The Theology of…Video Games?! Using Games to Build Relationships in Your Congregation and Community

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"If Jesus played video games, he would be a *god*!"—Welcome to the intersection of technology and theology. In our twenty-first-century context, the questions we ask about who Jesus is—and why that matters—are being asked in a world that virtually none of our predecessors could have imagined. Many of us who have lived through the most recent technological changes have been surprised by how quickly they have permeated our culture. Cell phones have gone from being bulky luxuries for the rich to becoming tiny, indispensable requirements for daily life (or so we think). Social networking has moved from exchanging business cards at a convention center to developing a comprehensive online identity that connects you to other like-minded people.

Video games have been going through some major changes, too. The assumptions we've built up about video games—who plays them, why they do, and what games are all about—are turning out to be houses built on sand.

More, video games have developed to the point that they actually have theological significance. The opening statement of this article is just one tiny example.

Video games are played by virtually every demographic group in our culture. The video game industry is larger than the movie industry. Video games can explore deep and meaningful issues. What will Christian churches make of this new world?

In video games, a *god* is a player's character that has the best equipment, the most deadly skills, and is so powerful that it is unstoppable by other players. People that play video games are saying that what makes a god is the power to destroy. Is this the way you think about God, too?

To say the most important thing at the outset: virtually every problem (theological or otherwise) presented by video games can be overcome by getting adults and youth to play video games together. Besides, video games are lots of fun! I have several suggestions for how we can use video games in our congregations and communities, but first we need to examine some myths.

MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT VIDEO GAMES

Myth: Video games are just for kids—mostly teenage boys.

Fact: Video games are played by virtually every demographic group that has access to them and the money to pay for them.[1] (The exception is the current generation of great-grandparents, who didn't grow up in a world with video games.) Many adults play games so much that video games are a primary—if not *the* primary—form of entertainment for them. Women and girls play games almost as much as men, but they tend to play different kinds of games than the boys—and for social reasons rather than competitive ones.

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Myth: Very few people play video games, because most people do other things for their entertainment, like going out to the movies.

Fact: For years, the video game industry has been bigger than the movie industry. Investment in gaming has been growing while investment in movie production has been in decline.[2] There are 20 percent fewer films being produced by movie studios today than ten years ago. The financial statistics are one thing, but the most telling figure is in the advertisements that run in the theaters before movies begin. These trailers are often for upcoming video game releases, because that is where the movie industry is beginning to generate its advertising revenue.

Myth: Video games are for "loners."

Fact: Multiplayer games are overwhelmingly more popular than single-player games and have been for a decade. With the expansion of high-speed Internet connections and social networking, people are playing games as an extension of their real-world relationships, rather than as an alternative to them.

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[1]Entertainment Software Association, "2009 Sales, Demographic, and Usage Data," http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2009.pdf (accessed 1 February 2010).

[2]Motion Picture Association of America, "U.S. Theatrical Market: 2008 Statistics," http://www.mpaa.org/2008 MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics.pdf (accessed 1 February 2010).

Myth: Video games are just about sex and violence.

Fact: Our culture both glorifies and fears sex and violence in virtually every medium, whether that be books, television, movies, video games, theater, politics, art, or music. Each of these areas of expression is worthy of critical study and reflection, because there is much more going on than appears at first glance.

Myth: Video games are shallow and meaningless and, consequently, have nothing to say about anything important.

Fact: While some games are designed to be simple "time wasters," many are not. Video games are a new form of artistic expression that allows values and ideals to be communicated to a much larger audience than traditional art forms. Furthermore, video games can create compelling narratives that comment on and criticize the culture that surrounds them.

If you have any doubts that a video game can tell a compelling story that can have an effect on the way a person thinks, then I suggest you search out a PC game called *The Path*, by the small, independent developer Tale of Tales. (*The Path* is only available by digital download rather than on a CD or DVD, which reflects another change happening in the world today.) Described as "a short horror game," *The Path* uses the fairy-tale landscape of "Little Red Riding Hood" as a way to explore what happens when six young women wander off the path to Grandma's house and into a twisted dream world.

As I played *The Path* and tried to make sense of its symbolic storytelling, it seemed to me that the game designers were telling a story of how the mind tries to cope with the consequences of past sexual abuse. Let me be clear—*The Path* does not contain what most would consider offensive content. It tells a story in much the same way an indie filmmaker might explore a particular issue—by composing a diverse blend of sound and images into a finished piece that can work its way into our psyche at a deep level.

In the words of the designers, "the experience of loss of innocence as a combination of extreme delight and violent destruction is something that is very personal to us. So to some extent, we probably used *The Path* to deal with our demons and lick some wounds. To try and make sense of things that have happened in our own lives."[3]

If video games can explore such a deep, personal topic as abuse—and do so in a way that makes a gamer think about their world differently—then they surely have the capability to comment on or criticize any other topic in a compelling way.

The confidence with which game designers present their narratives actually presents a challenge to the aspiring video game theologian. The nature of the challenge is that all religious ideas in these stories are presented as fact, while only some of the claims are actually true. What are people learning about Christianity in a

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[3]Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, "Tale of Tales Interview," *GoGamingGiant*, 9 January 2010, http://www.gogaminggiant.com/2010/01/09/tale-tales-interview/ (accessed 1 February 2010).

game where it is difficult to tell what is historically and theologically accurate from what just sounds right but is actually false? Alas, I think an adequate exploration of this question is probably a PhD dissertation or two away.

USING VIDEO GAMES IN THE CONGREGATION

For now, we have a more direct and practical concern: Why do video games matter to us and our congregations? How can we use video games to build up the body of Christ where we live? I have four suggestions. As you read them, I hope that you will find something that brings a little spark of vitality to your community.

1. Get rid of the old gaming console in the youth room—and don't replace it. Instead, get the youth together in whatever home has the best environment for adults to join the kids and play games together.

Practically every youth room in the country has two things—a couple of beat-up couches and a television set with an out-of-date game console hooked up to it that never gets used. Game consoles in youth rooms represent an odd duality in the church's relationship to video games: at the same time that many parents are lamenting the terrible influence of video games on their children, they are buying game systems for the youth room as "bait" to attract more youth into the church.

I've never seen a video game console ever get used in a youth room. I suspect this is because (1) half the parts and controllers are missing, (2) it's out of date, (3) the games are the boring, "safe" ones that the nongamer parents approve of, and (4) the kids are too busy trying to get dates anyway. I have no particular wisdom to share on the last point here, but, as to the first three observations, there is a much better solution available.

To get youth together with parents around video games, find out the following (in order of priority):
- Which family has adults that are the most excited about playing video games with youth?
- Which family has the best selection of games that the youth may like?
- Which family has the biggest TV and gathering space?
- Which family is the most centrally located?

The most critical thing is that there are adults who are engaged in the process. It doesn't matter if they have kids in the youth group or not. Without engaged adults, you're not likely to have a good result no matter what you do.

Remember, you don't want youth playing games without adults involved—not because you're afraid of sexual and violent content, but because connecting the generations through gaming can be so rewarding. The adults are *not* there to be the police—the adults are the *hosts of the party*, whose job it is to make sure that as many people as possible are having a good time. Without a doubt, the adults will have to be the rule enforcers, too—we are talking about teenagers here—but they'll

act differently if they know their ultimate goal is building community rather than ensuring compliance.

Work with the adults in question to develop a basic plan for a video game night with the youth, asking such questions as: What games will we play? How will we rotate players? How will we get the girls involved and prevent the boys from dominating? Remember, girls like gaming just as much as boys, but girls tend to play for *social* reasons rather than *competitive* ones. Adults often miss this subtle, but crucial, point and assume that only the boys want to play. A Nintendo Wii is a great solution here—it is a game console designed specifically for social gamers rather than competitive ones.

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And, if the grown-ups are around, a miracle might happen: they might ask questions about the theology of the game! I would love to be in on some of the spontaneous conversations that might arise as the teenagers, in their infinite wisdom, teach the adults what their games are really all about.

2. Instead of referencing movies in sermons, start trying to substitute video game references.

As mentioned before, the video game industry is bigger than the movie industry. Instead of starting a sermon point with, "I saw a movie this week," why not try, "I played a video game this week"? It doesn't really matter if anyone in your congregation has actually played the game—or any game at all, for that matter. The job of a pastor, in my humble opinion, is to raise awareness of *the culture we actually live in* and interpret it theologically, so we can thrive as Christians in that culture.

Of course, if the latest video game you've played was *Pong* in an A&W Restaurant in 1973, you're probably going to look foolish if you try to reference it in a sermon. It will come off as a poor attempt to pander to young people.

It doesn't matter if you are an expert in video games. But, if you don't know the first thing about video games, there is absolutely nothing stopping you from asking another person to bring you into the world of gaming. In fact, I think it would be an amazing and memorable moment for a pastor to walk up to another person and say, "I care about connecting my sermons to our culture, and I know a lot of people play video games—but I've never gotten into them. Can you get me started?" Gamers are great evangelists—they love to share their passion with others—so there is virtually no risk that you're going to be turned down.

Why go through this effort instead of just quoting what somebody else said about a particular game? The real issue here is that of authenticity. At my congregation (a Lutheran-Methodist cooperative ministry), we have a pastoral staff of three who share preaching responsibilities. Our Lutheran pastor co-owns a wine

shop—McMinnville is surrounded by vineyards—so he talks about wine in his sermons. Our Methodist pastor loves systems theory and the process of change, so he talks about that in his sermons. I love video games and jazz music (I'm a professional jazz musician), so I talk about those things in my sermons. Since I rarely watch movies, it would be inauthentic of me to talk about the theology of *Avatar* or *The Matrix*, but talking about the armor designs of warrior characters in *World of Warcraft*—and connecting those designs to the battle strategies of the fourth-century emperor Constantine—makes sense. This actually was one of my recent sermon illustrations, as I tried to explain why our culture often sees Christianity as a combative religion rather than a loving one.

All of this serves a greater theological purpose. The dominant form of Christian theology today makes the argument that what Jesus gives us is the opportunity to withdraw from the world and escape to a better place. Since I side firmly with C. S. Lewis in *The Last Battle*, I believe that the incarnation of Jesus calls us deeper into the world around us, because God is taking what exists right now and is using it as building blocks for the fulfillment of the realm of God. As Lewis puts it, the fulfillment of the realm will be like our present world but even *more real*.

By talking about video games in a positive light—rather than demonizing them at every turn, as many religious people prefer to do—I hope that I am teaching my congregation that the details of their everyday lives might just have some connection to what God is ultimately up to in the world. I hope they are also learning from all three of their preachers that the things they love can teach them something about the nature of God—and be things in and through which the love of God can be present.

3. Get the grandparents and the empty nesters in your congregation to join an online role-playing game, like World of Warcraft, *so they can play games with their children and grandchildren wherever they live in the world. Offer training, and teach those who aren't familiar with gaming how to play and have fun with it.*

If you are a part of a church, and you aren't a new church start specifically meant to target young adults, you have grandparents in your congregation. Those grandparents often live a long way from both their children and grandchildren—a long car trip at best, a long plane flight at worst. How many grandparents in your congregation have a lot of extra money to spend flying across the country to visit their family as often as they would like?

Of course, the Internet—and the recent rise of social-networking technologies—has made it possible for different generations to connect almost instantly. But, the ways in which different generations approach and use these tools makes it difficult for connections to happen. Preteens are usually considered too young for social networks. Teens are mostly interested in their friends—not their families. How can caring adults move past these barriers?

One idea is to make these connections through online video games. Children and youth don't need any excuse to play games. Why not get the parents and

grandparents involved? Remember, some of these grandparents grew up playing the first generation of games on the Atari 2600 and some of the parents spent their childhood playing *Super Mario Brothers* and *The Legend of Zelda* on the original Nintendo.

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There are some keys to making this work in a way that can actually build and strengthen relationships between the generations:

- *Form a small group at your church* initially dedicated to teaching parents, grandparents, and other caring adults the basics of gaming and to giving them a community to share the delights of gaming with others who are trying to connect with their kids and grandkids in the same way.

- *Play in a persistent world.* The game selected should be an MMO (short for massively multiplayer online game) or something similar. An MMO allows a player to create a character they will use to explore a world each time they play and will automatically save their progress. This gives a feeling of continuity to the gaming experience.

- *Pick a game that multiple generations can find engaging.* A game that is too heavily oriented toward action or constant button pushing without any breaks isn't going to work for many grandparents, while a game that is too intellectual at the expense of "fun" won't work for youth. The generation of parents is likely flexible enough to strike a good balance between the two.

- *Make sure your game has the potential for human interaction*, either by typing text messages or by using voice chat with a headset. If your chosen game doesn't support this, an ordinary phone call with each person using a headset or speakerphone can work just as well.

- *If your game supports it, form a guild* made up of everyone at your church who is playing and includes those family members they are playing with. A guild is a simple in-game community that makes it easy to chat and play together.

- *Tell the kids it is their job to teach grandma or grandpa how to play.* Children in junior high and younger will absolutely love to have the opportunity to show grown-ups how to play a game. This simple step hits all three key areas of a vital life of faith as promoted by Paul Hill of Vibrant Faith Ministries (formerly the Youth and Family Institute). A specialist in intergenerational ministry, Dr. Hill argues that adults must be "authentic," "affirming," and "available" to connect with children and pass on faith. It is authentic to admit you want help. It is affirming to take an interest in and value the way a young person spends their free time. It is being available to take time out of your day to play a game with a young person.

- *The two PC games I most strongly recommend at this point* are *World of Warcraft*, for its cartoony art direction and deep storytelling, and *Lord of the Rings Online*, for the way it promotes teamwork to tackle dramatic quests—and the opportunity it gives to connect gaming with a classic work of literature. You can find a game that will work on console games through services like Xbox Live, or you can even get started with a Facebook application like Farmville.

4. Offer small-group studies that explore the theology of a particular video game.

For my MA thesis, I did an in-depth exploration of the theology of two video games: Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* and Microsoft's *Age of Empires 2*.[4] You don't need to be in graduate school to explore the theology of a game and find it meaningful. You just need a few things:

- *People who are passionate about gaming.* If your immediate reaction to this statement is, "But nobody in my church cares about video games," then I have two responses. Either you don't know because you haven't asked around yet, or you're looking in the wrong place. Since when does an exploration of theology have to be made up of "church people"? You'll probably learn more if you get out in your community and connect with gamers there.

- *People who are passionate about theology.* Naturally, you'll be tempted to look to the most dedicated, intellectual people in your congregation. Then you'll try to imagine them playing the first-person shooter *Halo*, and you'll laugh. You may be right! But, theology is not just an intellectual exercise—it is something that can be explored with more than books (which is what I'm writing about in this article). Some of the most passionate theological people I know express that passion through service projects, through camping programs, through being the kind of people who are attentive for God to speak wherever they are. Who can you discover on the fringes of your awareness that wants to explore more of theology—the study of God?

- *A grounding in your own faith tradition.* You don't have to be a professional theologian. You *do* have to have an idea of what you believe and why you believe it, despite all the evidence and possibilities that exist that show it doesn't always make a lot of sense. Without this kind of grounding, you're likely to react to any different perspective you see represented in a game with judgment—rather than asking the kinds of critical questions that open up conversations with others.

- *A game that uses religious language, symbols, or assumptions to create its world.* I won't even bother to make a comprehensive list here, because once you start looking for religious content in games, you'll find it everywhere. And once you find it, you'll start asking questions. Why are the bad guys in *Halo*

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[4]Paul C. Adams, "'If Jesus played video games, he would be a god!' A Look at Gaming Culture through the Eyes of a Christian—and a Look at Christian Culture through the Eyes of a Gamer" (MA thesis, Luther Seminary, 2007).

called the "Covenant"? How come the long-running *Might and Magic* series portrays all religious figures as corrupt, stupid, and incompetent? Why do the paladins in *World of Warcraft* wear armor with Roman crosses on them, even though it is in a fantasy world? Why do those same paladins have an entire area of skills called "retribution" if they're wearing the symbol of the Prince of Peace? Why do the priests in *The Elder Scrolls IV (Oblivion)* lament that they have no power to stop evil, and despair that the gods never respond to them?

Once you have these things put together, a small-group study is pretty easy to do. Play the game—together if possible. Make observations about what is going on. Ask questions. Talk about what it all might mean.

I hope that you begin to see the ways in which video games can teach us about the culture we live in, can help us grow in our understanding of who God is, and—most of all—will be a joyful way to build connections between the generations. Now, get out there and play. There's a virtual world waiting! ⊕

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