

Of Games and God

A Christian Exploration
of Video Games

KEVIN SCHUT

Foreword by
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For Kristin

You are a part of everything I write

Contents

Foreword <i>Quentin J. Schultze</i>	ix
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xvii
1. Finding Balance in an Unbalanced Discussion	1
2. How to Understand a Video Game	15
3. Making the Immaterial Playable: Games, Religion, and Spirituality	29
4. Games and the Culture of Destruction: Violence and Ethics in Video Games	51
5. Escape! The Peril of Addiction and the Promise of Fantasy	73
6. Real Men, Real Women, Unreal Games	93
7. The School of Mario: The Brain, Education, and Video Games	109
8. Making a Different World: Christians Building Video Games	127
9. Plays Well with Others: The Social Side of Gaming	149
10. Do You Want to Continue Playing?	171
Notes	179
Glossary	199
Index	203

Foreword

In today's era of smart phones and dumb users, the term “angry birds” quickly became associated with a mini-gaming application—an “app.” The app captured players around the globe who, because of boredom, curiosity, or peer persuasion, digitally transferred a few dollars to a cyberstore to join the angry-birding fold.

Meanwhile, young software developers from Seattle to Jakarta tried to create the next big game that would temporarily saturate the expanding gaming-app marketplace. Programmers played with technology in hopes of creating a paying technology.

Perhaps nothing is more natural for human beings than play. When I was a young boy growing up in Chicago, on some muggy and boring summer days my neighborhood peers and I seemed to exhaust every method of generating fun. Then one of us would ask one of the most important questions about life, “Whaddaya wanna do?” That question was all it took to get us back to play. Most of us were Roman Catholics, and we would then respond together, like a Gregorian chant, “Sit in the shade and go pooh pooh.”

No matter how many summer days we resorted to that ritual, it always worked. We laughed together. For a few moments, we re-created the verbal playground of childhood delight. We didn't need a theology of creation or recreation to embellish let alone justify our scatological humor. We never wondered if Adam and Eve played in their yard. Play for us was the most natural thing in the world—much more heavenly than school. Play was right and fitting, the way the world was supposed to be. The devil was in the agony of July boredom.

Play seems to be so basic to the way we're created that it pops up in all human activities. In fact, we intentionally or unintentionally invent ritualistic forms of play that lend a kind of liturgical quality to everyday life. Just as we delight in worship, we delight in gaming. We don't worship the game or its creators. But we discover pleasure by participating in the playful rituals that others have created for us to enjoy—even if they make a few dollars off of us along the way.

I create play for myself while studying and writing at home. Outside my home office is a hanging bird feeder framed by a casement window. Constant visual motion occurs on the other side of the window. It's like a looping video image. Goldfinches and house finches playfully push each other around to get access to the seed while chickadees dart in and out of the playing field without joining the ongoing mischief. The birds never stop jockeying around, nosing each other, squawking and peeping while grabbing, cracking open, and scarfing down safflower seeds.

I let the birds play until I get bored. Then I might let loose with a red tailed hawk call from the app on my phone. The next time I might tap lightly on the window pane—just enough to cause them to cock their heads and listen up. But most of the time I just chat with them. I ask them to get creative, to attempt a novel ornithological game for the pleasure of their human observer.

And occasionally it works. One scruffy male house finch will climb up the cylindrical meshing on the outside of the feeder and let himself down on the inside, right on top of the seed that's being dispensed underneath him to his feathered neighbors. He knows I will not stand for it; like one of Pavlov's subjects, I always come over to the window and clap my hands to scare the scruffy scoundrel out of there before he drops white bombs on his friends' vittles. "What's with this clown?" I mutter to myself out loud, shaking my head. And he probably wonders what's with me. So the play goes on, back and forth, until I'm no longer sure who's in charge of the game. I'm caught up in the flow of my entertaining bird-human ritual.

I think my neighborhood friends and I had it right on those summer days, playing at playing without excessive worry, absent the nasty conflicts that divide human beings around the world. There is something so fitting about playful delight that God commanded the ancient Hebrews to rediscover it every week on the Sabbath. Today, as a more cynical human being—what seems to count for a mature adult—I yearn for those leisurely yet adventurous days under the elm leaves in our tiny backyards.

In this fine book, Professor Kevin Schut has kept his Christian, scholarly head about him while simultaneously letting the joy of play speak to us. He rightly tells us, without preaching, that gaming at its best is a form of play and needs no justification. Play is as important as work in our lives. Those of us who can't play a game are also humorless people who take ourselves too seriously.

Those of us who see others having a good time and feel like they should instead be laboring in the vineyard of paid employment, or studying Scripture, are sad souls who need an extra measure of unmerited grace to seduce us back into the luxurious yards of our more innocent youth. Often we're too quick to reject too much of one good thing and to embrace too much of a different good thing. Work is essential as stewardship of creation, but so is play. Play can help us to flourish as emotionally healthy people. Sabbath keeping and play are intimately related. When we rob our lives of play we game God's system.

One measure of play in our era is how thoroughly technological so much of even our good gaming is becoming. Young and old alike are increasingly defining gaming as a kind of manufactured, standardized form of play whose rules are dictated by distant programmers and regulated through computer networks. That's not all bad. Regardless of how technological a game is, someone has to set the rules.

I want rules for my games, just as I need some liturgical order in my worship. And in both cases I want rules that make me feel good about what I'm doing. I don't like outsiders gaming me—unless I appreciate the way they set up the rules. So it is that each of us tends to prefer some games and some rules over others. There is a considerable measure of personal taste in what we like. *Of Games and God* helps us understand how Christians sometimes use their personal preferences about high-tech gaming to criticize others about their play.

Jean Shepherd, who wrote the screenplay for *A Christmas Story*—now the most popular holiday-season movie—once told me that holy wars start at the local church-league baseball games. Many Christians' strong feelings about which games are appropriate to play sound like the fiery rhetoric over appropriate worship music. Professor Schut instead offers balance and moderation in his well-informed assessments of digital gaming. He's charitable toward all sides even as he holds up the possibility that there is more "liturgical" good in gaming than is dreamt of in our philosophizing about it.

I don't need high-tech games to be delighted. But is that because of my generation? Am I missing new avenues of delight just because the rules of the game are foreign to me? Am I turned off by stereotypes about electronic gaming, especially the notion that the high-tech rules lack proper decorum? Or am I scared of the possibility that high-tech gaming, compared with the simpler board games I grew up with, might better allow players to write the rules along the way? Is that too much like Pentecostal liturgy for me? I feel that by regularly playing Scrabble I have affirmed my Presbyterian sensibilities. Is there an older Presbyterian who doesn't play Scrabble? Where are the Lutherans and Methodists on the high-tech gaming issue? Missional church folks? Read *Of Games and God* and then speak up!

Of Games and God shows us the relationships among faith, gaming, and technology. It challenges us to consider how much our positive and negative views of gaming are analogous to our opinions about faith. The book accepts the likely possibility that God has even more delight ready for us to enjoy in video gaming. But it reveals that gaming is implicitly like worship liturgy. After reading this book someone will probably write a doctoral dissertation titled, "Worshiping Outside the Xbox: Liturgical Styles in Secular Computer Gaming."

Professor Schut discerningly explores the developing world of computer and video gaming, in which the players can freely create and enjoy fictional worlds. To some people, such virtual worlds are scary. If my children were young I would probably be leery myself. But then I recall the fact that we did similar things with low-tech means in my day. We grabbed junk from backyards and created our own little circuses and carnivals. We used the technologies of our hands and feet, coupled with our God-given communication abilities, to fabricate our own tiny universes of fun. Then we acted out our roles within our contrived universes.

Of course gaming can be serious business; it can be worldview oriented, a matter of intra-game life and death. Our games can reflect some of our deepest desires for good and bad for ourselves and others. They can play on our existing stereotypes and help us to convince ourselves that caring for our neighbors is not as vitally important as ridding ourselves of neighbors we don't like. There is on-screen, realistic fighting and abject violence. There are the video games that seem like training modules for children to learn how to run remote-controlled killing machines.

A few years ago I asked Professor Schut to demonstrate some cutting-edge computer-gaming software in my seminary class at Regent College in

Vancouver, British Columbia. The class was made up of graduate students from nearly every continent and represented a wide range of ages. Even the techno-savvy students were amazed at some of the games we previewed. Professor Schut demonstrated games that challenged and delighted us.

He taught me to be more open-minded about the high-tech gaming frontier. I needed that for the sake of my own teaching. Calvinist professors like me are not known for being the most fun-loving creatures in the classroom. Now when my own students start talking about computer games in those preciously revealing moments before I call a class to attention, I listen in and learn about the games they're playing.

I know wonderfully gifted college professors who employ gaming to teach some of the most important truths about human nature, social institutions, and human decision making. I know teachers who successfully use games to teach students how to think and to expand their imaginations. I yearn to be better at that, to know how to more fully engage the imaginations of my students in the process of learning so that they might not just know the course material, but may more fully see themselves as imaginative and responsible players in God's own creation.

I admit that I bothered Professor Schut for a number of years until he finally agreed to write this book. Having surveyed the landscape of books on the topic, I felt that a book like this simply had to be written. I knew he was the one to write it. *Of Games and God* shows on every page that mind-engaging, heart-opening gaming can bring us healthy delight and help us to be more faithful stewards of God's neighborhood. Thanks to God for giving us a playground for gaming. Thanks to Professor Schut for showing us the possibilities as well as the potential pitfalls in the expanding world of electronic gaming.

—Quentin J. Schultze, author and Arthur H. DeKruyter Chair in the department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College

Preface

Just like a good video game, I have faced a few significant challenges while writing this book. Challenge #1: compact time and space. There are too many things to talk about. Readers who are gamers are going to wonder how I could do an entire book without really talking about Nintendo’s *Zelda* games or *Madden NFL* or whatever. I try to at least dip my toe in the most popular **worlds**, but I have gaps in my experiences as a gamer. (NOTE: When you see a **bolded** word in the text, look for a definition of it, as used in the video game universe, in the glossary that begins on page 199.) Likewise, topics are missing and others are only barely addressed. I could do an entire book on race, class, gender, and sexuality in video games, or many chapters on the kinds of religious perspectives video games encode. I’m missing important academic perspectives—there are books I haven’t read and articles I’ve forgotten to cite.

Challenge #2: I’m writing for a lot of different people. Some of my readers will be **hardcore** gamers who will find much of my explanation to be tedious and obvious. Others will be video-game novices, who might think I’m assuming too much or going too fast. I have tried my best to strike a balance, but I know it won’t always work.

Challenge #3: conversations about video games have a “best before” date, and anything that arrives in print is going to be stale the minute it’s picked up. The video-game world moves quickly, and some of the games I cite heavily will look ancient to gamers even when this book is new, let alone after it is two years old. I have tried to deal with this by mentioning game *series* where possible, as their relevant features tend to stay the same

from sequel to sequel. I have also tried to draw on examples from all over video-game history so that the book has a fairly long time line.

All this is to say that if readers think I've neglected an important game or topic, have not gone deep enough, or have made arguments that are obsolete, they're probably right. And I hope this doesn't matter too much. In the end, I hope the reader will forgive these shortcomings because this book is not intended to be the final word: I have designed it to be a conversation starter. Carefully researched and written Christian commentary on video games is really just starting to get going in earnest, mostly on blogs and online magazines—*Halos and Avatars* was the first book-length treatment of video games from a Christian perspective, and is the only one I know of at the time of writing this book. There's so much more to say, and I look forward to others improving what I've written here.

Enough instructions. Press "Start" to begin.

Acknowledgments

I have a T-shirt that says “I never finish anyth”

I wore it a lot while I was writing this book, as a challenge to myself. I’ve never done anything like this before, and I’m deeply grateful that God has provided me the opportunity and means to do it. While writing is a highly individualistic activity, it can’t happen without a huge amount of support, and I want to recognize a few of the people most directly responsible for helping me finish.

First, I owe much to the communities where I live and work: the city of Abbotsford, Trinity Christian Reformed Church, and especially my colleagues at Trinity Western University. The latter have been models of good scholarship, great encouragers, wise advisers, and good friends—especially my coworkers in the Department of Media + Communication and the School of the Arts, Media + Culture. And thanks to my administrators for granting me a sabbatical in the fall of 2011; it made this book happen. It’s great to work in such a stimulating and supportive environment!

I am deeply grateful for games and gamers. My thanks to Sid Meier, to BioWare and Bethesda and Blizzard, to Jenova Chen and Gary Grigsby, to Telltale Games, Interplay, Epyx, Cyan Worlds, Riot Games, LucasArts, and so many more for entertaining, inspiring, and provoking me, and for giving me such an interesting line of work. I’m also thankful for the Vanguard gaming group in Abbotsford, my friends in Edmonton, my friends from Calvin College, and my siblings and parents, who’ve gamed with me all my life. A special thanks to the gamers who responded to my survey and to the game makers who did their interviews with me—you guys rock!

I have had incredible help in writing this book. The people at Brazos, including Robert Hosack and Lisa Ann Cockrel, have been awesome. I've also had a bunch of readers giving me great feedback at every step of this process. Former students Keharn Yawngghwe and Mark McIntosh, my friend James Bentum, my former pastor Jim Dekker, and my mom, Jessie Schut, have all given me incredible feedback on both the content and the writing. My friend Mike Terbeek is one of the sharpest people I know, and his extensive comments have made this a better book. My former student Janelle Weibelzahl was my unofficial editor, working on my book proposal for course credits, but then continuing to give me great feedback after she graduated.

This is a work of scholarship, and so I owe a great debt to all the teachers and professors I've had who taught me what I know about reading, writing, and thinking. I still remember lessons I received in the Edmonton Christian school system, writing tips from my profs at Calvin College, and the best role models for cultural scholarship at the University of Iowa. One person in particular, however, deserves special mention. Dr. Quentin Schultze, my prof at Calvin and peerless mentor of so many students, has continued to guide and encourage me in my career. He suggested I go into Communication Studies as an academic field, has encouraged me in my scholarship, first suggested I write this book, helped me prepare the proposal, and then essentially acted as my agent. I can't repay that—I only hope I can be half as good a prof for my students. This is what building the kingdom of God is about.

Of course, there's nobody in this world I love and cherish more than my family. My siblings, siblings-in-law, parents, and parents-in-law are nothing but supportive. My daughters—Karina, Geneva, and Aerin—are my gifts from God, and their love gives me the joy that animates my work. My wife and best friend, Kristin, has known me all my life, and I can't even begin to count the ways that she makes it possible for me to do anything. I love her more than any other person.

Finally, to God be the glory. The great message of Jesus's gospel is that all that is offered to him is accepted as beautiful, no matter how flawed it is. Have this book, Lord.



Finding Balance in an Unbalanced Discussion

Starting a Journey

Reality is mundane, completely devoid of swashbuckling and derring-do.

The boy starts his journey in a dimly-lit room, oblivious of his surroundings. The sole object of significance is the little beige box with the dark brown keyboard, connected to a loud, clacking cube that eagerly devours a big floppy disk.

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LOAD "x" , 8 , 1 _
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The machine launches the world into slow motion. After an endless wait, the silhouette of a ship with full sails against a moonlit sky appears. Pasted on top in giant letters: "Pirates!" The boy plunges in.

The black-and-white fifteen-inch TV screen is home to the Caribbean, a world of Spanish, French, Dutch, and English merchants, governors, forts, duels, and—of course—buried treasure. The boy daringly storms

the battlements of Cartagena, chases the Spanish Treasure Fleet, searches for hints of his long-lost family, earns promotions from governors, and builds an estate for the inevitable retirement from years of adventuring.

Two hours turn into years in this magical land, but the boy must depart. He will return many times, however, to the sandy shores of Curacao; later to the war-torn skies of 1940s Europe; later still to the depths of ancient history, the endless expanses of starry skies, and mythical castles in fantastic lands. The journey still continues.



Sid Meier's Pirates! first released in 1987. The player is a privateer in the Caribbean, and engages in ship-to-ship combat, sword fighting, treasure hunting, and land battles.

Confessions of a Gamer in a Christian Community

This book is about helping the Christian community find a balanced approach to computer and video games—and also, I hope, a little about helping people outside the Christian community understand some of the issues relating to faith and games. But in the interest of being open, I should let readers know where I'm coming from: the warm and sometimes smothering embrace of gaming culture. Yes, I'm a lifelong gamer; the boy playing *Sid Meier's Pirates!* in the story above was me.

I played chess and *Monopoly* growing up, and when my family bought our first Commodore 64 home computer (the machine described above), my eyes were opened to a whole new world of games. I've blasted spiders

in *Centipede* and spent hundreds of hours sailing the Caribbean waters in all three versions of *Sid Meier's Pirates!* College homework hours were sucked up by the collectible card game *Magic: The Gathering*, weekly Thursday night tabletop war games with seventy-page rule books written in nine-point font, and Sunday night role-playing sessions. *Settlers of Catan* and the German board-game scene are my new obsession. And towering above them all is the world-history strategy-simulator *Civilization* (Sid Meier owes me at least a month or two of my life back).

My graduate-studies professor told us in our first class that we should study what we love. It took me only a few minutes to embark on a career of studying computer games. I've often joked with friends that my field of study is really just an excuse to play games and get paid for it. Except that it's not really a joke (ask my long-suffering wife).

I say all this so readers understand where I'm coming from. A big part of me would like nothing more than to stand up and zing off a loud-and-proud defense of gaming. And I suspect that this bias is going to leak through all over the place. I've tried very hard to stay balanced, but if I lean in a direction, it's to praise games.

There's another part to this story, however, and that's what underlies my motivation in this book. Since I was a teenager, I've had to struggle with reconciling this big part of my life—my love of games—with the *biggest* part of my life: my Christian faith. I was raised in a community that believed God was the Creator and Ruler of all things, and that God matters in everything we do. But for many years, God didn't seem to have much of an opinion about games—at least, nobody in the church said much about *Monopoly* or chess. Sure, I knew lots of Christians who *played* games, but nobody ever connected that with God. Not like work or education or art.

When I *did* finally start to hear Christian commentary on any kind of game, it was almost always a complaint or an attack. Just like heavy metal music and horror movies, **role-playing games (RPGs)** flirted with satanic spirits. And just like TV, computer games sucked time away from wholesome things like physical activity and homework. Of course, as with many Christian teens, that didn't stop me from playing. It just made me feel vaguely defensive and guilty about something I enjoyed. But as I grew older and my faith grew more sophisticated, I started to engage the idea of games as good or bad—or, more precisely, what games were good and bad at doing. It's an internal struggle that continues to this day.

What This Book Is About

This book is my attempt to work out the relationship between Christian faith and games. I am *not* writing a review book on specific games; anything like that would soon be hopelessly outdated. I respect people who take the time to write guides, but what we really need is a way to think about God, faith, video games, and gaming culture. If we can learn to think critically, we can be our own guides.

Video games are a blind spot for many Christians, but they shouldn't be. In terms of money alone, the game industry is huge—not quite the size of the global film industry, but in the same multibillion dollar neighborhood.¹ More important, video games are a major catalyst for changes in the way we think and relate to one another. We need to talk about them seriously and think about them carefully. This book is written to help Christians do that thinking, but not to do the thinking *for* them.

Loving and Hating Games

There is no shortage of thinking and debating about games. Ever since they became a major cultural force in the late 1970s and early 1980s, video games have received both praise and condemnation.

The Game Enthusiasts

Gamers, whether Christian or not, are enthusiastic about their pastime. They rave about video games online, badger reluctant houseguests with “you gotta see this!” and spend many hours a week playing. Ask gamers why they love games so much and they'll be ready with a passionate set of justifications—sometimes even if they're *not* asked.

The heart of games, enthusiasts argue, is that nebulous buzzword *interactivity*. Of course, *everything's* interactive these days—our TVs, our cars, our crackling bowls of cereal. What gamers mean by it is that when we get involved with games, we do stuff that *changes* the game.² In other words, we're not just sitting back and finding out if Harry Potter wins the Quidditch match; we're making him do it ourselves (or not, depending on our skill).

Not only are games interactive, but—second overused term alert!—they're also *immersive*. Video games suck the player in. When a player gets into a game, the sense of focus and the rhythm of play create an intense

experience some theorists describe as *flow*.³ Good books or movies can immerse us in fictional worlds, but with a good game, it doesn't just feel like we're looking in—it feels like we're *there*. (More on this in chapter 5.)

Game fans also talk a lot about the social aspects of games. This may come as a surprise for nongamers. The long-held stereotype of the computer gamer is a solitary teenaged boy hunched in front of a flickering screen in his parents' basement. But gamers today are a diverse, vibrant community, and most games invite some kind of social connection. Many gamers, in fact, insist there's something special about friendships formed over games.⁴ (More on this in chapter 9.)

Some gamers also note the ability of games to exercise the human desire for fantasy.⁵ While game fans of all sorts mention this, the Christian game community has a special connection between the appeal of the fantastic and the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. As we'll explore in chapter 5, these authors argued that fantasy gives us a deeper appreciation of reality, and games are fantasy builders par excellence.

Other Christians describe games as potential avenues for the betterment of the human condition. Specifically, they argue games are good for teaching uplifting things—such as improving character, morality, and biblical knowledge—and even evangelism.⁶ (We'll mostly talk about this in chapter 7, but also touch on it in chapters 2, 4, and 9.)

Finally, people are increasingly realizing the artistic and creative potential of games.⁷ While this is not a dominant theme in Christian gamer discourse, there's a natural connection. If Christians really want to argue that God loves expressions of creativity and beauty, then it makes sense to celebrate games just as much as sculpture, music, and novels. (This is partly what chapter 8 is about.)

The Game Critics

Of course, if we hear anything from the Christian community about games, it's typically the bad stuff. Game critics, whether Christian or not, range from full-out anti-game crusaders to mildly concerned parents, so it's important to note that people deliver the following lines of argument with differing levels of vehemence.

Game critics commonly note objectionable content as a major concern.⁸ Until recently, most top-selling games featured some type of violence, a trend continued today by the *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Call of Duty* series. While this emphasis on guns, gore, and explosions is shifting as the

game industry starts concentrating increasingly on mass audiences (we'll discuss this in more detail in chapter 4), in some cases, the shift has led to new emphasis on an old concern: sex. Some critics attack *The Sims* series for permitting homosexual relationships⁹ and point to titles like the 2003 *Dead or Alive: Extreme Beach Volleyball*, with its bikini-clad, impossibly pneumatic beach volleyball players, to show that the industry has brought the exploitation of women to new lows (discussed in chapter 6).

Another major issue for game critics (discussed in chapter 5) is the growing specter of game addiction. The very immersive quality that game fans love is the trap that can keep them in the game for longer than is healthy. It's one thing when the occasional session lasts a few hours. It's another thing again when employees don't show up for work and friends go AWOL because they won't stop playing *World of Warcraft*. Game addiction isn't a clinical term, but many anecdotes and studies clearly demonstrate a link between games and addictive behavior.¹⁰

A uniquely Christian complaint about games involves spiritual issues. The RPG *Dungeons and Dragons* hit mainstream infamy in the early 1980s, in part because a series of groups publicly linked it with witchcraft and demon-possession.¹¹ Some Christians made similar claims with the enormously popular *Pokemon* game and its associated television shows and merchandise.¹² Critics argue that games like this contain sorcerous elements and unholy symbols that encourage the corruption of players. Although the degree of furor surrounding these specific games has died down, many Christians still have a lingering distrust of games featuring magic (discussed in chapter 3).

While these worries grab the lion's share of the airtime given to game critiques, they are not the only complaints people make. Many critics, for example, complain games are physically unhealthy and tied to laziness. Games are linked with a wide range of antisocial tendencies, including, but not limited to, disrespect for parental authority, an unhealthy fascination with control, a tendency to view other people as means to an end, and a poor appreciation of the consequences of actions.¹³

Loving and Hating New Media Is Nothing New

What's particularly interesting about this back-and-forth conversation is that it's not new, even though video games themselves are a relatively recent arrival. All this has happened before, and all this will happen again.

Fearing New Technology and Popular Culture

Video games are not understood by the present generation of adults. They are new; they make an enormous appeal to children; and they present ideas and situations that parents may not like. Consequently, when parents think of the welfare of their children who are exposed to these compelling situations, they wonder about the effects of the games upon the ideals and behavior of their children. Do the games really influence children in any direction? Are their conduct, ideals and attitudes affected by the games? Are the parts which are objectionable to adults understood by children, or at least by very young children? Do children eventually become sophisticated and grow superior to games? Are the emotions of children harmfully excited? In short, just what effect do video games have upon children of different ages?¹⁴

I'm guessing most of us have heard something like this before. But what's interesting about this quotation is that it wasn't actually written about video games—I simply replaced the words *film* and *pictures* with *video games* and *games*. It was written in 1933. We might get the impression that when we hear complaints about sex, swearing, and violence in games or the internet that these are relatively recent concerns. In fact, such worries belong to an established tradition. Our culture has a history of worrying about our culture.

One root of this collective hand-wringing is a long-running fear of popular culture. According to many historians, the rise of the nineteenth-century urbanized, industrial masses and mass media (such as phonographs, film, and radio) freaked out the traditional social elite. They transferred some of the fear into critiques of crass popular culture: first vaudeville theater and “penny dreadful” novels; and later popular film, radio, and the “vast wasteland” of TV.¹⁵ This is why “popular culture” and (especially) “mass culture” have become derogatory terms, used to describe the tawdry, stupid, and formulaic entertainment made for millions of boneheaded, slobbering consumers.

Academics also got in on the alarmism. The frightening experience of effective propaganda in the early twentieth century, the growing demand from marketers on how to do effective propaganda, and the worrying of moral leaders about the corruption of youth led a variety of serious scholars to scientifically chart the impact of newspaper, radio, and television.¹⁶ The field of media effects has, since the 1930s, attempted to precisely map and explain how watching the hapless coyote drop boulders on his own head

while chasing the road runner makes young James want to hit his sister. The findings have been enormously complex and have consistently shown the public are often influenced but never brainwashed by mass media; of course, an anxious public untrained in social science methodology can certainly read many of the findings as thoroughly alarming.

On top of all this, there is a long history in the West of suspicion or outright hostility to new technology. Back in antiquity, Plato had Socrates complain about the dangers of writing.¹⁷ The Luddites of the Industrial Revolution objected to the modernization of the textile industry by destroying new machinery that eliminated their jobs. Throughout the twentieth century, a whole series of critics have urged Western culture to fight against the instrumental logic of technology. Neil Postman, for example, decried the unthinking acceptance of all new machines and tools, worrying that we would lose the wisdom of tradition and the perspective of history.¹⁸

When we put this all together—the fear of popular culture, the academic suspicion of the effects of media, and the backlash that new technology incurs—it’s hardly surprising that as video games have started to make it big they have attracted a crowd of naysayers. Strike one: video games are extremely popular. Strike two: many gamers change the way they live because of their entertainment patterns. And strike three: video games are new technologies. It may be a bit surprising, however, to find that while attacks on games fit a long-term pattern, so does the praise of games.

Worshipping New Technology

In their important essay “The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution,” James Carey and John Quirk argue that new technology has always had a near-religious fascination for Americans.¹⁹ First the railroad, then the telegraph, then the telephone, then the radio, and so on: all touted as the great fixers of all that ails us, promising a bright and better future. The theme of technological utopianism is strong in Western culture in general.²⁰

Historically, there are a couple of major sources for this onward-and-upward narrative. The first is the entrepreneurs who see technological revolution as their ticket to financial success. These inventors have often been risk takers with big visions whose dreams take the form of the film-based camera, or the wireless telegraph, or television.²¹ While such innovators may honestly believe in helping humanity, they—and their bank balance—have an obvious stake in the success of whatever technology they are promoting. So there is a long history of technology industries and inventors explicitly

arguing to the public—via advertising and other channels of communication—that their products will lead to a better, happier world.

Another strand of techno-utopianism has less interest in the financial success of technology and more in its idealistic potential.²² These are the visionaries who either look to inventions as a simple solution to some terrible problem (genetically modified food will end world hunger!) or are simply in love with the newest, sleekest, bestest toy ever. Today's green energy enthusiasts stand at the front of a long line of problem solvers, such as the promoters of domestic appliances (which actually created more, not less, work for stay-at-home wives²³) or the idealists who thought televisions would solve dysfunctional family relationships.²⁴ Today's toy-loving early adopters of the newest iPhone likewise echo the crowds at late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century expositions in Philadelphia, Chicago, Buffalo, and St. Louis who saw electrical lighting as sublime.²⁵

And We Care Because . . . ?

Both the fearing and the worshiping camps, taken at face value, have really bad track records. No technology has managed to fix family dysfunctions or eliminate hunger and injustice. Neither has any technology turned the population into gibbering idiots (despite elitist proclamations to the contrary) or destroyed the world (although nuclear and biological weapons certainly have the capability). While these things might still happen, the historical pattern is pretty clear: neither side has been entirely correct.

So when people talk about how awful television is or how wonderful electric cars are, they are usually doing more than that. They are locating our cultural fears and hopes in something that may not truly be the root of those hopes and fears.²⁶ Technology, in other words, is a useful screen upon which we can project our fondest wishes and deepest nightmares. The same applies to video games. The ongoing nature of the optimist/pessimist discussion doesn't negate the concerns over video games or invalidate the enthusiasm of gamers. Rather, it indicates that the vehemence behind the public debates are probably not *entirely* due to the games themselves. Are games, then, just a stand-in for movies, comic books, or novels? Certainly not, as we'll see in the next chapter. Games have unique characteristics that deserve critique and development. But I'm convinced that part of the argument about games is really about culture and technology in general.

This suggests that a wise consideration of video games avoids blanket praise or condemnation of them. But there is another approach we'd be wise to avoid: that of not questioning at all. For every passionate evangelist and prophet of doom, there are ten people that either don't care or don't bother to think it through. History washes over most people, who are too busy getting their next paycheck, managing families, and having fun to stop and realize what is happening to them. This is reasonable—we live in the moment-to-moment, and big-picture thoughts are, well, big picture.

But our moment-to-moment existence is shaped by a lot of the big stuff. Life before and after the introduction of an important new technology such as the automobile or cell phone is often profoundly different, but typically, after an initial burst of interest, people stop paying much attention to it, even though the effects don't go away. How many of us think very often about how profoundly weird the relatively low-tech telephone is (speaking with a disembodied voice from thousands of miles away!) or how it shapes the way we live? The video game is likewise changing our world. I don't think we should give it mute acceptance—we need to engage the attacks and praises carefully and consciously.

Finding a Balance and Finding a Place for Faith

This much my scholarly study has taught me: video games are caught up in an ongoing discussion of utopianism, dystopianism, and apathy. But let's get back to the project we set up at the beginning—that of connecting faith with games. Where should Christians stand in this ongoing debate? The more I read and speak with other followers of Jesus, the more I realize there is no one answer to that question. So what follows is my understanding of the impact my faith should have. It's not an idiosyncratic vision, a truth created *ex nihilo* by and for myself. Rather, it's my understanding of what greater and wiser leaders have argued.²⁷

Engaging Culture

Some Christians, when confronted with a filthy world, want to pull back or force clean it. Don't touch video games because they're of the devil, or, if we *must* go there, purify out all the sex, drugs, and laser guns. While such responses are perhaps appropriate at times, I believe both the monastic and the sanitizing response are at best incomplete: when taken to extremes, they assume that we can somehow escape what's wrong with

the world, that we can go somewhere or do something that isn't tainted with sin.

The narrative of the Bible and the Christian tradition argues that *everything* is partly messed up, from hallowed cathedral walls to the cleanest Christian romance novel to wholesome potluck dinners to a newborn infant. It's all corrupted to some degree—all I have to do is look at myself to know this is true. While we are still alive, there is no such thing as complete escape from evil. Besides, Jesus argues it's not the stuff outside of us that makes us broken, it is our own hearts, our selfishness, our weaknesses.²⁸ People can surround themselves with *Dora the Explorer* (or better yet, *VeggieTales*) and still be rotten misanthropes.

The Jesus I see in the Gospels lived *in* this messed-up world. Jesus sometimes took a break on a mountaintop, and he certainly didn't lace his speech with profanities, but he hung out with the bad boys and girls. He planted God's kingdom where people needed it most. That wouldn't have worked if he was a hermit. Video games are my part of my culture. If I'm Jesus's follower, that's where I go.²⁹

Understanding Culture

But this is still a potentially negative view: as a paragon of purity, I'm called to shine forth light into the muck-infested swamps of the video-game world. (As a gamer, this scenario sounds eerily familiar.) As comforting as such condescension might be, however, it's ultimately wrong. My poor self-discipline, know-it-all attitude, and self-indulgent behavior make me a lousy paladin. And Christians like me don't fix the world by inserting so-called Christian content (more on this in chapter 8). Take a moment to think about watching a good movie, reading a good book, or playing a good game. The stuff that makes it good usually has nothing to do with the number of explicit references to Jesus.

We can find God and traces of God in the most unexpected back alleys of the very real Lagos and the virtual Liberty City. Just as the biblical narrative and Christian traditions argue that all creation has been tainted, so all of it was created good by a good Creator God. There's more to game playing as a Christian than putting up with the so-called ignorant heathens—there are great things to learn, even from people who, for whatever reason, wouldn't want to ever be associated with Jesus. I don't want to be an unquestioning game fanboy, of course. I feel that Christian understanding means careful critique—just not *self-righteous* critique.³⁰

Transforming Culture

It's good to get involved with culture, and it's good to be humble while doing so, but that's not the whole story. Jesus didn't just go with the flow. He recognized that people are hurt and busy hurting others. So as a healer, he made things better. He found grasping, insensitive Matthew and Zacchaeus and turned them into philanthropists. He lifted prostitutes out of a life of abuse. He found headstrong thickheads and made them into model leaders.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God. And he called his followers to likewise transform the world around them, not as superior, know-it-all, do-gooders, but as humble people ready to love, listen, and play games alongside everyone else. A lot of stuff in this world is arguably good or bad, but many things are just plain awful: hate, selfishness, neglect, cruelty, and the like. We are supposed to do more than just watch; we are to plant love, whether it be in our everyday world or that of *World of Warcraft*.³¹

Exploring the Video Game One Facet at a Time

To sum up: the cultural debate about video games is a part of a long discussion about the nature and value of technology. I believe my call as a Christian is to engage video games and their surrounding culture, gain critical understanding of them, and help transform them. This book is mostly about the second step—gaining critical understanding.

Each chapter of this book develops a different angle of the cultural phenomenon of video games. Chapter 2 is the necessary first step. Before we start talking about games and culture, we need to talk about video games themselves. We'll briefly explore the unique characteristics of the **medium** and the gaming situation. This will help us avoid common mistakes critics make when discussing games.

Chapter 3 tackles the religious and spiritual issues surrounding games. What does it mean to be Christian and play games? Can games be Christian? Can they accommodate *any* religion? Can spirit live in the machine?

In chapter 4, we'll consider how games have become closely tied to the culture of destruction. We will look at the debate surrounding violence and media effects and what a Christian response might include. We'll also talk about the ethics of playing a game: Is it okay to do bad stuff in an imaginary game world?

Chapter 5 explores the double-edged sword of escapism. Many game critics consider addiction the number one issue facing gaming culture today. Yet a significant body of Christian thought suggests the powers of fantasy that games wield are an important, positive part of what it means to be human.

Chapter 6 examines gender and games. The representations of men and women (and boys and girls) in computer and video games have been extremely limited in the traditional market, and the exploitation of sexuality is very common. The last five or ten years, however, have seen some significant shifts in how games portray gender, changes that we need to consider critically from a Christian point of view.

Recently, several commentators have promoted games for educational purposes, which is chapter 7's topic. To evaluate these claims, we need to talk about the common critiques of digital media and the body of theory known as media ecology.

Chapter 8 is a consideration of the computer and video-game industries. Specifically, we'll look at how the Christian faith impacts and *should* impact game making. After reviewing where the industry stands and the problems that critics typically pin on it, the chapter will share the opinions of Christians who make games for a living—in both explicitly Christian companies and mainstream ones.

Chapter 9 breaks the gamer out of solitary confinement in a parents' basement. The old stereotype of the solo gamer is justifiably fading, as video games are the center of all kinds of communities and a new way of socializing. To get a good understanding of what game communities are all about, we'll hear from Christian gamers who belong to a variety of gaming groups.

Throughout all of these topics, I want to paint a picture of a balanced Christian approach to games. In Philippians 1:10, the apostle Paul prays that followers of Christ will be able to practice discernment. That's what this book is all about. Whether we're playing games, supervising game players, considering games as a teaching tool, or making games, I believe we need to exercise wisdom informed by the nature of reality and the faith that God gives us. I hope the subsequent chapters illuminate what that means in practice.