubiquitous today. For instance, a global audience of touchscreen users has downloaded some version of *Angry Birds* over a billion times.<sup>2</sup> Smartphones are Trojan horses for gaming.

### **Lack of Influence**

Christian communities, however, have typically not had much to say about video games. Over four decades into the history of commercial video games, there are few Christian game-makers and only a small body of commentary about them. A few academic books such as *Halos and Avatars*, *When Religion Meets New Media*, and *Godwired* (as well as my own just-released *Of Games and God*) talk about religion and games. Christian websites such as Three Day Re-Spawn, Everyday Gamers, Christ-Centered Game Reviews, Gamechurch, and Christ and Pop Culture post thoughtful commentary on video games, and a few established Christian media magazines such as *Relevant* and *Plugged In* also write about games. This small body of critique and commentary is dwarfed by Christian writing on film, music, television, and books. Given the tremendous cultural importance of video games, it's time for this to change.

## **SHOOTING ITS WAY TO SUCCESS? VIDEO GAMES AND VIOLENCE**

Of course, it's hard to have a thorough discussion of video games without tackling the issue of video game violence. This specter reared its head again in the aftermath of the horrific Newtown shootings in December 2012. Some news reports suggested the shooter played out violent fantasies in games.<sup>3</sup> And the National Rifle Association, in response to calls for increased gun control, publicly argued that the culture of violence fostered partly by video games was more to blame for such tragedies than the easy availability of guns.<sup>4</sup> This isn't new — video games often receive criticism in the wake of mass shootings.

But is this fair? Are all video games really violent? And is the violence that is present such a problem? A careful consideration of violence in video games suggests that the issues are not as simple as they look.

For one thing, the social scientific research on the issue is hardly straightforward. Some scholars are absolutely convinced there is solid research demonstrating a connection between playing violent video games and a short-term rise in aggression.<sup>5</sup> Other researchers challenge this idea, suggesting that the scholarship making a link between games and aggression rests on unproven assumptions and is full of methodological inconsistency.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, there is simply no evidence on the long-term effects of violence games, and even social scientists who see connections between games

and aggression recognize a host of other social issues are more significant contributors to violent behavior than games.

In any case, even if the verdict of social science on the effects of video games were unanimous, a Christian evaluation of the good or evil of media representations should really rest on more than their *effects*. Rather than ask how violent video games affect players, Christians should ask whether it is right or wrong to enact virtual violence in a game.

### **To Fight or Not to Fight?**

Even this question, however, is not simple to answer. The church has long debated whether violence is ever appropriate for a follower of Jesus. Some believers are pacifists, arguing against all actions that would harm someone else. Others see a possibility of justifiable violence under certain conditions. But even Christians who allow that some degree of violence is sometimes appropriate are unlikely to suggest that believers should *enjoy* violence.

Are gamers, however, really engaging in violence? What does it mean to shoot someone in a video game? A purely literalist interpretation would argue that what happens on the screen has the same moral import as a decision by a real human being in everyday life. That is, stealing a car in *Grand Theft Auto* is just as bad as stealing the physical equivalent. This isn't a very tenable position: shooting someone in a video game is clearly different than shooting someone in real life, no matter how photorealistic the image on the screen is.

Some video game theorists argue that a game is a completely separate social space where the normal rules of society do not apply. Johan Huizinga's important book *Homo Ludens* argues that games occur within what he calls "the Magic Circle": while society normally frowns on killing, few people complain about the army of one chess-player slaughtering the army of the other.<sup>7</sup> Such a notion might suggest that violence in a video game does not really mean much of anything at all. What happens in a game *stays* in a game.

More recently, however, video game scholars have questioned this notion, pointing out that ordinary rules do not totally disappear in a video game.<sup>8</sup> Woe betide the lovers who backstab each other in a friendly game of *Settlers of Catan*! Players do not forget life outside a game when they start playing—otherwise, they wouldn't know that this image in front of him or her is a gun or a car or a tree. This suggests that moral and ethical actions in a game may actually have meaning similar to real life.

So are gamers in a Magic Circle or not? Is their violent play meaningful or not? Some game scholars have pointed to the concept of "frames" as a way of thinking about how players engage games. Sociologist Erving Goffman used the term to describe the very different points of view humans adopt in different situations, points of view that shape what people understand about reality. For instance, at different times I am "dad," "professor," and "friend." Each one of those frames implies a separate way of thinking and acting.

## FRAMING AND IMAGINATION

Sociologist Gary Alan Fine used this concept to analyze role-playing gamers in the early '80s.<sup>9</sup> What Fine discovered is that gamers can rapidly shift frames: sometimes the player is deep into the game's fiction and pretending to be an imaginary character, and seconds later he is launching into a blistering critique of how poor the design is (which requires taking a step back from the game in order to be critical).

Different frames provide different understandings of what's happening in a video game. Players taking on the role of an imaginary character are likely to think of an *image* of an explosion as an explosion. In contrast, to players thinking like a tinkerer—the sort of person that messes around with Lego blocks just to see what happens—that same image seems far more like an abstraction. Such a player recognizes the fictions of the game as imaginary, and treats them as such. A gun could just as easily be a bow and arrow or even a triangle; it's not physically real. Some gamers do indeed report that as they become engrossed in the action of a game, the artwork and game narrative fade away into the background and the player focuses exclusively on making things work the right way.

Even though they seem quite different, the same player can take on both the frame of the role-player and the tinkerer, and flip between them rapidly. And that's hardly the whole list of possibilities. A player may play a game for all kinds of reasons. For instance, as an academic game researcher, I may play a game in order to be able to write about it. In such a situation, the apparent morality of an action is a fiction I can ignore or note in a detached way. And that is the point: depending on how the player is thinking about the game, what may seem from the outside to be a moral decision is not that at all—at least, not from the player's perspective.

In short, the issue of violence in video games is a complicated one. Social science hasn't come to a firm verdict on the effects of playing violent video games, and in any case, Christian morality is based more on the Word of God than it is on consideration of social effects. However, Christians themselves are divided on the appropriateness of real violence, and things become even more complex when dealing with simulated, imaginary violence. In such a situation, the perspective of the player matters a great deal to what game violence means.

### Weighing the Worthiness

This is not to say that Christians should not bat an eye at virtual beatings, killings, and explosions. As Paul says, all things may be permissible for a believer, but that is not the same thing as saying all things are beneficial.<sup>10</sup> Christians who play games need to be capable of self-monitoring and self-criticism, to perceive what is harmful and harmless. If playing games fosters a kind of bloodthirstiness or aggressiveness in everyday life, this suggests the player is probably absorbed in the game's fictions to an unhealthy degree.

The automatic association of video games with violence, however, is problematic. Every communication medium has the potential for a tremendous variety of expression, and the video game medium is no different. Not every movie is *The*

*Avengers*, not every book is *Game of Thrones*, and not every video game is *Call of Duty*. There is a long history of nonviolent video games dating back at least to *Pong*, and today's video game scene sports a wide range of titles that have no shooting, no killing, and so on. It would be quite possible for someone to play games heavily for years and never use a virtual sniper rifle to hollow out an opponent's head.

### **ESCAPE: ADDICTION VS. THE HEALTHY JOY OF FANTASY**

This raises the second specter haunting video games: the fact that many gamers seem to play too much. In the 2006 book *Playstation Nation*, Olivia and Kurt Bruner—who are closely associated with Focus on the Family—make a passionate plea to parents to keep children away from any and all video games.<sup>11</sup> They argue that while the medium may seem harmless and inoffensive, it turns players into antisocial zombies, obsessed with playing at the expense of any healthy activities.

It is not entirely unreasonable to associate video games with addictive behavior: they are often built to be unhealthy escape machines. Today's developers sometimes employ insights from behavioral psychology to hook their players into compulsive playing.<sup>12</sup> B. F. Skinner and other researchers found that rats conditioned to press levers for food rewards would go into a frenzy of pushing if the rewards came at random intervals. Many video games do the same, dispensing rewards like loot from fallen enemies at relatively unpredictable times, keeping the player hooked into continually playing just a little bit more. In addition, the desirable digital trinkets play on the human tendency to act like packrats and hoard pretty things.<sup>13</sup>

Another key characteristic of video games is that they are very good at encouraging what psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi calls a "flow state."<sup>14</sup> He uses this concept to describe the experience of pleasurable concentration when doing something challenging, yet feasible. People can experience flow while gardening, painting, or skating, but video games are especially good at setting players clear challenges that scale to the ability of the player. Gamers deeply enmeshed in a game know how enjoyable this can feel and thus how hard it is to stop.

Video games can also pull players back in via social hooks. Many popular video games feature online groups called "clans" or "guilds" who play together as a team. Often these groups can build wonderful friendships, but when players try to quit, their compatriots can often apply pressure to stay, even when that's not the best idea.

So on the face of it, it seems like video games are ideal addiction-building machines. Again, however, things are not quite so simple. Neither the American Psychiatric Association nor the American Medical Association has accepted "video game addiction" as an official diagnosis.<sup>15</sup> That is partly because researchers cannot fully agree on what the definition of video game addiction would be—for instance, some people who report heavy amounts of play exhibit no other major problem signs—and partly because experts don't know if addictive behavior is due to the video games or due to other underlying causes.<sup>16</sup>

### **A Social Scapegoat?**

People can become compulsive about a lot of different things, from collecting rocks to reading novels. In many, if not most cases, the person exhibiting addictive behavior is suffering from problems he or she wishes to hide from. The cause of the so-called addiction in such cases, then, is not the thing itself, but some other issue, such as unemployment, broken relationships, or unsatisfied dreams.

Because video games are a relatively unfamiliar technology, they can become an easy scapegoat. This fits a long history of moral panics.<sup>17</sup> New culture and new devices usually arrive with outsized hype, but also with outsized critiques: fresh eyes easily find faults, but also easily exaggerate those faults. *Playstation Nation*, for instance, highlights all the potential problems of video games and implicitly argues that older media are all perfectly safe by comparison. But familiar media like printed books have their weaknesses as well—Western culture has simply become blind to these limitations.<sup>18</sup>

Do video games encourage unhealthy play? Certainly some do—although many games do not employ the techniques described above. No activity is risk-free, and the complexities of determining the nature of game addiction suggest games are hardly digital cyanide. Still, this leaves video games in the same category as junk food: in small amounts it will not kill anyone, but there is nothing beneficial about it. Is this the real potential of video games? Clearly, many people see video games this way.

But it is also possible to argue that the escape video games provide is a *good* thing. The writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien suggest exactly this, even though they wrote about print. What both Lewis and Tolkien loved about stories was not plot development or characters but imaginary worlds, which Tolkien called “Secondary Worlds.”<sup>19</sup> He argued that humans create Secondary Worlds in imitation of the great Creator of the Primary World. Lewis further argued that reading and writing these great stories and imaginary places is not escapist (in the ordinary negative sense of the word). Rather, when readers retreat from reality to a well-constructed fictional world, they experience a kind of potent, distilled form of reality that reinvigorates readers’ appreciation for the Primary World.<sup>20</sup> The right kind of story gives the reader a fresh take on everyday life.

Video games have a tremendous capacity to create compelling Secondary Worlds. Obviously, books and films can conjure up fantastic spaces full of wonder and mystery. But video games employ many of the same tools as novels and movies, while adding interactivity. A reader goes only where the author wants him or her to go; a video gamer, on the other hand, does not have limitless freedom, but typically has the ability to explore a great deal more than the reader and in a very nonlinear fashion. A video game allows the player to poke around, play, and see how things work, which is a very powerful way to conjure up tangible and exciting Secondary Worlds.

Engaging creativity is not, Lewis argues, a shirking of responsibility.<sup>21</sup> God made humans to be thinkers, to be artists, and (even though Lewis himself does not say this) players. “Escape” is not a dirty word for Christians to avoid. Instead, it is a key part of human life and culture—God calls His children to use it wisely and faithfully.

This article only scratches the surface of what Christians should be tackling with video games. It is time to dig deeper; this medium is important and it is here to stay. Clearly, not every play session of *Tetris* or *Dragon Age* is going to be a mind-opening, life-altering experience, but then it is also unlikely to be the gateway to life-destroying addiction. As with all media, video games have the capacity to bless and curse, to heal and to damage. Critical engagement of games can help the church understand what the medium can and cannot do. Just as the church learned to use and critique the book, the radio, and the television, it needs to learn how to wield a controller.

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