NO AVATARS ALLOWED

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON VIDEO GAMES

JOSHUA WISE

CHURCH PUBLISHING INCORPORATED

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GENERATIONS OF BELIEVERS THAT GAME

Everyone Games

I don't remember when my father taught me to play chess. He had been brought up in the Dogpatch and Tenderloin districts of San Francisco and had seen several people murdered in front of him before he was fifteen years old. I'm not sure where he learned the game, but I know that he taught me to play when I was young, how to move the knight differently than the bishop, and how to castle. I remember that I was young because by fifth grade I was learning, from my science teacher, the gambit known as "fool's mate" and discovering for myself how to move a pawn en passant.

This is not a story of a father with a rough upbringing teaching his son to play chess and, lo and behold, the father and son were chess masters. Neither my father nor I were ever very good at the game. He might have been, if he had put his mind to it. Instead, we played now and then; I can't say that I remember when our last chess game took place. It was probably on a family vacation when I was a teenager.

At some point in his very rough life—perhaps in prison—someone taught my father a game about military strategy abstracted into a small, eight-by-eight board in which bishops, no less, killed knights and common folk. The pawn, standing in for the hard-working farmer whose life was often of little worth to the landed nobles who waged their wars across the face of Europe, died easily. However, with good strategy, that pawn could become noble and mighty by reaching the other side of the board. Chess is a violent game, but the violence is abstracted far enough from the bloodshed of the medieval battlefield that we often put away any concerns about teaching children to play. The benefits of the game—strategic thinking, patience, forethought, sportsmanship—outweigh its bloody heritage.

Most every generation has played games that draw their inspirations from combat and war. Such games require thinking people to apply their minds openly and critically to what each form of play is saying about its culture, and what it teaches children. That children play at defeating evil is a good thing. C. S. Lewis points out that the training of our imaginations, the training of our reflexes, and the training of our virtues in play allow us to be readier for those situations in real life. But this training can go awry. When generations of white boys and girls played "Cowboys and Indians," the Native American peoples were placed in the role of the villain and the imaginations of children were conditioned to think incorrectly and disparagingly of other human beings.

Less problematic perhaps, though not without its difficulties, is the play of "cops and robbers." One can imagine, however, in the current American social climate, that the decision about who is good and who is bad might be up in the air for many children. When Electronic Arts, a prominent video game publisher, released the game *Battlefield Hardline* in 2015, a

game of virtual "cops and robbers," many in the video game community criticized the game's seemingly tone-deaf attitude toward the hardline tactics of police against criminals while America was reeling from police violence.

One might object that play need not be violent. What about a tea party? What about playing at being explorers? It is true that a tea party need not involve a daring shoot-out between Mr. Bear and Ms. Bunny while Ms. Porcupine's best china is shattered to pieces and the tables and chairs are turned over for good cover. Though, I must admit that imagining Ms. Rabbit jumping up from behind a doily-covered sideboard and knocking the stuffing out of Mr. Owl with a bazooka presents an amusing picture.

But even if we pass on this Quentin Tarantino version of a tea party, this kind of play is not without its need for critique. What does the tea party say about our views of class, society, and money? Are the poor skunks invited to the tea party, or only the most perfumed of the woodland creatures? Do the turtles who do the drudgework for the rabbits who live in the big house get to sit and eat biscuits, or must they go back to their hovels as they have nothing fine to wear?

As for exploration, there is little to critique about bravery in the face of nature's dangers, but, whether it is exploration of the North Pole, a dangerous jungle, or a journey to the moon, the nasty context of nationalistic imperialism does tend to rear its head.

That is not to say that one might not play cops and robbers in which the police are just and brave. One might play at a tea party in which the poor are, as Christ commands, invited in to share in the vittles. One might assemble an international team to explore the jungle to make contact and create a fair trade relationship with the indigenous people. All of that is possible in play. But, being creatures who are fallen, we will find other

ways of slipping our fallenness into our recreation, whether it is virtual or not.

Why We Should Care about Video Games

In one sense, video games are nothing new. They are play that is fun, inspirational, challenging, and in desperate need of critique. In another sense, they are genuinely novel. Things that once only existed in our imagination, on the page, or on film are now presented to us so that we can interact with them and examine them from all angles. They have the wonder of the greatest movie scenes and effects, the interactivity of our imaginations, and the permanence of a book.

Video games also give us the kind of feedback that we can otherwise only get in the real world. I might have my action figure punch another action figure, but my mind must provide all of the sounds, the bruising, and the impact of the hit. If I'm not given to a particularly gory imagination, perhaps when my Batman figure hits the Joker, the Joker gets a fat lip and falls to the ground. If I'm more inclined toward blood and guts, perhaps the damage is more extensive, more along the lines of a mature comic book or movie. In a video game, when Batman hits a criminal in the *Arkham* series by Rocksteady Games, the bone-crunching effect of the world's greatest combatant is visually and audibly clear. And, after a well-executed fight, I can sit back and think, "I did that," as the criminals lie on the street cradling their badly injured limbs.

All of this means that video games require more complex thought when we are critiquing them. Like drawn or animated art, they show us things that our imaginations probably don't conjure on their own. Like physical play, they respond to our actions: we have agency. Like choose-your-own-adventure books, there is some sense that we are working with someone else, someone who created the content, to tell our own story

in a new world. Like chess, we must think strategically, and hopefully will engage in good sportsmanship and fair play.

Video games are a beast of complexity that the church must actively engage because the church is playing video games. Few pastors, however—Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox—are particularly conversant with them. There may be a host of reasons for this, but my suspicion is that the main problem is that, at least within Christianity, a stigma remains attached to playing these games. Throughout my academic career, I have encountered this stigma repeatedly, but a few examples should suffice. During my PhD program, I took a class on the theology of grace. It was a relatively large seminar because the professor was popular. Across from me sat an intelligent, gym-going, newly minted Catholic priest. Before class started, I made a joke about having "a healthy video gaming habit." I meant that my habit of playing video games was alive and well and that I fed it regularly. The young priest took me to mean that I thought that my habit was healthy for me. I pointed out that that was not what I meant, but what if I had? He seemed to take it as given that video games were an unhealthy pastime. He made no argument for their lack of value other than the generalization that everyone knows they are to be shunned.

A few years earlier, when I was doing my MA in systematic theology at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, an institution now absorbed into the United Lutheran Seminary, I remember mentioning to one of my professors that my friend Ben (now Father Ben, who wrote the foreword to this book) and I were doing a podcast on theology and video games. She laughed—and she was not the only professor to do so.

A final example will suffice for my point. About a year ago, after Mass, the same Father Ben and I were discussing a game night. This time it was board games and good, old-fashioned paper and pencil role play. One of the parishioners laughed and said, "What do you plan to do when you grow up?"

Each of these instances reveals two kinds of suspicion. The first, divorced from Christianity, is that video games are for children. The second is that video games are either so dangerous or so vapid that they do not warrant serious theological engagement. The first issue exists largely across a generational divide. Those who didn't grow up playing video games, and who haven't experienced them growing and changing, have little experience with the vast, mature, insanely complex worlds creadted by hundreds of adults for other adults to engage in. The second issue is largely due to an unexamined consensus that doesn't stand up to serious scrutiny, especially when compared with other accepted hobbies for adults.

I will not spend the rest of this chapter attempting to argue that those who didn't grow up with video games should try, if they can, to see past the generational gap in the same way that they perhaps hoped their parents would have with the music of their youth that has continued to entertain them throughout their lives. I will not spend paragraphs on the difficulties of spectator sports as a hobby that one picks up in one's youth and then carries all one's years. Instead, I want to contend that clergy and theologically minded people should take video games seriously because they are something that the church is doing. Many millions of people play video games; many of these people are religious.

Not only is the church playing video games, it's making them. Christians are actively involved in the creation of game worlds. A few years ago, I was researching *Past the Sky's Rim: The Elder Scrolls and Theology,* a book that looked at how theologians and scholars of religious studies could engage *The Elder Scrolls* by Bethesda Games. I got to sit down with one of the writers of the popular game *Skyrim* over coffee in Bethesda, Maryland, and talk about stories, the games in the series, and faith. He is a Christian who has had a good career making major video games. He is by no means alone.

The church plays games; the church makes games. It may be that not every congregation in America has gamers in it, but I would bet that most do. Our religious leaders need to be conversant in the popular literature of the day; the ever-expanding adventures in the worlds of Hyrule, Tamriel, Azeroth, and a thousand others are, for at least three generations of churchgoers, one major corpus.

Worlds That Engage Us

If we should take video games seriously, what is their substance? We might assume that all video games are something like *Pac-Man*, or like the violent shooting games we've seen on the news. And, there are a lot of games like *Pac-Man* and *Grand Theft Auto* out there. There are also games where you simply move a little picture around a screen, collect things, eat things, light things up, and put things in the correct order. There are games that are focused entirely on shooting other people in a virtual world. There are games that are focused on the activity of gameplay, and there are those that work to draw the player into an engaging story with interesting characters.

There are myriad other genres that draw players in. On the more militaristic side, there are strategy games in which you move pieces around a large map to try to take over territory, much like the board game *Risk*—or chess, come to think of it. There are games that involve flying planes, driving tanks, sailing ships, steering submarines, and commanding tank battalions or fleets of ships. In more imaginative settings, you might do all these things, except on a science fiction space-battlefield, or in a fantasy world. Instead of commanding the Soviet KV1 tank against Panzers in a World War II simulation, you might command the starships of *Star Trek*, the X-wings of *Star Wars*, or armies of elves or orcs in Tolkien's Middle Earth.

In narrative games such as *Gone Home*, *The Stanley Parable*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, the player interacts with the world around them to discover a story embedded in the game's environment. Sometimes this is done by way of spoken narrative, sometimes by text found in the world, and sometimes the player is invited simply to "read" the scene. These stories are often touching, personal, and melancholy. Sometimes they are uplifting; sometimes scary.

A popular kind of video game is the open-world role play. In this genre, the player is placed in an expansive world that can take hundreds of hours to explore. They are often challenged with quests by other characters they meet, challenged by hostile forces, and engaged in the discovery of fascinating locations and stories. Players often gain experience doing these things that translates into increased skills so that they can barter with people more effectively, repair their gear, use better weapons, construct equipment, talk people down from dangerous situations, and survive more damage. The more the player plays, the more capable their character becomes, so they can tackle even greater challenges. Games like *Fallout*, *The Witcher 3*, or *Breath of the Wild* are good examples of how aesthetically engaging these virtual worlds can be. They are filled with intricate detail, memorable characters, and surprising events.

Video games span the spectrum from pure puzzles to rich narratives. They ask us to think differently than we do in our regular lives, and they offer us experiences and vistas that don't exist in our world. From personal experience I can say that the spooky town of Silent Hill is a place that I love to visit virtually, but I wouldn't want to go walking down its deserted misty streets by myself in real life. The same can be said for Stephen King's Derry, Maine, or H. P. Lovecraft's Dunwich, Massachusetts. I enjoy walking through the postapocalyptic wasteland of the *Fallout* series, and enjoy movies like *Mad*

Max, *The Book of Eli*, and stories like "A Boy and His Dog." It should go without saying, though, that I am entirely opposed to anything that would turn our planet into a nuclear wasteland. In other words, video games engage all manner of our human capacities, and they often do so in ways that offer us experiences that we couldn't have otherwise.

Story Telling

Video games invite us to be active storytellers. They often require us to make choices, to see what the consequences are of those choices, and they invite us to share our stories with others. Much like the fans of football or baseball will replay the game the next morning, adding their own (unquestionably expert) opinions about how the game should have been played, gamers will talk about their own experiences playing alone or together.

A close friend of mine, who happens to be a priest, and I were playing a game called *Sea of Thieves*. In the game you are a pirate sailing the high seas, searching for treasure, fighting both skeletons and other players, and, for all intents and purposes, swashing every buckle you come across. The game was roundly criticized for not having a lot of structure when it first came out in 2018. Players were given different kinds of quests and then they would go off on their ships, either a sloop or a galleon, to dig up treasure, fight skeletons, or collect livestock. When they finished their quests, they returned to the people who sent them out and handed over the booty for rewards they could use to procure fancier pirate clothes, equipment, and decorations for their ships.

My friend and I set sail on a quest to find treasure. The quest had three different stages. In each we were led to an island and either given riddles to solve or a map with Xs on it. During part of the adventure, a squall kicked up and the ship was tossed

about violently. Skeletons fired on us with canons from towers around the island we were trying to reach. My friend managed to get into one of the towers and defeat the skeletons with his scimitar and take control of the canon. I stayed behind, bailing water from my ship, patching holes, and trying to keep it steered in the right direction. It was all quite difficult.

We muddled through, the storm passed, and we found our treasure. Twice more we sailed to islands, dug up booty, and sailed away. As we headed home to turn in our swag, we pulled out instruments and played a lonesome Celtic tune as the sun set and our sail billowed. We were, of course, running with our lights off so as not to attract other pirates, and to let us get a jump on them if we happened across them, and so the deck was dark when the sun dipped below the waves. Once we had completed our quest, we sank our ship in the shallows and played it down with the same tune on a hurdy-gurdy and accordion. Then we said goodnight over our microphones, wished each other a blessing, and shared how much we enjoyed the time with each other. We hadn't seen each other in over eight months as careers and distance make it hard to meet in person, but we met once a week on the seas, using terms like port, starboard, windward, and leeward, as we created a story together. The game developers didn't write the story, but they made the world where we could craft one.

I will talk more about agency and some of its ethical ramifications in video games in the next chapter, but I want to emphasize here that games allow people, and this includes people in the congregations of churches, to tell fantastical stories alone and together. They foster creativity and expression in new media. They let people solve highly complex puzzles, defeat hoardes of goblins, and talk their enemies down from their wicked ways. Games like *Minecraft* let us sculpt in grass, dirt, and stone to make glorious castles or complex mine systems. Games like *The Witness* let us bang our heads against

logic puzzles until we wake up the next day with a Eureka! moment. And, when we get the chance, we share these stories with each other.

Friendly Competition

I have a complex relationship with competition. My fundamental understanding of reality is that at the heart of all things is a Triune being who is the antithesis of competition. The only negatives in the Trinity are ones that indicate distinction. The Father is not the Son; the Son is not the Spirit. The three persons are interpenetrating, completely self-giving, and their distinction and unity are beyond human comprehension and expression. They are, indeed, more united because they are distinct. This is the great mystery of being and love at the root of all things.

Creation, as the limited and diverse image of this infinite plenitude of love and self-gift, should be a place of cooperation and unbounded love. All Christian expression should be an expression of charity in all things. But the world is more complex than that. The evolutionary process by which we come into being as a species is a mechanism of competition. We have competition deep within our psychology. Indeed, we find that when we set our minds to compete, we tend to accomplish far greater things than if we are merely satisfied with what we have and where we are.

This conflict between the Christian ideal of peaceable cooperation and natural competition is seen in Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "In Memoriam A.H.H.," in which Tennyson considers the conflict between the nobility of the human spirit and the destiny of death. His departed friend is the one,

> Who trusted God was love indeed
> And love Creation's final law—

Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed—

The solution I find is that competition as it exists with "red in tooth and claw" may not have been the original plan for creation, but, whatever has happened to it, competition is now a reality and can be redeemed by God. Competition can be made a glory of what C. S. Lewis calls "complex good." A redeemed competition can be used by God to make us determined, loyal, brave, mutually supportive, and glorious. An unredeemed competition can lead to cheating, lying, jealousy, and hatred.

My experience of playing video games with friends, especially Christian friends, has given me many examples of redeemed competition. There is a complex joy that can be mined from the competition between friends that is lost to those who do not love their competitors. In friendly competition we find that we can glory in our opponents' victories as well as in our own. We can celebrate the amazing shot, the ingenious tactics, and the wise foresight that defeated us in the end because we don't believe the fundamental message of unredeemed competition, which is that we are playing a zero-sum game, and that your victory is my loss. Instead, redeemed play in all forms, not just video games, allows players to be like the scribes of the kingdom, bringing forth treasures old (my victory is my glory) and new (but so is yours).

This perspective on competition is not new. Christians have been playing each other in chess, rugby, soccer, football, baseball, basketball, tennis, and scores of other games for centuries. Christians tilted with each other from horseback in suits of armor, wrestled with each other, and met in the boxing ring. They have gloried in the humility of trying their very best and meeting a more capable opponent. Video games are another place where the Christian expression of redeemed competition can come to light.

Fallen Play

The picture I have drawn in this chapter is one that shows games in their best light because I believe the assumptions that surround them are often unfair. I have attempted to show how they can tell stories that deeply engage us, present worlds for us to explore, and provide us with opportunities for friendly cooperation and competition. Because my argument is that we should be taking video games seriously, I have not emphasized the troubling side. However, once the church accepts that video games have something important to contribute to our contemplation of ultimate questions and are worth considering, the church must take an honest look at the darker side of video games.

I am not thinking of those games that present stories of questionable or outright immoral behavior. Nor am I thinking of those "open" games that let a person play as an upright or low-down dirty kind of character. I have no issue with the game that lets you talk your way, shoot your way, or seduce your way out of a situation. Play is the place where we can indulge a little and have every chance of slipping past any moral consequences. All of this I will get into in the next chapter. Instead, I'm thinking of two problems with video games in general. The first is the assembly of games that are designed purely to foment a desire rooted in doing harm. The second is the community that gathers around video games. Both are areas where the church must be both aware and active in engaging the world of play.

I want to represent the collection of games that concern me with two examples; alongside them I'd like to put two counter-examples. The two games in question are *Hatred* (2015) and *RapeLay* (2006). Next to these I'd like to put the much-touted *Grand Theft Auto* series, and the once controversial, but now perhaps somewhat quaint, *Leisure Suit Larry* games.

Hatred, made by Destructive Creations, is a game in which you play a character who deeply hates the world around him and simply wants to murder as many people as he possibly can. The goal is to spread as much suffering as you can before you are gunned down by police. The graphics are dark, the people in the game other than you are only there to be the objects of your homicidal rage, and the player is encouraged not to have any empathy for them. The player fends off police by killing them; not only can the player gun down the civilian population but the player also executes them as they struggle and try to get away after they have been shot. There is, as far as I can tell, no purpose to the game other than the simulation of hatred and nihilism. The character has decided to die, and he plans to send as many people to the grave with him as he can. There is no exploration of the character's background, no attempt to contextualize the problems that might have led him to this tragic moment, and no demonstration of the cost of such a rampage to those who are affected by it. The sight of grieving loved ones, if it were it shown in the game, would likely be used to enhance the sense of accomplishment of evil.

Next to this I would like to put the series *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*), by Rockstar Games, and, specifically, *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), which is, at the time of this writing, the most recent in the series. For several versions, *GTA* has been increasingly focused on stories and characters. *GTA: San Andreas* drew its characters and setting heavily from the movie *Boyz n the Hood*; *GTA: Vice City* focused on a 1980s *Miami Vice* setting; *GTA IV* was set in an analog of New York, focusing on an immigrant from a former Soviet Bloc country who wants to come to America to start over, but is pulled into the shady dealings of the underworld; *GTA V* introduces the first storyline with three protagonists.

It is worth saying that in all these games, you play as a criminal who is either trying to reform and get out of "the life" or

actively pursuing a criminal career. In either case, the characters are seeking something. They care about other characters and are not wanton killers. In no *GTA* game do you play as a person whose goal is a mass-murder spree. The closest the series gets to that is a character named Trevor in *GTA V*. He is both the most amoral character the series presents, and one of the most tragic. He is introduced as he murders one of the protagonists of a previous *GTA* adventure. Trevor is morally reprehensible and generally a menace to society, but there are two significant elements that distinguish him from the character in *Hatred*.

The first is that Trevor's corruption, manipulation, and psychopathic tendencies are not recklessly glorified like the murders in *Hatred*. Trevor is complex. He has friends he cares about, even if he treats them terribly. He has been betrayed, he has a strange code of honor, and he even has a dastardly charm. Excepting his tendency to kill, I've known people like Trevor. They are people in desperate need of help, people who have been badly damaged. I saw, in his character, the possible outcome for one of the kids I grew up with, who fortunately turned away from drugs and submitted himself to baptism a few years ago. In a different version of our lives, he might have been Trevor.

The things you do as Trevor are bad, there's no getting around it. The things you do in *Grand Theft Auto* games would be, if you did them in the real world, immoral and illegal. And the things that you can do in a *GTA* game would range from the ill-advised to the monstrous. Still, the difference between *GTA* and *Hatred* is massive, at least from my perspective.

The point of *Hatred* is to feel no empathy, to have no sense of humor, simply to hate the people around you. It is, even if not so intended, a game that appears designed to live out revenge fantasies—the kind we fear some peole have before they take a real gun and cause real damage and excruciating sorrow in our world. The goal of *Hatred* is wholesale slaughter.

None of that is the point of *GTA*. *GTA* allows you to commit widespread virtual violence, but it doesn't revel in it. Instead, you can spend sixty hours in a full game of *GTA V* committing crimes—many of them involving shootouts—yet never go on a shooting spree. And, even if you do, you may have vastly different motivations than someone playing *Hatred*. My common practice when playing *GTA* is to play entirely without civilian casualties, if I can. Sometimes the cars don't handle well, and sometimes you get in a tussle with the police. None of it brings up malicious feelings in me. None of it gives me satisfaction that that innocent person, or a police officer, has gotten what they deserve. However, when I am satisfied, or bored, or tired, I will often save my progress and make use of the combat elements of the game. I will shoot it out with the ever-escalating police presence and see how long I can last. I might hunker down in a restaurant, commit a crime, and then let the police, swat teams, and, eventually, military characters of the game pour in and do my best to stay alive under the increasing danger. I derive no sadistic pleasure in seeing "people" shot. I simply like the challenge of the escalating level of difficulty, knowing that, in the end, I will fall in a hail of bullets.

There are people who go on shooting sprees in *GTA* for the same reason they might in *Hatred*. They feel hatred. They want the people in the game to stand in for the people they wish they could hurt. But *GTA* is not designed with that in mind, or at least it does not appear to be. Instead, *GTA* has a system in place that insures that if you do something flagrant, the police will respond. Alternatively, *Hatred*'s whole point is to do malicious harm to people and cause them suffering. There is nothing else to do. If you don't kill innocents and police, you've played the game badly. In *GTA* you can play "robber" as you might in a game of "cops and robbers." In *Hatred*, there is only the titular emotion.

Now, turning from violence to sex, the other, somehow larger taboo when it comes to our culture, we find the game *RapeLay*, made by Illusion Games. As you might glean from the title, it's a game about nonconsensual sex. The game is a collection of small vignettes in which you manipulate a disembodied hand to grope and prod at the members of a family of women so that you can take them against their will. There isn't much more to the game. It is a simulator that treats women as play things. It has no other point. There is no character, no real story, no empathy.

Comparatively, the *Leisure Suit Larry* games, made famous in the eighties for their smutty content, tell the stories of the kind of guy you might see at a bar on Friday night and wonder, "What on earth is he thinking?" Larry is on a quest for sex. However, as Rachel Presser has argued,[1] despite the outrage that often follows the game, the *Larry* games emphasize the need for consent, the ability to good-naturedly accept rejection, and the superiority of emotional connection to simple physical interaction.

Even so, the game is prurient, it's immature, and it's largely played for laughs. Larry is a schlub and the women around him know he's a schlub. Their rejections of him are humorous, but there is no hint that Larry is trying to bed them to get revenge. Larry has a sense of humor about it all too. There is, of course, the problematic way in which the games present the pursuit of sex—not as the culmination of a loving relationship, nor always even as something people do for mutual enjoyment, but as a kind of secret treasure the women possess that men must figure out how to unlock. *Larry*, of course,

1. Rachel Presser, "The Surprising Feminist Overtures of a Leisure Suit Larry Retrospective," Medium, September 10, 2018, https://medium.com/mammon-machine-zeal/the-surprising-feminist-overtures-of-a-leisure-suit-larry-retrospective-f8b5950c29f1

needs serious critiquing, especially around the idea that sex = victory. But, since it is played for laughs, there is a certain amount of critique in Larry's understanding of sex inherent in the game already. Far from excusing his antics with a "boys will be boys" attitude, the games treat Larry as the butt of the joke, while at the same time allowing his constant optimism to allow players to still feel for him and root for him.

Some may find any sexual content in books, movies, television shows, or music to be in bad taste. They will see Larry's escapades, even when their problematic elements have been addressed, simply as smut. I must simply disagree, and so does a significant portion of Christian cultural history. There is an equally long history of bawdy humor in Christian culture as there is of military entertainment. If one embraces that the soldierly and the sultry can be subjects of Christian entertainment, then the difference between *Larry* and *RapeLay* matters. *Larry* needs critiquing, and perhaps can receive it in the games themselves. *RapeLay* is no more than an exercise in virtually enacting sexual assault.

There are many games like *Hatred* and *RapeLay*. There are games where the point is to shoot Muslims, to shoot students in schools, and to manipulate events to sleep with women, with or without their consent. These are all problematic, but there may be an upside to them that demonstrates why it is so important that our churches are conversant in the games people are playing. If someone plays *Hatred* and enjoys it, they may just have a darker sense of humor, but they may also be finding a desired simulation of things that they feel drawn to do. If we know the games and we can talk to our congregations about them, and engage them in shame-free conversation about why they enjoy what they play, then we can gain insight and offer help where it is needed.

This brings me to the second major dark sector: gaming communities. There are a multitude of healthy, happy, friendly,

encouraging gaming communities in the world. At my own church, we have a game night on Saturdays where we invite people, as part of a meetup group, to come into the rectory and play board games or role-play games. For a few hours every week, a group of fifteen to twenty people sit around tables, slay goblins, cast spells, buy up properties, assign workers, roll dice, and do all the things that people do in games. It's a friendly group. It's not perfect. There have been a few tense moments here and there. But, overall, it is growing into a group, not just of people that play together, but of friends who care for each other. This is the ideal: people coming together through the love of play and building human bonds.

But there are sectors of the video-gaming community that do not work this way. Instead, largely fueled by the anonymity of the internet, they are a thriving expression of the sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia that gather around gaming. The use of racial and sexual slurs on voice chat in many online games is well known. Many people turn off their voice-chat features or reserve those features for people they already know in real life.

A good example of both the need for critique as well as the toxicity around that critique is the "Gamergate" phenomenon that dominated public video game discussions in 2014. Elements of the online gaming community came together to harass women in the gaming community that they saw as either dishonest or dangerous to the continuation of gaming as it existed. Women like Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, and Anita Sarkeesian received harassing messages and threats against them and their families. Threats of rape and murder were leveled against these and other women in the larger community of gaming, either for, as the Gamergaters saw it, unfairly using their sexuality to promote their games, or critiquing a male-dominated industry that often treats women with shocking unfairness in the games that it makes and plays.

In both the Gamergate and online gaming sides of deeply problematic behavior, both anonymity and fame play important parts. People who feel that they can harm others by exposing their home addresses to the public— an act known as "doxing"—tend to do so without being willing to present their own information. There are more examples of the destructive nature of the community around video games. Of course, there are similar examples in the communities around sports and politics. There has not been, to my knowledge, a single riot-related death of anyone associated with video games, though professional sports cannot say the same. This is not to say that sports are somehow worse than games, but to say that human communities will always be laced with fallenness. This fallenness can be kept, to some degree, in check by a healthy openness in our activities. When we can operate entirely in the shadows, when we can say whatever we feel without anyone being able to call us out for it, or threaten things just to scare another person without being confronted, the angels of our worst natures seem to come flapping into view. The church must address all of this, not by standing outside of the gaming community and wagging a parental finger, but by standing within it and engaging it constructively and compassionately.

Conclusion

Leaders of faith communities need to have a level head when it comes to dealing with video games. The presence of problematic, sometimes deeply problematic, elements in the hobby of gaming should not blind anyone to the artistic, narrative, imaginative, aesthetic, intellectual, and social good of video games. Instead, we must be realistic and aware about this activity that millions of people around the world are engaging in every day. To shun it, to be willfully unaware of it, or, worse, to dismiss it, is irresponsible and robs us of the ability both to communi-