

2007

"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

Paul Curtis Adams

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/ma_theses



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Adams, Paul Curtis, "'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" (2007). *MA Theses*. Paper 9.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses at Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in MA Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Luther Seminary.

“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

by

PAUL CURTIS ADAMS

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

THESIS ADVISER: JACK FORTIN

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2007

This thesis may be duplicated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Michelle, for all of her support during this project. She played many video games late into the night for the sake of this writing, and her observations were an invaluable contribution to the completion of this work.

PREFACE

All Biblical quotations in this writing are from the New Revised Standard Edition of the Bible (NRSV), unless otherwise indicated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
PREFACE	iv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	viii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
A Brief Overview of Video Game Studies	3
Historical Considerations	4
The Rise of Personal Computer (PC) Gaming	6
Technological Advances	7
The Internet and Multiplayer Gaming	9
2. THE IMPACT OF THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY	11
Video Games: A Way of Life	13
Age and Gender Considerations	14
Is There Enough Time to be a Christian <i>and</i> Play Video Games?	15
Video Games and Human Relationships	16
3. VIDEO GAMES: GOOD OR BAD?	
Video Game Ethics: A Wesleyan Perspective	19
Scientific and Social Perspectives	24
4. THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO VIDEO GAMES.....	27
The Current Response of the Church.....	27
The Inadequacy of the Church’s Current Response	28
The Church’s Unwillingness to Recognize Gaming Culture	28
Inconsistency in the Church’s Treatment of Video Games	31
The Church’s Denial of the Full Challenge of Culture.....	34
The Challenge to the Church in a Technological Era.....	36

5. COMPARING “AGE OF EMPIRES 2” AND “WORLD OF WARCRAFT”	38
An Introduction to, and Comparison of, Both Video Games	39
“Age of Empires 2”	40
The Monk in “Age of Empires 2”	41
The Monk’s Healing Ability	42
The Monk’s Relic Gathering Ability	44
The Monk’s Conversion Ability	47
The Use of Theological Language in “Age of Empires 2”	51
The Sanctity, Atonement, and Redemption Technologies	51
Reflections on Theological Language in “Age of Empires 2”	53
Comparing Theological Language and Theological Content.....	54
“Age of Empires 2”: Summary and Conclusions	55
“World of Warcraft”	57
The “Light” in “World of Warcraft”	58
The Paladin in “World of Warcraft”	60
The Paladin: Christian Language and Symbolism.....	62
The Use of Language in the Paladin’s <i>Lay on Hands</i> Skill	63
Inconsistent Use of Language, and Hostility towards Christianity	64
A Postmodern/Relativist, Young White Male Theology for Sale	65
6. THE PRIEST IN ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES	67
The Origins of Priest Weapon Restrictions in Video Games	67
One Theory Explaining Priest Weapon Restrictions	68
Historical Practices of Priests of the Middle Ages in War Situations	69
The Convergence of History with the Needs of Game Designers.....	71
7. OTHER EXAMPLES OF THEOLOGY IN VIDEO GAMES	72
The Theology of “Galactic Civilizations”	72
The Theology of “Rise of Nations”	73
The Theology of “Civilization IV”	73

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY IN THE HOME	75
Redefining Ministry to Include the Home	75
Redefining Ministry: The <i>missio Dei</i>	76
Redefining Ministry: Martin Luther	77
Five Principles for Using Video Games in Faith Formation.....	79
Faith is Formed through Personal, Trusted Relationships	79
The Church is a Living Partnership between Home and Congregation	81
Where Christ is Present in Faith, the Home is Church, Too	83
Faith is Caught More Than it is Taught	84
It Takes Christian Parents and Other Adults to Raise Christian Youth.....	85
Final Reflections.....	87
BIBLIOGRAPHY	89

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AD&D	“Advanced Dungeons and Dragons” (role-playing game)
AoE2	“Age of Empires 2” (Microsoft Corporation video game)
MMORPG	Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
PC	Personal computer
RPG	Role-playing game
RTS	Real-time strategy game
WoW	“World of Warcraft” (Blizzard Entertainment video game)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A central task of the church—the work of communicating the gospel to the surrounding culture—is becoming a more complicated endeavor. In this post-Christendom age, video games have become a dominant source of entertainment in Western culture. Many video game designers borrow and repackage Christian language and symbolism, using this altered content for the sake of selling their product. The process of modifying Christian theological concepts to the parameters demanded by video game designers often results in an unorthodox distortion of the original concepts. In order for Christians to share the gospel effectively in this postmodern world, the church must reclaim and restate the truth of the Christian message in a form that has meaning for people that are more strongly influenced by entertainment than theology.

The purpose of this writing is threefold: 1) to investigate the developing relationship between Christianity and video games, 2) to examine a number of popular video game titles to see how game developers use Christianity for entertainment purposes, and 3) to discern what the church might learn from video games about the realities of existing in a 21st-century, Western, postmodern, technological context.

For the purpose of this study, most of the specific video games that will be examined will be “PC” (personal computer) games¹. This is for the simple reason that all

¹ The term PC typically refers to the computer system historically developed by International Business Machines and made popular through the development of Microsoft Windows. However, for the

PCs have a keyboard. A keyboard—quite obviously—allows the computer user to communicate through words, phrases, and sentences. “Console” game systems, such as the gaming platforms made by Nintendo and Sony, do not use a keyboard for input. Instead, they use a special controller that is used to direct the action on the screen. These generic input devices are excellent at things like controlling movement, but are quite poor at writing text.

A user that can interact with a video game using language can express more subtlety and complexity than a user that is forced to interact with a game using a proprietary controller with only a few buttons on it. Because of this, PC video game developers have historically created games with more depth than their console gaming counterparts.² Console game developers have tended to focus their attention more on action and less on interactive storytelling.

Because of this fact, PC video game developers have done a better job of integrating ideas from the surrounding culture into their games than their console counterparts. Therefore, they are better suited for the type of theological study proposed by this writing.³

purposes of this writing, Apple/Macintosh/iMac computers will also be considered PCs. Games developed for Windows and Apple/Macintosh/iMac systems have, for the most part, been duplicates of one another.

² This statement is not *exclusively* true, for some console games have wonderfully interactive worlds that are excellent at communicating complex ideas, while some PC games have little depth. However, PC games developers have generally been more successful in this aspect of game design. In very recent history, the differentiation between PC and console games has lessened, though PC games developers still do a better job at creating depth in their design processes.

³ A theological study of the relationship between Christianity and console games would be a worthy project to undertake, though the conclusions drawn from it would likely be more generalized (due to the preference of images and action over words in console gaming) than the results presented in this writing.

A Brief Overview of Video Game Studies

The idea of the academic study of video games is a relatively new one, even considering the short history of electronic gaming. “Pong”, a basic tennis game that is celebrated as being the first video game available to be played on a console system in the home, was released in 1972. Yet, it took about thirty more years before the first major scholarly journal was established that exclusively focused on video games.

Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research was first published in 2001, describing itself as “a cross-disciplinary journal dedicated to games research...our primary focus is aesthetic, cultural, and communicative aspects of computer games.”⁴ Professional associations have also formed around the topic of video game study, such as the Digital Games Research Association.⁵ They act as networks for academics, game developers, and policy makers to explore the implications of video games in culture, though the emergence of these associations has also been a recent phenomenon.

A survey of journals and associations dedicated to the field of game studies reveals a limitation in the scope of their work. Academics, particularly in the fields of psychology, sociology, and cultural studies, are well represented. Professionals that make their living through the gaming industry, such as business executives, also participate in these discussions (though to a lesser degree than the academics). Educators on all levels,

⁴ Espen Aarseth, *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research: Our Mission*, par. 2-3, <http://www.gamestudies.org> (accessed January 16, 2007)

⁵ Frans Mäyrä, *Digital Games Research Association*, <http://www.digra.org> (accessed January 16, 2007)

seeking to find ways to integrate the popularity of video games with the process of teaching and learning, have also played a significant role.

Theologians, though, are nowhere to be found in the discussion. It is very likely that they have simply considered video games, being a form of entertainment, as a subject that is unworthy of critical theological study. Though the Christian church has often been quick to respond to social concerns, such as the care of the poor, sick, and needy, it has often been slow to respond to the trends of social culture in recent history. This writing seeks to bring an informed Christian theological viewpoint to the emerging field of video game studies.

Historical Considerations

The first video games were, by today's standards, basic and crude. Yet, these early games had enduring appeal. One example is "Combat", which was packaged along with one of the first major console gaming systems (the Atari Video Computer System). Released in 1977, "Combat" became very popular among gamers because of its revolutionary two-player feature, which put two humans in direct competition with each other.⁶

Console systems from pioneering gaming companies like Atari and Nintendo provided a new form of family entertainment in the home. While they functioned as a form of family play that sometimes brought people closer together,⁷ these early games cannot be said to have had any significant cultural impact on the people that played them.

⁶ Nick Montfort, "Combat in Context," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 6, Issue 1, 2006): Creating Context—For Two Players, <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/montfort> (accessed January 17, 2007)

⁷ E. Mitchell, "The Dynamics of Family Interaction Around Home Video Games," *Marriage and Family Review* 8 (Special Issue: Personal Computers and the Family, 1985): 121-135.

They simply didn't have a high enough level of complexity to communicate a story or a message of substance to the player. Consequently, these games didn't have any real connection to reality. If they did resemble reality in some small way, they required a work of incredible imagination on the part of the game player in order to make a connection from the game to concepts in daily life.

One such work of imagination was published in *The Christian Century* by a Methodist pastor, John Robert McFarland, in 1982. Mr. McFarland, writing about the popular video game "Pac-Man", wondered about the significance of the game. Pac-Man is a game that involves one large circle eating smaller circles, while being chased by square blocks ("ghosts") in a maze.

Using an allegorical analysis, in the same way that the early church often read the Bible, he made this claim:

"[Pac-Man] is based on the Christian understanding of life...Pac-Man is based on the biblical narrative, its story the same one Jesus told in a different way. Pac-Man is existence, captured in the bleeps and blips of the electronic board. It is, in short, life...Pac-Man is the story of life as we hear it in the Judeo-Christian tradition...it is the most thoroughly theological of all the video games."⁸

While Mr. McFarland certainly gets points for using a video game as an inspiration for a written sermon, it is virtually impossible to believe his claims that Pac-Man has any basis in the Christian tradition at all. Gaming technology in 1982 wasn't capable of communicating any message of substance, much less of telling the story of the Christian tradition as Mr. McFarland claimed. Yet, despite its obvious flaws, his article stands as one of the first published theological reflections on video games.

⁸ John Robert McFarland, "The Theology of Pac-Man," *The Christian Century* (September 29, 1982): par. 16, 26, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1341> (accessed January 17, 2007)

The Rise of Personal Computer (PC) Gaming

Console game systems, like those of Atari and Nintendo, have traditionally focused on games featuring action and direct competition. They ultimately sought to emulate the experience that game players had in an arcade (a shop full of technologically advanced, pay-per-play video games), but to bring that experience into the home. However, personal computers (PCs) were charting a different path to bring gaming entertainment to the home.

Personal computers were initially valued by home users for their word processing and productivity software, such Microsoft “Works” or its Macintosh counterpart, “AppleWorks”. Video games were played on PCs, but they were a secondary function of the machine. Until the mid-1980s, most PC games copied the form and style of console games, but were of generally lower quality because home computers were not being primarily designed and marketed with gaming in mind.

All this began to change in the mid 1980s with the development of gaming genres specific to PCs. The presence of a keyboard inspired game developers to design PC games with interactive storylines, like Richard Garriott’s “Ultima” series⁹ or the “Quest for Glory”¹⁰ series from Sierra Entertainment. A player could input words or phrases with the keyboard to interact with virtual characters in the game. This was a significant departure from console gaming, which encouraged combative competition, rather than conversation.

⁹ Some titles in the Ultima series were later sold on non-PC gaming platforms, but the entire series was initially designed for the PC, and only the PC was able to play each and every title in the Ultima series.

¹⁰ The “Quest for Glory” series was initially released as the “Hero’s Quest” series, but the title was changed prior to the release of the third game of the set after a copyright dispute.

With these games, and others like them, the concept of the computer “role-playing game” (or RPG) became a dominant form in video gaming. A role-playing game casts the player in the role of a heroic figure that must go on a fantastic journey to save the world from evil. Role-playing games are not unique to computers, as can be seen by looking at the highly influential pen-and-paper “Dungeons and Dragons” series. However, it was on the personal computer that role-playing games became a dominant form of interactive entertainment.

Technological Advances

Technological advances in computer technology also contributed to the rise of the personal computer as a gaming platform. Back in 1965, the co-founder of the Intel Corporation, Gordon Moore, made a bold prediction now known as “Moore’s Law”. Moore’s Law states that the number of transistors¹¹ on a computer microprocessor will double about every two years.¹²

Moore’s Law has generally proved to be true. While the first microprocessor had only 2,200 transistors, computers available to home users in the early 21st century now include as many as 1,000,000,000 (one billion) transistors on the central processing unit.¹³ People designing video games in the early 21st century have at *least* a thousand times more processing power to work with than Richard Garriott did when he was working on his groundbreaking “Ultima” game series (when personal computers had microprocessors containing between 500,000 and 1,000,000 transistors).

¹¹ A transistor is a switch that acts as the basic building block of computer circuitry.

¹² Intel Corporation. “Moore’s Law, The Future,” *Technology and Research at Intel*: par. 2. <http://www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/index.htm> (accessed January 17, 2007)

¹³ *Ibid.*, par. 1.

Similar rates of technological progress have taken place in computer components like graphics boards, sound cards, and hard disk drives. Game developers are now capable of designing games with photo-realistic graphics and video, world-class sound and music, and storylines with as much (or more) depth than movies, books, or theater. Contemporary video games can feature hundreds, or thousands, of hours of play in a single game. It may be helpful to bring a theological perspective to these developments at this point.

It is interesting to note a word that is commonly used to describe contemporary video games: “immersive”, referring to the idea of submerging an object in water. Technology, especially in sound and video, has progressed to the point that humans can now feel that they are fully immersed in a game. Video games are so effectively designed to be attractive to the human brain that many players feel that they “exist within the game”; they feel completely surrounded and supported by the game itself.

The Christian tradition (the Baptist church, most prominently) also uses the language of immersion to describe our baptism through water into the death, life, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christians openly state that it is Christ who surrounds and supports us. This raises a theological question for the technological age: how can a Christian explain to another person what it means to be “immersed” in the waters of baptism, when the video game industry can so fully immerse us in video, sound, and story through the use of a few electronic devices?

The rise of technology is bringing up questions for Christian identity that were not an issue in previous centuries. Experts in the field of church conflict resolution note that

since “we are in a time of great change,”¹⁴ these kinds of questions are not all that surprising. However, the rate of technological change in the video game industry that has led to the development of fully immersive video games may surprise those who do not follow the gaming world closely.

The Internet and Multiplayer Gaming

Aside from the exponential increase in the capability of computer components, the single most influential factor in the rise of PC gaming has been the emergence of the Internet. While it has been possible for home users to play games over a modem or network connection since the early 1990s, it was the development of broadband Internet connections at the end of the 1990s that fundamentally changed the way that video games are created and played.¹⁵ Instead of an industry devoted to creating *single-player games* with multiplayer elements, PC video game developers began to create *multiplayer games* with single-player elements.

Today, virtually all popular PC games include multiplayer capability over a broadband internet connection.¹⁶ Some games, such as Blizzard Entertainment’s “World of Warcraft” and Mythic Entertainment’s “Dark Age of Camelot” actually require such a connection in order to play. These special role-playing games, known as Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), will be considered in more detail

¹⁴ Gilbert R. Rendle, *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders* (Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 1998), 3.

¹⁵ Broadband internet connections, such as coaxial cable internet, digital subscriber lines (DSL), or satellite internet links can offer consistent connection speeds of hundreds, or thousands, of kilobits per second. The fastest dial-up, phone line modem has a maximum speed of 56 kilobits per second, though historically, most dial-up modems had a speed of 14.4 or 28.8 kilobits per second.

¹⁶ While PCs took advantage of Internet gaming from the very beginning, it took nearly ten years before console game manufacturers began to include Internet gaming capabilities in their systems.

later in this writing. Popular PC games that do not include broadband internet play, like Stardock's "Galactic Civilizations" series, are quite rare. These single-player games are considered anachronistic by many game players, although they still have some appeal.

Broadband internet is now at the point where a customer can instantly purchase a game title online, download it to their computer, and be playing it within minutes. The Internet is slowly making the idea of going to the store to purchase a game an unnecessary practice. Whether it is in a traditional store or online, though, it is clear that the video game industry is selling incredible numbers of games to consumers.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPACT OF THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY¹

The video game industry sells about 250 million video game titles each year,² which equates to \$7.4 billion in game sales.³ When the sale of console gaming systems and accessories are factored in, the sales figures rise to \$13.5 billion.⁴ Total sales have nearly tripled since 1997.⁵ Some people estimate that the worldwide gaming industry generates \$30 billion each year.⁶

It may be surprising to some that the video game industry now rivals—or perhaps surpasses—the movie industry in sales. Movie ticket sales, which bring in approximately \$9 billion in box office receipts annually, have not increased for the last several years.⁷

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all statistics quoted in this writing only apply to the United States.

² Entertainment Software Association. “Facts and Research [2006]: Sales and Genre Data,” *TheESA.com*, 2007, http://www.theesa.com/facts/sales_genre_data.php (accessed January 18, 2007)

³ David M. Riley, “2006 U.S. Video Game Retail Sales Reach \$13.5 Billion Exceeding Previous Record Set in 2002 By Over \$1.7 Billion,” *NPD.com*, January 19, 2007, http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_070119.html (accessed January 27, 2007)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Dora Radwick and Sean P. Dolan, “First Quarter 2002 Video Games Fact Sheet,” *NPD.com*, May 20, 2002, http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_020520.htm (accessed January 27, 2007)

⁶ Darren Waters, “Game On For Console Conflict,” *BBCNews.com*, November 9, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6132358.stm> (accessed January 18, 2007)

⁷ Motion Picture Association of America. “U.S. Theatrical Market: 2005 Statistics,” *MPAA.com*, March 9, 2006, <http://www.mpa.org/2005%20Theatrical%20Market%20Statistics%20Report.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2007)

Pastors and teachers have long recognized the value of using movies to open theological discussions in sermons and classes alike. Now that the video game industry is rapidly surpassing the movie industry in terms of financial impact, perhaps it is time for church leaders to study them for their theological significance as well. After all, video games are becoming more and more visible to the general public as time goes by.

It is becoming increasingly common for specific video game titles to be advertised on television, during the preview time before movies shown in theaters, and to be the focus of mainstream news reporting. Major television networks now feature video game award shows in the style of the Emmy or Grammy awards.⁸ The incredibly popular MMORPG “World of Warcraft” was even the subject of a weeklong comic strip parody in newspapers across the United States.⁹

The general public is becoming more and more involved in video games each year, even though doing so can be a significant financial investment. A PC can range in cost from \$500-2000, a console game system can cost up to \$500, and a single game title can cost up to \$70. In addition, games played online often charge a monthly subscription fee of up to \$20. Yet, as rising sales numbers indicate¹⁰, more and more households are making video games a priority when it comes to their expendable income. The impact of video games on households can also be seen in the way in which people are choosing to spend their free time.

⁸ Viacom International, *Spike TV 2006 Video Game Awards*, 2006, <http://www.spiketv.com/#/events/vga2006/index.jhtml> (accessed January 27, 2007)

⁹ Bill Amend, “Foxtrot’s Bill Amend Discusses World of Warcraft with Allakhazam,” *Allakhazam.com*, February 28, 2005, <http://wow.allakhazam.com/news/sdetail5190.html?story=5190> (accessed January 18, 2007)

¹⁰ Entertainment Software Association. “Facts and Research [2006]: Sales and Genre Data”.

Video Games: A Way of Life

Today, video games are not just an isolated form of entertainment for people living in the United States—they are a way of life. The average 25-year old has spent 10,000 hours playing video games over the course of their lives.¹¹ Sixty-nine percent of “heads of households” in the United States play video games.¹²

Some skilled gamers even play video games as a primary source of employment. Organizations like the Cyberathlete Professional League sponsor tournaments where dedicated gamers can compete for large cash prizes.¹³ The idea that adults would play video games as a source of income is inconceivable to some people, especially given the widespread assumption that video games are primarily a form of entertainment for youth.

Statistics do back up the assumption that youth are connecting strongly with video games. Among boys between the ages of five and twelve, more time is spent playing video games than playing with all other toys.¹⁴ Teenagers believe that playing a video game is a more meaningful way of spending their time than watching television,¹⁵ and

¹¹ Ned Potter, “Video Game Makers Get a ‘C’ For Effort, Critics Say,” *ABCNews.com*, November 23, 2004, <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=277677&page=1> (accessed November 23, 2004)

¹² Entertainment Software Association, “Facts and Research [2006]: Game Player Data,” *TheESA.com*, 2007, http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php (accessed January 18, 2007)

¹³ Angel Munoz, “CPL Background History,” *TheCPL.com*, 2007, <http://www.thecpl.com/league/> (accessed January 18, 2007)

¹⁴ Reuters, “Kids Prefer Video Games Over TV, Toys,” *CNN.com*, October 27, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/fun.games/10/27/media.videogames.reut/index.html> (accessed November 23, 2004)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

more than half of teenage “gamers” (people who play video games) learn about popular new music groups by playing video games.¹⁶

Age and Gender Considerations

Yet, the perception that video games are something that only youths participate in is completely false. The average age of a gamer in 2006 was 33 years of age, and 25% of all gamers are over the age of 50.¹⁷

Gaming has been possible for nearly four decades in the home. This means that the generation that grew up playing the first home gaming systems is old enough to have grandchildren. People that played the first home video games as adults are old enough to have great-grandchildren. This goes a long way towards explaining the fact that video games are played by people of virtually every age group in Western society.

As the age statistics quoted above indicate, people are not necessarily giving up gaming as they get older. Within the next generation, the statistics will show that will that every age demographic will have had first-hand experience with playing video games as children (even though not all individuals will necessarily be interested in, or have access to, video games).

Another common perception to investigate is the assumption that more males play video games than females, and that they play more often. While the 2006 ratio of gamers

¹⁶ People who have not followed the world of video games in recent years may be unaware of the implications of technological development on music. Today, it is becoming increasingly common for a game developer to use popular bands as the music for a game, rather than the traditional computer-synthesized soundtrack. This has gone so far that video games can be a significant source of revenue and marketing for up-and-coming musical acts, as well as established groups.

¹⁷ Entertainment Software Association. “2006 Sales, Demographic, and Research Data: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry,” *TheESA.com*, 2007, <http://www.theesa.com/archives/files/Essential%20Facts%202006.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2007)

was 62% male to 38% female, males and females both play about the same amount of time each week—an average of 7.5 hours, according to the Entertainment Software Association.¹⁸

Is There Enough Time to Be A Christian *and* Play Video Games?

This average figure of 7.5 hours/week could actually be much higher than the statistics seem to indicate. This may be the case, because the figure of 7.5 hours/week also takes into account the 31% of “heads of households” that say that they do not play any video games. It can be estimated that people who actually play video games may be spending up to 10 or 11 hours per week doing so. When we consider these figures in relationship to the amount of time that the average Christian spends being involved in faith-based activities, the discrepancy is immediately apparent.¹⁹

Even if a Christian attended a two-hour worship service, one hour of Christian education before or after worship, volunteered for an hour in an outreach ministry to the community, participated in a small Bible study group in a home for two hours, went to an hour of music rehearsal, and spent an hour in committee meetings *each and every week*, they would “only” be averaging eight hours of overtly Christian activities. Any congregational pastor would be hard-pressed to identify a non-staff member of their church involved to this degree. If they could identify such a person, they would likely be concerned about that person becoming “burned out” from having too many commitments.

¹⁸ Entertainment Software Association, “Facts and Research [2006]: Game Player Data”. Men average 7.6 hours per week, while women average 7.4 hours per week.

¹⁹ For the purpose of this writing, “faith-based activities” is intended to be an inclusive, broadly defined term. It is meant to encompass any activity or event whose basic purpose is the formation of Christian disciples—and/or is working to participate in God’s mission in the world—through the love of God and neighbor in the way that Jesus taught the first disciples.

Pastors, theologians, and educators using the doctrine of vocation and the concept of “ministry in daily life” might argue that one’s entire life could be considered ministry. Living out the Christian calling to love God and to love neighbor can happen in our homes, in our workplaces, in our communities, and in our congregations. We will consider the relationship between video games and a Christian’s calling to ministry in the home later in this writing. For now, it is important to point out the fact that Christians in the Western world still primarily—or only—engage their faith during an hour of weekly community worship time.

The point here is not to claim that the ideal Christian disciple is one who neglects to take time for rest and entertainment (such as video games) in order to be involved in every possible church and community activity. The argument being made here is that video games now have the potential to be a significant influence in a person’s life. Christians claim that loving relationships —with God and with others—are central to life. Researchers are now discovering that video games serve an important relational function for many people.

Video Games and Human Relationships

With the rise of the Internet, many people now consider video games to be an important way of connecting socially with others. 43% of people who participate in online communities (like video games) consider their online relationships to be just as important as their real-world relationships.²⁰ One landmark survey of a popular MMORPG, “Ultima Online”, found that the primary reason people played the game was

²⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation, “Virtual Pals Soar in Importance”, *BBCNews.com*, November 30, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6158935.stm> (accessed Thursday, January 18, 2007)

because of the social experience available to them in a virtual environment.²¹ A minority of Ultima Online gamers even claimed that their in-game relationships were more important than their offline relationships.²²

However, most surveys find that playing PC games online is an addition to a person's "real-world" social network, rather than a replacement for it.²³ Gamers are not usually reclusive people who forsake all face-to-face relationships. On the other side of the coin, they do not often treat their online relationships as being incidental and expendable. The line between online and offline relationships is blurred further when we consider that some gamers know their gaming partners both online and offline.²⁴

This data reveals that the relationship between a person and the video games they play is more complicated than has been previously thought. This, in turn, brings up questions about the inherent value of video games.

²¹ Castulus Kolo and Timo Baur, "Living a Virtual Life: Social Dynamics of Online Gaming," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 4, Issue 1, November 2004): Discussion and Conclusion, par. 5, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/kolo/> (accessed January 18, 2007)

²² Ibid., Online Gaming and Offline Social Relations, par. 4. The percentage of gamers that claim that their online relationships are more important than their offline relationships appears to be about 15%.

²³ Ibid., Online Gaming and Offline Social Relations, par. 6.

²⁴ Ibid., Online Gaming and Offline Social Relations, Table 7.

CHAPTER 3

VIDEO GAMES: GOOD OR BAD?

A basic, positive purpose of an activity like playing video games is to allow human beings the opportunity to distance themselves from the stresses of their daily lives. By doing so, they may re-engage their life's work with a newfound sense of energy and motivation. Yet, the act of playing video games may also become an unhealthy coping mechanism by which people "escape" from a stressful reality and avoid fulfilling their responsibilities.

Are video games an unhealthy way to avoid reality? Are they a problematic escape strategy that a person employs to avoid their responsibilities and commitments? Or, are they a healthy form of rest that also allows for the development of important relationships? Are video games ultimately a positive or negative presence?

These questions resist easy answers. In theological terms, they reflect the problem of the human condition as it deals with the "already/not yet" character of the emerging Reign of God. We live in a world in which God's work in the world has already started. Yet, that work is not yet complete.

We exist in this "in between" time—between the initial emergence of the Reign of God and its ultimate fulfillment. Consequently, the world is likely to contain some things that are already being redeemed, and some things that have not yet begun to demonstrate the evidence of a transformed character.

Video Game Ethics: A Wesleyan Perspective

To further investigate the ethics of video games, we will turn to the founder of the Methodist renewal movement, the Anglican clergyman and practical theologian John Wesley. His work can provide a theological grounding by which we can address whether or not video games could be part of God's good work in the world.

First, we will examine how Wesley characterized the relationship between God and humanity. The Wesleyan scholar, Randy Maddox, argues that Wesley saw the relationship between God and humanity as the dynamic interaction between divine action and human response. What is meant by divine action and human response?

Wesley understood that human beings themselves are an important part of God's work in the world. This was the case both in terms of Wesley's convictions about humanity as a *subject* or *focus* of God's gracious and creative work,¹ as well as agents who could participate in God's holistic work towards all of creation by responding to the empowering love of God.² Wesley believed that our need for pardon from sin was met by Christ on the cross. However, for Wesley, pardon did not equal salvation in its fullest sense, nor was salvation a one-time event. This is seen in Wesley's writing of *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, as reprinted in Maddox's book:

“By salvation I mean, not barely (according to the vulgar notion) deliverance from hell, or going to heaven, but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity, a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. This implies all holy and heavenly tempers, and by

¹ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 67.

² *Ibid.*, 68.

consequence all holiness of conversation” [‘conversation’ meaning all types of human conduct in 18th-century English].³

As we can clearly see, Wesley’s understanding was that salvation took place by the power of the Holy Spirit over the course of our lives as we responded to God’s pardoning and empowering love.

However, he was convinced that humans are fully and persistently dependent on God’s constant gracious action to enable them to be redeemed by Christ, or to respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit in any way.⁴ This is what Wesley understood the “in between” time of the present age to be: an age in which we are persistently dependent on God’s grace in our fallen state of being, but an age in which God is working to heal that nature as we respond to God’s gracious overtures.

However, even with God’s initial (“prevenient”⁵) grace empowering people before the moment of pardon (justification), humans exhibit varying degrees of responsiveness to this process,⁶ since God’s grace manifests itself in encouragement rather than coercion.⁷ God gives grace so that everyone might be empowered to respond to God’s overtures, but we are never forced by God to do so. This makes the concept of choice central to Wesley’s theology; we either choose to respond to grace, or to resist it.

³ Ibid., 145.

⁴ Ibid., 82.

⁵ The word “prevenient” means “comes before”, and is used in the phrase “God’s prevenient grace” to refer to the fact that God’s grace always comes before our response. This was a central Wesleyan concept to explain why an action in response to God’s grace was not an attempt at “works righteousness” (or trying to earn one’s salvation by performing good actions in order to impress God), as some Lutheran and Calvinist groups have charged. As Wesley understood it, when God acts first, and *then* we take responsive action, we are living a life of holiness that reflects our transformed moral character on account of our identity as Christians.

⁶ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 87-89.

⁷ Ibid., 54-55.

When considering the nature of the interaction between humans and video games, we are likely to see some positive examples of gaming providing a valuable way for people to rest and relate to others. We are also likely to see some negative examples where gaming is an addiction or is used as a way to hide from one's responsibilities.

A Wesleyan theological perspective could see the positive aspects of playing video games (rest, community formation, the process of learning about God's moral expectations, etc.) *and* the negative aspects of playing video games (addiction, withdrawal from important relationships, indulging in immoral gaming content, etc.) as *both* being under the umbrella of God's grace. This would be true because, as Maddox puts it, "in no situation are we ever separated from God's grace or from our accountability".⁸

Yet, only the good aspects of playing video games could be seen as a healthy, faithful response to that grace. It is very unlikely that Wesley would ever describe the mere act of playing a video game as a participation in the "means of grace", in which we grow deeper into God's pardoning and sanctifying love. Still, it is possible that some of the consequences of playing video games (such as sharing in fellowship) could be considered as experiences of God's grace under certain circumstances. For Wesley, an activity that promoted Sabbath time, the building of relationships, or the learning and practicing of the moral good would be an activity that God could use to strengthen the divine/human relationship and heal our sin-diseased natures. Video games could be an opportunity for God to work the good in, through, and around us.

⁸ Ibid., 52.

For Wesley, good actions are always the result of God empowering us for that work, even if we do not recognize or acknowledge that reality. Wesley's understanding was that God's grace gives everyone a basic ability to determine the difference between good and evil. The ability to recognize good and evil—and the ability to choose our response to that recognition—is fully attributed to God's grace, and not to any inherent qualities we possess.⁹ A choice to recognize the good in a video game and embrace it would be done “through Christ”, even if Christ was not explicitly known or identified by the human participant.¹⁰

For these reasons, Wesley could be able to affirm the potential good in secular video games.

However, video games could also be a way for sin to find expression in the world. Any activity that we chose that was damaging to relationships, abandoned our responsibility to love our neighbors as ourselves, or included practices that were offensive to God's moral nature would be the result of sin in our lives. When we choose to play games that glorify concepts or actions that are toxic to God's good desires for human existence, we do so because of sin. God's grace is still available to work in the redemption of these kinds of activities, but God never desires the presence of such depraved behaviors (knowing the destructive consequences that they have for all of creation).

While some sin could be characterized as specific choices that we make, another dimension of sin is not so much a matter of choice as it is a result of our general state of

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33-34.

separation from God. An example is in the case of video game addiction, a condition that is now being treated at medical centers around the world as a serious psychological disorder.¹¹ Addictions, by definition, make it extremely difficult for the people that are afflicted by them to free themselves from their compulsive behavior.

For Wesley, such an addiction would more accurately be seen a general reflection of the “always/not yet” nature of the world we live in, rather than as the result of specific choices that a person might make. It is true that in many cases of addiction, people do make initial choices that lead to the destructive situation they find themselves in. Wesley would likely still identify those initial actions as sinful, but was always much more concerned with sin as a general state of “sickness” than as a list of specific actions that a person chooses.¹² Thus, addiction is a condition that is in need of healing not just in medical terms, but in theological terms as well.

Wesley saw a direct correlation between God’s redemptive work and our physical healing.¹³ In other words, God’s grace is not merely intended to bring about a saving relationship with eschatological significance, but is also intended to contribute to the redemption of our bodies and minds in this life. In fact, one of the most common ways that Wesley referred to God was as the “Great Physician”.¹⁴ If Wesley were alive today and interested in video games, he would be much more likely to be working in an

¹¹ Sherry Rauh, “Video Game Addiction No Fun,” *WebMD.com*, June 26, 2006, <http://www.webmd.com/content/article/124/115554.htm> (accessed January 19, 2007)

¹² Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 73-75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

addiction treatment center grounded in Christian practices than to be campaigning against the “evils” of gaming in front of political leaders.

All of this confirms Wesley’s conviction that sin is better understood as the state of corruption that infects our very nature, rather than as a list of theologically problematic actions that we commit. God is working to heal us from the ravages of sin, and desires our participation in this work. However, this healing work will not ultimately be completed until humanity is delivered from the very presence of sin into “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21).

In summary, a Wesleyan answer to the question of whether video games are inherently good or bad would focus on the human interaction with such games. While certain games are so offensive to God’s moral nature that they could be accurately condemned as destructive, the list of such games would be quite small. Rather, it is more often the case that the way in which we interact with video games will determine whether or not they can be part of God’s redemptive work in our present age.

It is important to remember the conviction of the apostle Paul:

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

This is a central theme that we must keep in mind as we consider the ethical dimensions of video games.

Scientific and Social Perspectives

This provides a basic theological framework for addressing whether video games are “good” or “bad”, or at least what is good or bad about them. However, it is important

to consider the purely scientific or social disciplines as well. There are some compelling studies from those fields of study that may help us understand these questions more fully.

In one study, several sociologists observed the social patterns of people playing a directly competitive, online video game. Based on that observation, they make the argument that multiplayer gaming is a positive activity for people to participate in. They came to this conclusion because they saw the opportunities that gaming produced for people to explore the significance of social standards through the creative interaction that takes place between players.¹⁵

Physicians are also exploring the use of video games to intentionally distract frightened young patients. Some research demonstrates that using a video game to distract a child before a surgical procedure may be an effective way of calming them down. It even suggests that a video game may be more effective than traditional treatments like tranquilizers or a parental presence in the room before surgery.¹⁶

These studies reflect positive attitudes toward the use of video games, but other evidence suggests otherwise. This writing has already mentioned the problem of video game addiction that psychologists are seeing with increasing frequency.

There is also the issue of sexual and violent content in certain games that is so degrading to a civilized understanding of human community that it is the subject of much criticism. Mental health professionals have added their voices to this protest. Video

¹⁵ Talmadge Wright, Eric Boria and Paul Breidenbach, "Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games: Playing Counter-Strike," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 2, Issue 2, December 2002): par. 2. <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/wright/> (accessed January 19, 2007)

¹⁶ Associated Press, "Video Games Calm Kids Before Surgery," *CNN.com*, December 10, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/12/09/hospitals.gaming.ap/index.html> (viewed December 11, 2004)

games that use what psychologist Leonard Sax calls a “moral inversion”, in which evil is identified as good (and good is identified as evil), are clearly worthy of such criticism.¹⁷

His observation has theological support as well. In Matthew 12:31-32, Jesus says that there is only one unforgivable sin, which is speaking against the Holy Spirit. In other words, the only thing that cannot be forgiven is when the ultimate good (God) is identified as the ultimate evil. In Jesus’ eyes, moral inversion is the most terrible sin that could be committed, because it leaves the participants unable to recognize who God is anymore.

Dr. Sax does moderate his perspective somewhat about violence in video games. He believes that games with violent content *can* be considered acceptable *if* the ethical parameters of the game are in line with societal norms. In fact, Sax argues such games are healthy ways for young boys to express their identity, although he thinks that physical activities like team sports are better ways for this to happen.¹⁸

¹⁷ Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 70-71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

CHAPTER 4
THE RESPONSE OF THE CHURCH TO VIDEO GAMES

The church's response to video games has not been as balanced as the response of the scientific and social disciplines.

The Current Response of the Church

The church has usually portrayed video games in only one of two ways: either as offensive sources of sexual and violent content, or as "bait" that can be used to attract young people into the church.

For example, a January 2007 search of the United Methodist Church's denominational website (<http://www.umc.org>) for the phrase "video games" produced dozens of links organized around protests against violent and sexual content.¹ News reports are filled with stories about faith-based organizations staging protests against video games containing violent or sexual content, and press conferences are often staged by these organizations to advocate for the enactment of stringent laws against such games.

In the web search mentioned above, only a single link mentioned video games in any kind of positive or neutral light. That was an offhand mention by a pastor that

¹ The United Methodist Church's "Social Principles", contained in the *2004 Book of Resolutions*, make similar one-sided, unbalanced statements about video games. See ¶ 162Q.

technology (including video games, among other things) might attract younger people into participation in the church.²

One such example of this kind of technological evangelism was seen in 2004 at a Christian outreach ministry in Oklahoma. The youth-focused ministry purchased a large number of video game systems to be used by thousands of young people before worship as a way of getting them in the door of their 92,000 square foot youth building. The pastor, Blaine Bartel, explained the decision this way: “You’ve got to have the hook — the message of the Gospel. But you’ve got have bait on the hook... We’ve got to have things that appeal to kids.”³

The Inadequacy of the Church’s Current Response

Three arguments about the church’s relationship to video games will be made at this point.

The Church’s Unwillingness to Recognize Gaming Culture

First, the church has been unwilling to recognize the scope and depth of gaming culture, that many non-theological disciplines have long recognized, because of an unjustified belief that all video games are fundamentally unethical.

While issues of sexual and violent content in any medium are worthy issues for the church to deal with, it is the contention of this writing that many church leaders and congregations have become so blinded by fear that they cannot view video games with an

² John Coleman, “Black Youth Seek Leadership Roles, Respect In Church,” *UMC.org*, November 12, 2003, http://archives.umc.org/umns/news_archive2003.asp?ptid=2&story=%7BB3F03142-FF22-4915-A890-BEB103E68D11%7D&mid=2406 (viewed January 19, 2007)

³ Kelly Kurt, “Ministries Use Tech, Flash to Attract Teens,” *STNews.org*, March 2004, http://www.stnews.org/archives/2004_march/rlr_ministres_0304.html (viewed November 24, 2004)

objective lens. The reaction against a small, select list of games (like the controversial “Grand Theft Auto” series) is so strong that many Christians have been led to believe that there is nothing in the whole of the gaming world that is worthy of serious theological analysis and reflection. This unjustified belief is an attempt to preserve the purity of the Christian witness in a complex world.

Perhaps the church believes that video games are “unclean”, along the lines of prohibited substances listed in the Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch, a system of laws ordained by God is recorded for the sake of the Jewish people. These laws designate certain things as “clean” or “unclean”. Contact is prohibited with unclean substances or people.

However, as the biblical witness of the New Testament teaches us, God often takes the “unclean” and makes it “clean” for the sake of reconciling broken relationships. In Acts 10, the church is trying to find its feet after a fresh wave of persecutions has scattered the church out from Jerusalem into the surrounding lands. While many attacks have come from the Jewish religious establishment (see Acts 5:17-8:4), there is still a justified fear among the disciples of interference from the occupying Roman army.

Peter, the recently appointed leader of the followers of Jesus, has a vision while in the midst of prayer. In the vision, God commands him to eat foods that have been declared “unclean” by God in the earliest recorded days of the Jewish tradition. Peter refuses to do so, to which God responds by saying “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15).

Peter believes he is in the right by preserving the previous boundaries set down by God, and we would be hard pressed to disagree with the disciple’s reaction. Peter’s

theology of righteousness has its basis in the Jewish tradition, and he appears to be standing on solid ground. Yet, God is bringing a new understanding of righteousness into the world that Peter is not fully aware of yet. The vision that God gives to Peter prepares the disciple for what will happen next.

Immediately following Peter's vision, some men seek out Peter on behalf of a Roman centurion. This Roman soldier, Cornelius, is clearly not part of the Jewish bloodline (although the Jews speak well of his God-fearing character). Cornelius had been directed by an angel to seek out Peter so that the soldier could hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Peter and the centurion finally meet, it is Peter's vision of God's new work in the world that gives him the confidence to say "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). God has replaced the Jewish food laws with the peace of Jesus Christ, so that the entire world—not only the Jews—might find new life in the Lord.

We know that God can take anything that is considered "unclean" and make it "clean". In fact, it is the confession of Christians that this is exactly what Jesus' atonement on the cross was able to accomplish. Because of God's ability to perform such redeeming work, we need not fear that by exploring the culture of video games, we will be in any way compromising the theology of the Christian church. This is not to claim that gaming culture has been declared righteous by God. Rather, it is to say that by taking gaming culture seriously from a theological point of view, the Holy Spirit may find creative new ways to show the gospel to people who might not otherwise experience it.

As this writing has already demonstrated, playing a video game is an opportunity to form and build relationships, to explore complex social interactions, to tell and hear stories (perhaps even the gospel?), to overcome challenges, and to take time for rest and reflection in today's busy society. Church leaders and congregations that believe that video games are inherently "unclean" will have a very difficult time seeing these positive characteristics. However, those that recognize the potential good in gaming will see the emerging technological age as an opportunity, rather than as a threat.

As we will explore in significant detail later, video games are also valuable tools by which the church can understand something of the relationship between Christianity and the surrounding culture. This is particularly true when game developers borrow the language, images, symbols, and stories of Christianity and use them to serve their own purposes.

Inconsistency in the Church's Treatment of Video Games

Second, the church is demonstrating inconsistency in its treatment of video games. On one hand, social justice advocates are publicly attacking video games. On the other hand, evangelists are using them as a tool to attract young people into the church.

Church leaders and congregations act in an unjustifiable manner when they attack video games for being morally corrupt, and then turn around and use those games as an evangelistic tool in the context of Christian fellowship and worship. Neither one of these responses takes video games seriously, and when they are asserted simultaneously, they are simply hypocritical.

First, attacking the entirety of gaming culture for being guilty of moral failure is a reaction based on fear of the unknown. As the lesson from Acts 10 reminds us, although

fear is a normal human response, it is not what God intends for human relationships and for creation. In fact, such fear hinders our ability to respond to God's grace working in the world. While some criticism of gaming culture is justified, the church is far behind the scientific and social disciplines when it comes to seeing video games as a legitimate topic of study. Psychologists and sociologists are able to preserve their critical voice even as they find topics in the gaming world that are worthy of further investigation.

Second, it is the contention of this writing that the "bait-and-switch" evangelism practices that are taking place today undermine the prophetic voice of the church to speak out against legitimately offensive video game titles. Bait-and-switch tactics are used by congregations that hold a theology of scarcity. A theology of scarcity describes a congregation that believes that God has *not* given them everything they need in order to participate in God's mission in the world. Because of their perceived scarcity, they believe they must resort to extreme measures in order to accomplish the work set before them.

In the context of evangelism, this manifests itself when a congregation tries to bait a person with something that is not the gospel in order to bring them into the context of a worshipping community. Once the person is thought to have taken the bait (in this case, a video game), the bait is taken away from the person, and is replaced by a concentrated evangelistic effort. Since these congregations believe that the gospel itself is not sufficient for evangelism, they feel that they must use these alternative tactics.

Bait-and-switch evangelism should *not* be confused with the recent move towards "seeker-sensitive" worship led by church leaders like Rick Warren.⁴ Bait-and-switch

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), 79-80.

tactics use *deceitful practices* because of a theology of scarcity. On the contrary, while seeker-sensitive churches use *hospitality* and *cultural adaptation*. They are often—but not always—driven by a theology of abundance (a theology that says God has already given them everything they need to participate in God’s mission in the world).⁵ While this writing is not intended to investigate the strengths and problems of seeker-sensitive churches, it is important to differentiate them from bait-and-switch congregations.

To be fair, some game programmers do believe that there are effective ways to use popular video games for evangelistic purposes without endorsing objectionable content in the process. These programmers use a variety of software tools to create a “total conversion” of an existing video game. In a total conversion, the form of an existing game is retained, while the details of the game (such as graphics, video, and sound) are replaced by new content. The most common type of game that undergoes a total conversion is the “first-person shooter”.

In a first-person shooter, the game player controls a single character, and looks through the character’s eyes as they move through a maze. Typically, the character is armed with an impressive array of guns and missiles, which they use to attack anything in their path. The PC video game series “Doom” has the player kill armies of grotesque aliens with weapons like the shotgun and the Gatling gun. Some “Christian” total conversions of Doom replace the aliens with unrepentant sinners, and substitute a cross “weapon” for the shotgun. The cross “weapon” has the power to force the sinners to accept Jesus when it is “fired” at them.

⁵ Ibid., 37-38.

“Christian” total conversions, however, are generally ineffective for the work of evangelism. First, these efforts are usually undertaken from a fundamentalist point of view, and generally do not reflect the theological perspective of most Christians. Second, the quality of the re-programming is generally poor, making the gameplay uninspiring. Third, the only people that have any genuine interest in playing a “Christian” total conversion are people that already claim a Christian identity, meaning that these games serve no real evangelistic purpose in reality.

On the whole, the existence of such modified games is not an adequate response to the criticism raised in this section: that the church is demonstrating inconsistency in its treatment of video games. Ultimately, this is a problem because inconsistent, hypocritical practices contribute to an attitude of suspicion about the Christian church in the surrounding culture. This suspicion makes the entire work of the church more difficult, especially when it comes to evangelistic practices.

The Church’s Denial of the Full Challenge of Culture

Third, by only valuing video games as a tool to attract youth, the church is unable to critically reflect upon the challenges and opportunities that a technological consumer culture presents to the mission of the church in the world.

The evangelistic practice of using video games as toys to attract the attention of children and youth is flawed when we consider that industry research clearly demonstrates that adults are playing video games as well. (Two-thirds of all “heads of households” are gamers.)⁶ This flawed practice sheds some light on why issues of change and conflict can polarize congregational members along generational lines.

⁶ Entertainment Software Association. “Facts and Research [2006]: Game Player Data”.

For example, a congregation might observe that a lack of younger people present during worship is a problem that needs to be addressed. It decides that the solution to this problem is to buy a video game system for the youth room in order to attract youth into the building, since many youth *do* play video games when they have access to them.⁷ The congregation works to implement this solution, and in doing so, associates video games exclusively with the younger population.

The change and conflict author Gilbert R. Rendle identifies this pattern of linear problem solving (problem → solution → implementation) as a tactic employed by congregations that is often intended to *prevent* real change from happening. As Rendle writes,

“By seeking quick but inappropriate solutions [to complicated problems], leaders tend to add to the discomfort and disequilibrium of their situation and actually subvert the opportunity to address deeper issues they face. Often quick fixes are collusive exercises that are intuitively designed not to bring any real change to the congregation but offer the feeling that something has been done.”⁸

It is easy for a congregation to pretend as if only younger people are gamers. That false assertion makes it possible for a congregation to use that misinformation to “solve” a problem (low youth attendance in worship) that it may not really be interested in solving in the first place. Including youth in more leadership roles (rather than distracting them with video games) might bring about changes in worship, which could make some congregation members unhappy.

There are three consequences that may result from a congregation that only sees video games as “bait on the hook”. First, the youth may not take the bait—after all, they

⁷ Reuters, “Kids Prefer Video Games”.

⁸ Rendle, *Leading Change*, 35.

or one of their friends may already have access to video games at home—which means that the congregation has just wasted several hundred dollars (or more). Second, the congregation is avoiding its responsibility to deal with the very real issues of power-sharing in church activities that may occur among people who have different ideas of what worship, fellowship, and education should be.

Third, the congregation becomes less able to deal with the real complexities and challenges that a technological culture presents to people of *all* ages. As the next section of this writing will demonstrate, many popular games are challenging Christian theology by borrowing and repackaging the language and symbolism of the church for the purpose of selling their product.

The Challenge to the Church in a Technological Era

As this writing has already shown, video game players are spending far more time with their games than they are with their church (if they have a church at all). *How can a congregation respond to the challenge of a technological, consumer culture—one that sells unorthodox Christian theology for profit—if it denies that there is any challenge at all?*

Highly committed disciples are unlikely to be swayed in their faith by what they experience in the course of playing video games. However, those who are less committed, are new to the practice of faith, or (especially) those who have not yet heard the good news are likely to be confused or misled by what popular gaming culture teaches them about Christianity.

The biblical admonition recorded in the letter to the Colossians shows that the clash between Christian belief and popular culture is an ancient one indeed: “See to it that

no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col 2:8). In fact, the letter to the Colossians is written as a warning to a group of disciples who are tempted to turn away from Christ and adopt the empty practices of the surrounding culture.

If the church wants to have effective evangelistic and discipleship practices in a technological age, it must begin to understand how the technological culture is influencing how the people of the world will hear—or misunderstand—the good news about Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 5

COMPARING “AGE OF EMPIRES 2” AND “WORLD OF WARCRAFT”

At this point, we will consider how two best-selling PC video games, written and developed in the United States, have borrowed and repackaged Christian theology: Microsoft’s “Age of Empires 2”¹ and Blizzard Entertainment’s “World of Warcraft”.²

Choosing games to examine from the United States avoids the problem of cross-cultural theological interpretation. A game developer from a nation with little Christian history (such as Japan) would likely interpret Christian language and symbolism in ways that would be very different than the way a game developer from the United States would interpret the same information.

Before we examine each game in detail in the next few chapters, it will be helpful to conduct a brief overview of them. This will allow us to compare the games with each other more effectively in the course of this writing. A table differentiating “Age of Empires 2” and “World of Warcraft” can be found on the next page.

¹ The Microsoft Corporation holds all applicable trademarks and copyrights regarding the Age of Empires game series. “Age of Empires II” was originally called “The Age of Kings”, and a subsequent game expansion pack led the game to be referred to as “The Conquerors”. For the purposes of this study, The Conquerors version of Age of Empires II was examined.

² World of Warcraft and Blizzard Entertainment are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in the U.S. and/or other countries. All data referred to in this writing regarding “World of Warcraft” was gathered from version 2.0, after the release of the “Burning Crusade” expansion pack in 2007. Incidentally, the Burning Crusade expansion pack sold 2.4 million copies in the first 24 hours it was on the market. [Blizzard Entertainment, “World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade Shatters Day-1 Sales Record,” *Blizzard.com*, January 23, 2007, <http://www.blizzard.com/press/070123.shtml> (viewed January 24, 2007)]

An Introduction to, and Comparison of, Both Video Games

	Age of Empires 2	World of Warcraft
Designed by	Microsoft Corporation	Blizzard Entertainment
Release date	October 16, 1999	November 23, 2004
Game type	Real-time strategy (single-player or multiplayer)	Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)
Sales numbers	Over 2,000,000 copies sold ³ (over 15,000,000 copies sold in "Age of..." series) ^{4 5}	Over 8,500,000 active subscribers worldwide ⁶
Gameplay consists of	Building a city, gathering resources, controlling an army	Exploring a virtual world with a single character; forming adventuring groups with others
Goal of game	Defeating opposing armies	No goal other than making your character more powerful; players can't "win" or "lose"
Game setting	European Middle Ages, Christendom world; "realistic" game design	Fantasy world of Azeroth
Characters and civilizations in game	Major civilizations of the Middle Ages	Humans among many other fantastic creatures (elves, trolls, etc.)
Impact in society	Well-known among almost all PC gamers	Cultural phenomenon; widespread press coverage
Visibility of Christian elements	Christian units and buildings are a part of all armies	Specific character types are "Christian" archetypes; many uses of Christian language and symbols
Theological integrity	Generally speaking, historically accurate in its use of theological terms (with some exceptions)	Theology is often deeply flawed in uses of "Christian" elements; church language and symbolism used in bizarre ways

³ Microsoft Corporation, "Age of Empires II: The Ages of Kings Crowned No. 1 on Holiday Sales Charts Around the World," *Microsoft.com*, January 27, 2000, <http://www.microsoft.com/presspass/press/2000/Jan00/CrownedPR.msp> (viewed January 20, 2007)

⁴ Microsoft Corporation, "Best-Selling Age Franchise Tops 15 Million Mark", *Microsoft.com*, May 7, 2004, http://www.microsoft.com/games/press/default.aspx?no=titans_20040507001 (viewed January 20, 2007)

⁵ Microsoft's newer release, "Age of Empires 3", is not included in these figures, because Microsoft has not released official sales figures. Sales are estimated to be in the millions of units.

⁶ Blizzard Entertainment, "World of Warcraft Continues Record-Breaking Sales Pace," *Blizzard.com*, March 7, 2007, <http://www.blizzard.com/press/070307.shtml> (viewed March 24, 2007)

“Age of Empires 2”

Microsoft’s “Age of Empires 2” (AoE2) is a defining example of the real-time strategy genre of video games. Real-time strategy games are played in “real-time” (without pauses or breaks in the action), and are “strategic” because the player must manage a large force of units and buildings at any given time. These kinds of games put the player in the role of a military commander. The job of the commander is to direct their army to build a base, gather resources, train soldiers, and battle other armies.

While Westwood Entertainment’s “Dune 2” and “Command and Conquer” games were important initial explorations of the real-time strategy genre, it was Microsoft that made this genre a dominant form of PC gaming. The first Age of Empires game put the player in command of a civilization that existed in the time between the Stone Age and the Iron Age. Age of Empires 2, which we are exploring in depth here, allows the player to control a civilization from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance.

An interesting element to note about Age of Empires 1 and 2 is their focus on historical realism. Microsoft took few creative liberties in the development process as they designed a realistic set of units, buildings, and player-controlled civilizations. The game story is told from a distinctly European perspective (although the player does have the option of controlling a civilization from another part of the world, such as Japan).

Given that the Christian church was such a dominant cultural force in much of the known world during the time between the Dark Ages and the Renaissance, Microsoft included a Christian building (the monastery) and two Christian units (the monk and the missionary) to be featured in AoE2. It is true that the monastery, monk, and missionary

are not explicitly referred to as being Christian during gameplay. However, the reference to Christianity is obvious due to the pictures and language used to describe these elements, as well as the focus on historical accuracy that is a defining characteristic of the game itself.

To play Age of Empires 2, a player constructs buildings. Buildings, such as castles, stables, or universities, have two primary purposes. First, buildings can produce units. A unit is a single controllable game piece that may be moved around the game board. In AoE2, examples of units include foot soldiers (swordsmen, archers, etc.) mounted soldiers (like knights or horse archers), and siege weapons (such as catapults or battering rams). The second purpose of a building is to research new technology. For example, researching the wheelbarrow makes farms more productive, while researching chain mail armor makes some units more resistant to damage.

The monastery building in Age of Empires both produces units and researches new technologies. Primarily, the monastery produces the monk unit, because the missionary unit can only be produced by the monastery of a single civilization—the Spanish. In AoE2, missionaries are basically similar to monks, except that they move more quickly.⁷

The Monk in “Age of Empires 2”

In AoE2, monks are clothed in a simple robe, and they carry a staff. Like all other units, monks are only male. However, the monk is an unusual unit in AoE2. Most units, like swordsmen or archers, have the ability to directly engage in combat with other units.

⁷ There are other differences in AoE2 between monks and missionaries, but they are irrelevant for the purposes of this writing.

However, monks cannot attack. Compared to other more military unit types, monks are slow, have few “hit points” (which determine how many hits a unit can take before they are defeated), and are very vulnerable to enemy attacks, since their robe doesn’t offer much armor protection to stop a sword or an arrow. Monks only have three purposes in AoE2: healing, gathering relics, and conversion.

The Monk’s Healing Ability

When a military unit returns from battle, they may be injured. There are only two ways to heal them: either a long period of rest inside a building, or the much quicker process of using a monk to heal them. The way in which the monk healing process takes place is quite interesting, and it is worthy of investigation.

Rather than using techniques from medical science (which was admittedly quite primitive in the Middle Ages) to heal injured soldiers, monks rely on faith healing techniques to do the job. When a monk encounters an injured unit, they begin waving their staff around and making exaggerated gestures. By performing this ritual, the injured unit is slowly healed, and soon is in perfect fighting condition once again. It is clear in the game that the monk is calling upon divine influence to perform the healing, because healing occurs at some distance. The healing ritual performed by monks never fails to work.

The healing ability of the monk in AoE2 shows us that the designers presuppose a world in which God’s power to restore life is absolute. Yet, that power requires an intermediary (the monk) in order to function. Furthermore, when the monk asks God for help, God faithfully and consistently responds by granting the monk exactly what they want.

The biblical witness, especially the wisdom literature, teaches us that God's action is rarely so consistent with our will. The book of Ecclesiastes tells of a wise teacher struggling with the potential meaninglessness of life, while the book of Job presents to us a fully righteous person who, nevertheless, experiences great suffering. In both situations, God could immediately act to remedy suffering, but chooses not to do so.

Both of these books help to put Jesus' teaching on prayer into perspective:

“So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Lk 11:9-10; see also Mt 7:7-8).

Without the testimony of the wisdom literature, Jesus' words can be used to support the idea that God will give us anything we want (a “prosperity gospel”).

The idea in AoE2 that the monk's healing power is consistent and effective is necessary for the video game to function in a playable way. Balance is a crucial element in any successful game, as players would hardly consider it fair if they lost a game because God did not respond to their prayers for healing at a crucial moment.

Yet, that is exactly what characterizes the mysterious nature of God's power to mend and heal: at times, its presence seems miraculous; at other times, its absence seems frustrating and unjust. This is simply the nature of the divine-human relationship, in which we do not possess all of the wisdom, knowledge, and power of God. If we did have these characteristics, it is unlikely we would act any differently than God does, since God is the ultimate good and must be interacting with humanity in light of that reality.

Perhaps it is better that the final say in matters of life and death is left in the hands of a just and merciful God, and not in the hands of an all-too-limited and unwise human race. Rather, it is best that we remember the Christian confession that God is most clearly

revealed in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. As we testify to the fact that God has willingly taken on such suffering for the sake of the human race, it puts our own experiences of suffering and prayers for healing in a new light.

Interestingly, a lesser-used form of healing in AoE2 uses scientific principles as the basis for its works. The game player can research the “herbal medicine” technology at the monastery, which rapidly speeds the healing process of units that rest inside buildings. The founder of the American Herbalists Guild is quite skeptical of the concept of Christian faith healing, but he does trace the herbal healing techniques that were practiced in the Middle Ages back to the work of early Christian monks:

"It is no wonder that due to previous Roman lack of compassion, the new religion of Christianity was able to make significant headway, despite its early emphasis on faith healing. This occurred with the evolution of monasticism and a renewed spirit of humane compassion, exemplified by the tradition of maintaining a medicinal herb garden and a monastic pharmacy, available to its reclusive residents as well as to the local people."⁸

Overall, the concept of healing presented in AoE2 is as accurate as it could be from a historical perspective, given the obvious restriction that the presentation of healing had to fit the needs of the strategic gameplay. In particular, the placement of a technology in herbal medicine at the monastery shows the effort the game designers went to in order to recreate the world of the Middle Ages in a historically accurate way.

The Monk’s Relic Gathering Ability

In most games of AoE2, five “relics” are scattered around the map. If a monk finds a relic, they can pick it up and return in to their monastery, where it gives the player a consistent supply of gold over time. (Gold can be used to produce units and research

⁸ Dr. Michael Tierra, *The Herbal Tradition* (2005): Roman Herbal Medicine, par. 6, <http://www.planetherbs.com/showcase/docs/herbhist.html> (viewed January 27, 2007)

new technology.) If all five relics are held in a single player's monastery for a given length of time, that player immediately wins the game.⁹

In historical terms, a relic is a symbolic object whose meaning comes through the significance given to it by a particular community.¹⁰ They have value in their relationship to specific communities; when examined apart from a community, they have no value.¹¹ In the Middle Ages, relics for the church included items purported to be related to key events in Christian history. This included the remains of objects (like a piece of the cross that Christ was crucified on) and the remains of the saints (such as a bone or a burial chamber of a venerated Christian patron or leader from the past). For a Christian community, these items could be given significance. However, apart from a Christian community, no one would find value in a piece of old wood or in a decrepit tomb.

In medieval times, relics were seen as the primary way that God's power could find its way into one's ordinary, earthly life.¹² Some people saw them as magical objects. When they were properly used, the relics could provide miraculous effects.¹³ As such, they were very significant in the devotional life of Christians in that era. Relics were used as "companions" on journeys, in burial rituals, in the eucharist, in prayers, and for miracles (including miraculous healing and, oddly, the ability to fight fires). G.J.C.

⁹ Interestingly, one civilization — the Huns — can research the "atheism" technology, which increases the amount of time it takes for any player to automatically win the game after they have claimed all five relics. Perhaps an atheist civilization would not be impressed by religious relics, and therefore would be less likely to give into the influence of a civilization that had many such relics in their possession.

¹⁰ Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Snoek's book¹⁴ on the relationship between relics and personal piety is an excellent resource for understanding these phenomena.

While relics were sought by powerful Christian political leaders and members of the church hierarchy,¹⁵ *Age of Empires 2* accurately reflects the reality that the reclusive monastic communities also tried to claim relics for their own.

Monasteries in the Middle Ages were entirely dependent on gifts of funding and resources from patrons for their survival. Given the high regard that virtually all Christians of the era (including the monks) placed on relics, monks knew that securing a relic could also secure the continuing patronage of financial supporters. This placed the monastic orders in direct competition with each other, in a world in which subsistence living was typical for virtually all people.¹⁶

Given that the primary benefit of securing a relic in *AoE2* is to provide a steady stream of gold income, it appears that there is a strong correlation between this video game and the historical reality when it comes to relics. A player observing the relationship between monks and relics in the game would be accurately introduced to a facet of life for most monasteries in the Middle Ages.

The Monk's Conversion Ability

The monk's most powerful ability in *AoE2* is that of "conversion". At a significant distance from an enemy, a monk can begin singing and chanting loudly. As this "communication" takes place, there is a chance that the enemy unit will suddenly

¹⁴ G.J.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction* (Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1995)

¹⁵ Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

change sides and fight for the monk's civilization instead. In AoE2, conversion is forcible and permanent. Converted military units will obey all orders from their new civilization without question. However, conversion is resistible. Monks failing to convert an enemy military unit will sometimes be killed by that enemy unit. The monk's conversion ability in AoE2 is a compelling subject for theological analysis.

By its design, the game defines conversion as a one-way conversation.

Conversion is a persuasive effort, carried out by a person officially representing the church, with the goal of convincing another person to see the wisdom of their position. It is the interaction between an "insider" and an "outsider", and is an interaction that is filled with conflict.

This model of evangelism is certainly present in the church today. For example, youth ministry strategies encouraged by some "Evangelical" megachurches utilize a one-way conversation strategy for conversion. This strategy includes telling a friend you are a Christian, inviting that friend to an appropriate program, telling your friend why you are a Christian, telling your friend how you became a Christian, and asking your friend if he or she would like to become a Christian.¹⁷

Persuasive evangelistic techniques have been used to great effect by preachers through history. The most prominent persuasive/evangelical preacher recorded in the Bible is Paul of Tarsus, though there are many more examples of such people (especially in the book of Acts). In the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, the Methodist preachers George Whitefield and Charles Finney were well-known revivalists that used

¹⁷ Todd Hobart, "Megachurch Evangelism Models," presented at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, December 5, 2006.

persuasive evangelical preaching styles. Our 20th and 21st century context has produced the likes of Billy Graham and Luis Palau.

All of the examples listed above, including the video game *Age of Empires 2*, demonstrate a “warrior” approach to evangelism. Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper contrast the warrior image of evangelism with the “gardener” strategy.¹⁸ They argue that a warrior evangelist uses war imagery to explain the work of sharing the Good News: it is a battle, a fight, a seized opportunity, a struggle between light and dark, in which a Christian goes to war with the culture to conquer the hearts and minds of the lost for Jesus. Certain sections of some of Paul’s letters are used to justify this warrior approach, such as Ephesians 6:10-18:¹⁹

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints.

Also, the martyrdom of Christians in the early church shows that, like the monks attempting conversion in *AoE2*, evangelism can be a dangerous task. Christians living

¹⁸ Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations About God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003), chapter 8.

¹⁹ Some people argue that Ephesians 6:10-18 is actually intended to encourage Christians to *not* fight, because of the prevalence of defensive terminology (armor, shield, etc.) over offensive terminology. However, it is certain that passages such as these are more often used to support “warrior” evangelism strategies than “gardener” evangelism strategies.

under the rule of the Roman Empire in the first few centuries after the resurrection and ascension of Christ experienced a number of threats that challenged their faith.

Because the early church claimed that Jesus was Lord (and not the Roman emperor, who expected to be worshipped as a god), Christians were routinely charged with the crime of disloyalty to the state, which was an offense punishable by death.²⁰ They were considered to be the worst possible form of human being by the Roman citizens for their “superstitious” behavior, because they foolishly worshipped a god they could not see.²¹ A Christian who publicly engaged in evangelistic practices would be putting their life at risk, as attacks could come from hostile Jewish groups, Roman religious cults, or imperial authorities. Clearly, “warrior” evangelism is an understandable strategy when a person feels so threatened by the surrounding culture that they must publicly stand against it in order to preach the gospel.

In contrast to the “warrior”, the “gardener” evangelist uses agricultural imagery to explain the work of sharing the Good News: one must find good soil, plant seeds, take time to faithfully care for and nurture new plants, understand the value of persistence, and recognize the impact of the weather and the seasons on their work. Burke and Pepper argue that gardening imagery is more appropriate to use than warrior imagery, especially as we consider the way in which Jesus actually lived out his ministry in the world.

Even as the early church used battle imagery to describe some of their struggles with the powers and principalities of their world, they were committed pacifists. Christians refused to join the Roman legions up until the third century, when some began

²⁰ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), 63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 59, 64-65, 69-71.

to participate in local police work. As one follower of Jesus put it, “I am Christ’s soldier; I am not allowed to fight.”²²

However, it is obvious that the “warrior” imagery is dominant in the United States context today (in the eyes of the general public, at least). The loudest and most vocal evangelists make the news, while the “gardeners” are not part of the public’s awareness. The conversion ability of the monks in Age of Empires 2 reinforces the idea of evangelism as a battle. While AoE2 is essentially accurate in its presentation of warrior evangelism, it makes the work of “gardeners” a little more difficult. Such stereotypes make it more difficult to teach others about the peace-loving nature of God’s enduring work in the world, as told by the prophet Isaiah (underlining added for emphasis):

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! (Isa 2:1-5)

The Use of Theological Language in “Age of Empires 2”

All of the monk “technologies” that can be researched at the monastery in AoE2 have their names taken from theological terms. The terms used include *sanctity*, *redemption*, *atonement*, *illumination*, *faith*, *fervor*, *heresy*, and *theocracy*.

²² Alan Kreider and John H. Yoder, “Christians and War,” in *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 52.

This writing will investigate three of those terms in depth (sanctity, redemption, and atonement). A description of their significance in the game, and a comparison of that significance with their actual meaning in reality, is provided below.

The Sanctity, Redemption, and Atonement Technologies

First, the sanctity technology in AoE2 makes monks harder to kill by giving them more hit points.

The term “sanctity” refers to “sanctification,” or the process of living a life of Christian holiness in order for one to become more conformed to God’s good desires for humanity. John Wesley viewed holiness as the Great Physician’s work to deliver the pardoned Christian believer from the “plague of sin”.²³ Wesley was adamant that this “growth in grace” had a very real effect on the thoughts and actions of a person.²⁴

As this writing has already mentioned, Wesley believed that God’s relational grace could strengthen the mind as well as the body. In AoE2, sanctity strengthens the bodies of monks. This shows a remarkable consistency in the use of the term “sanctity” between AoE2 and its actual theological significance, especially when considered in the context of the Wesleyan Christian tradition.

Second, the redemption technology in AoE2 allows monks to convert buildings.

The term “redemption” refers to God’s redeeming work. This assumes that our human existence is in need of redemption from sin, whether that sin is behavioral or existential. As the Lord said through Isaiah, “But now thus says the Lord, he who created

²³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 176.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” (Isa 43:1)

Isaiah speaks of God’s people as the subject of redemption. God’s people are also described as being the possession of God because of gracious, redemptive action (“you are mine”).

In AoE2, monks with the redemption technology can take possession of buildings with their conversion ability. The idea of converting an object (or in the case of the game, claiming a building) is rather nonsensical in the typical use of the term conversion. However, if God’s redemptive work has to do with claiming God’s people for divine purposes, then there is an indirect connection between that work and the redemption technology in AoE2.

Third, the atonement technology in AoE2 allows monks to convert other monks.

The term “atonement” refers to Jesus Christ’s work on the cross to absolve us of our sin. Western theologians throughout history have varied in their specific explanation of the atonement, describing it as liberation, pardon, a display of God’s love, or otherwise. However, they have been in basic agreement that Christ’s death was the atonement for sin.

In AoE2, the use of the term atonement has absolutely no relationship to the theological use of the term.

Reflections on Theological Language in Age of Empires 2

It has now been demonstrated that games use theological language for entertainment purposes. In the case of AoE2, examples can be found in which that

language is used correctly (sanctity), bears some relation to normal usage (redemption), or is used in an inaccurate, irrelevant manner (atonement).

A more detailed analysis of every monastery term used in AoE2 would reveal that the use of most of the game's theological language bears a strong resemblance to the use of those terms in real life. In fact, every religious term — except for “atonement” — shows some degree of accuracy when considered in relationship to its standard definition.

Since the percentage of terms used accurately is so high, this demonstrates a clear commitment on the part of the designers of the game to take theological language seriously. A request made to Microsoft to interview the design team of AoE2 about this topic was declined. However, in a previous interview, one of the lead designers of the game revealed that he claims a Christian affiliation,²⁵ and that he has a personal interest in the study of history. He explains the emphasis on accuracy in AoE2 this way:

Anonymous Gamer: “It might not be historically accurate down to the last detail, but it ‘feels’ RIGHT.”

Sandy Peterson, AoE2 Designer: “Thanks. That makes me content, esp. [especially] coming from a fellow history buff. Our goal was, of course, to ‘feel’ right, not to be right.”²⁶

Comparing Theological Language and Theological Content

This is an interesting comment from Peterson. Why would he describe the goal of the designers to make AoE2 “feel” right rather than to “be” right?

The focus of this writing has been exclusively focused on the “Christian” elements in the game: the monastery and the monk. These historical elements are generally represented fairly and accurately. However, the monastery and the monk are

²⁵ Heaven Games, “Quotes from Sandy Petersen, Part 13,” *AOK.Heavengames.com*, 2004, <http://aok.heavengames.com/thegame/sandy/sandy13.shtml> (viewed March 11, 2007)

²⁶ Heaven Games, “Quotes from Sandy Petersen, Part 2,” *AOK.Heavengames.com*, 2004, <http://aok.heavengames.com/thegame/sandy/sandy2.shtml> (viewed March 11, 2007)

located within the context of a real-time strategy (RTS) video game. All RTS games are classified as such by a certain set of unwritten rules that every game follows.

RTS games presuppose a world in which several different factions are battling for supremacy. Each faction gathers resources, and those resources are used to build an army. The armies then engage in a campaign of total war against the enemy factions.

The concept of total war in the modern period is traced back to the American Civil War. The Union Army general William Tecumseh Sherman's 1864 "March to the Sea" campaign in Georgia led him to kill and burn virtually everything in his path. As his troops marched from Atlanta to Savannah, they destroyed everything they saw (whether it was civilian or military target) in order to demoralize the enemy and weaken their desire to fight back against the Union troops.

In RTS games, victory can usually only be achieved when every trace of the enemy is removed from the face of the earth. This means killing all life and destroying all property, whether that life and property is civilian or militaristic in nature. In AoE2, this means that the player must kill farmers, attack miners, and burn houses in order to win the game.

While the deliberate killing of civilians has been a part of the United States' military campaigns in the past (including the use of nuclear weapons in Japan and the firebombing of the city of Dresden in World War II), this is an obvious affront to the teaching of the Prince of Peace. When RTS games require the slaughter of non-combatants in order to ensure victory, they come dangerously close to the "moral inversion" that Leonard Sax speaks of.

There is nothing particularly special about the way AoE2 uses the concept of total war, except the fact that some Christian elements (the monastery and the monk) are represented with historical accuracy within the game. How, then, are we to consider the value of a game like AoE2?

Age of Empires 2: Summary and Conclusions

Age of Empires 2 is a video game that has used Christian theological language and symbolism to support the historical realism that it is based upon. It has taken that language and symbolism seriously, and the presentation is generally fair and accurate (even though it is imperfect in many areas). However, AoE2 is part of the real-time strategy category of video games. This genre requires the player to engage in a campaign of total war in order to achieve victory, which orthodox Christian theology would never support.

Given that the goal of the designers was to create a compelling real-time strategy game, and not to write a theological treatise, AoE2 is a remarkable example of the way a video game can responsibly integrate Christian history into great gameplay. Yet, it is also a powerful example of the limited way in which Christian theology currently affects video game design. It is important to recognize that AoE2 was created by a secular company, and to reinforce the fact that the game has no evangelical or confessional purpose. Its depth of content and historical realism makes it a valuable resource for any Christian educator who wants to explore the significance of video games for the church, but such games must be used with caution because of the underlying violent elements that they contain.

As this writing will investigate next, not all video games that represent Christian history do so in an accurate, responsible, or informed way. Such games may actually make the work of the church more difficult, because of the effort that is necessary to correct flawed assumptions based on bad adaptations or interpretations of Christian theology.

“World of Warcraft”

Blizzard Entertainment’s “World of Warcraft” (WoW) is the most popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) of its generation. Boasting more than eight million subscribers, who pay a monthly fee of about \$15 to play the game, WoW has become a cultural phenomenon. When the expansion pack to WoW, the “Burning Crusade”, was released in January of 2007, the British Broadcasting Corporation posted it on their website as one of their top three *world news* stories — alongside articles about major political figures and the war in Iraq.²⁷

Unlike Age of Empires II, the setting of World of Warcraft is a fantasy universe known as Azeroth. In Azeroth, humans exist in a medieval world alongside fantastical creatures like elves and goblins. Game players control a single character and use that character to explore the land of Azeroth, defeating enemies and completing quests as they go. The game is typical of the MMORPG genre in that the player can never “win”; they can only make their character more powerful as they gain experience. WoW is a game that never ends, and this is a major factor why so many people continue to participate in it for years after they begin.

Each player’s character is a certain “class”, which is one of nine different archetypes that affect the skills and talents of that character. Classes in WoW include the warrior, paladin, hunter, rogue, druid, shaman, priest, mage, and warlock. Warriors, for example, wear heavy armor and fight enemies with weapons like swords, while mages use magic to attack their opponents from a distance.

²⁷ British Broadcasting Corporation, “Hordes Queue for Burning Crusade,” *BBCNews.com*, January 16, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6263987.stm?ls> (accessed March 25, 2007)

A person might expect that a game set in such a fantasy world would have no connections to reality, and therefore might be unsuitable for theological analysis. However, the creators of WoW have derived the land of Azeroth directly from reality. For example, the creatures known as the “Tauren” have a society directly based on the culture of Native Americans, while the “Dwarves” speak and behave like stereotypical citizens of Scotland.

This writing will focus on WoW’s presentation of the human race itself. This will make it possible for definitive conclusions to be drawn from the appearances of Christian language and symbolism in the game, because such conclusions will not be clouded by the obvious fantasy elements included among the other creatures of WoW. In particular, we will investigate the two “Christian” classes — the paladin and the priest. First, however, we will turn our attention to the WoW concept of the “Light”.

The “Light” in “World of Warcraft”

The “Light” is World of Warcraft’s word for God. The Light “protects all the land,”²⁸ “builds character and makes you stronger,”²⁹ and is “inside” the faithful.³⁰ It “shows you the true path and keeps you safe from evil”.³¹ Devoting oneself to the Light

²⁸ Blizzard Entertainment, *World of Warcraft*, version 2, first paladin quest series (accessed January 30, 2007)

²⁹ Ibid., “In Favor of the Light,” level 5 human priest quest (accessed January 30, 2007)

³⁰ Ibid., “Garments of the Light,” level 5 human priest quest, completion screen (accessed January 30, 2007)

³¹ Ibid., “Tome of Divinity,” paladin quest give by Tiza Battleforge in the dwarven city of Ironforge (accessed January 30, 2007)

puts a paladin “on the path to greater virtue”.³² A paladin magical spell called Holy Light has the power to heal characters from almost any injury.

The Light is used as a blessing — “Light be with you” is commonly said by computer-controlled citizens — and as a curse (“What in the Light do you want?”).³³

The Light is explicitly identified with the “church” in WoW. Another Christian-themed class, the priest, receives a quest to see whether “they’re worthy of wearing robes denoting their place in the church”. This is important in order to “help people recognize you as a priest.”³⁴ The robes a priest receives upon completing the quest are called the *Friar’s Robes of the Light*. The most powerful paladin and priest leaders make their home in the Cathedral of Light, a European-style steeple-topped church building in the human city of Stormwind.

The Light, put simply, is the WoW word that means God. The word God, however, is *never* used in any capacity in the game, though “god” is commonly used (to describe a powerful player’s role-playing character). The word Light appears to be the attempt of the designers of WoW to come up with a generic religious term for God that means “good”.

However, the word “light” is used to directly refer to Jesus or to the disciples nearly fifty times in the gospels. This is most noticeable in several examples from the gospel of John (underlining added for emphasis):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., “Bazil Thredd,” quest given by Warden Thelwater in the Stockades of Stormwind (accessed January 30, 2007)

³⁴ Ibid., “Garments of the Light,” level 5 human priest quest (accessed January 30, 2007)

and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (Jn 1:1-9)

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.’ (Jn 3:16-21)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’ (Jn 8:12)

‘As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’ (Jn 9:5)

If the designers of WoW did think that the word “Light” would be a non-specific religious term, it seems that they were incorrect. (Blizzard Entertainment deflected a request for an interview, so it is impossible to specify the exact intentions of the game designers on this point). In any case, this is a thought-provoking example of the way that video games adopt theological terms and repackage them to serve their own purposes.

The Paladin in “World of Warcraft”

In WoW, the paladin is a heavily armored fighter that can use defensive magical skills. On the character creation screen, they are described as “champions who call upon the Light to heal wounds and combat evil.”³⁵ Paladins are a common class in the genre of

³⁵ Ibid., “Alliance Character Creation Screen” (accessed January 30, 2007)

role-playing games. They tend to be based upon a popularized version of the Christian crusader that lived in the Middle Ages.

The identity of a paladin in WoW can be most effectively described as the combination of three distinct factors. Those three factors are *Christian theological language and symbolism*, a *militaristic notion of protection for the weak*, and *the glorification of acts of revenge*.

The factor of Christian theological language and symbolism will be examined shortly. As to the concept of protection, crusaders did not charge into battle in order to protect the weak, but rather did so with the understanding that they were following Christ into battle in order to do battle with the devil.³⁶ They also understood that there was a devotional component to their efforts (they fought because they believed they would become closer to experiencing the love of Christ), and knew that by following the Crucified One into battle, they were following him into death.³⁷ While a crusader might indirectly protect their fellow soldiers and countrymen by going off to war, such was not the intent (as WoW claims).

As to the concept of revenge, there is absolutely no evidence that crusaders understood themselves to be soldiers that were exacting vengeance on their enemies. Their enemies were not so much soldiers, armies, or nations as they were the devil himself. The purpose of fighting was to be part of Christ's final victory over the devil, not to right an injustice that had been committed against the crusader or his nation. Again, the portrayal of the crusader in WoW on this point has no basis in history.

³⁶ Christoph T. Maier, *Crusade Propaganda and Ideology: Model Sermons for the Preaching of the Cross* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 59.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

Now, we can move on to the more substantial factor in the identity of the paladin in WoW: that of the use of Christian language and symbolism.

The Paladin: Christian Language and Symbolism

Paladin abilities, known in the game as “skills” and “talents”, are a primary source by which to observe the use of Christian language and symbolism in WoW. When we compare the number of paladin skills and talents in WoW with Christian language to the number of monk abilities and technologies in Age of Empires II, the difference is astounding. While AoE2 contained roughly a dozen such uses of language, *the WoW paladin (only one class of many) has about one hundred uses of theological language in the title names of its skills and talents. When skill and talent descriptions are included in this calculation, the number of theological terms doubles.*

There is simply not enough space in this writing to investigate every use of theological language in WoW—such an analysis could be a book in itself. However, some words or phrases that are included in the names of skills and talents are *righteousness, sanctity/sanctified, grace, blessed/blessing, spiritual, holy, devotion, sanctuary, sacred, conviction, judgment, crusade/crusader, repentance, lay on hands, and eye for an eye.*³⁸

These examples are not only theological in nature—many have biblical connections as well. We will investigate one such phrase: *lay on hands*.

³⁸ Ibid., “Paladin Talent Screen” (accessed February 4, 2007)

The Use of Language in the Paladin's *Lay on Hands* Skill

The phrase “lay on hands” is a prominent phrase in the Bible that carries great significance in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, the laying of hands on an offering was used as a form of prayer for the people of Israel. God commanded the Israelites to do so as a sign of their repentance from their unfaithful acts. By laying their hands on the offering, the Israelites were giving up those sins. The sins were either “left in the wilderness” (Lev 16:20-22) or “sacrificed” (Ex 29:15-18).

In the New Testament, the laying on of hands becomes a way for healing to take place, and for the Holy Spirit to come alive among people. Jesus lays his hands on the sick to heal them (Mk 6:1-6), and when Jesus does so, the demons recognize that he is the Christ (Lk 4:38-41).

The Holy Spirit finds life among new converts when Peter and John pray for and lay hands on them (Acts 8:9-25). The Holy Spirit leads the Christians in Ephesus to speak enthusiastically and prophetically when Paul lays hands on them to give the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1-10).

The author of Hebrews sees the laying on of hands as part of the basic foundation of Christian teachings (Heb 6:1-2). Both letters to Timothy recorded in the Bible reference the laying on of hands, sometimes equating it with ordination (1 Tim 5:21-22, 2 Tim 1:6-7).

In World of Warcraft, the paladin skill of *lay on hands* uses Jesus' healing powers as the inspiration for its function. The paladin skill can instantly heal any player up to their maximum hit points, regardless of how injured they are. The WoW version of the

laying on of hands shows a usage of language that is consistent with one of the Christian theological understandings of the term, though it does not represent the depth of the term.

Inconsistent Use of Language, and Hostility towards Christianity

However, a further investigation into the use of language and symbolism in the WoW paladin reveals that the accuracy of the term *lay on hands* does not carry over to the hundreds of other skills and talents. Theological terms like *holy*, *spiritual*, *grace*, and *sacred* are thrown around with little or no connection to their meaning in reality. For example, the word *repentance* means to turn away from one's own sins. However, in WoW, repentance is a special ability that allows the paladin to strike an enemy and prevent them from taking any action for a period of time. This reveals the bias that the game designers feel towards the very idea of repentance: it is a tactic used by deceitful religious people who trick others into being reflective for a period of time so that they can be taken advantage of.

In addition, most terms are used inconsistently in the course of the game. In one example, the word *holy* might symbolize an altruistic act. In another example, the same word might be invoked to justify the vengeful execution of an enemy. A specific category of magical spells are referred to as being holy, with some spells designed to heal one's friends, and other spells designed to kill one's enemies. For the designers of WoW, *holy* is nothing more than a religious-sounding word that has no inherent meaning.

Further analysis would show that most theological terms in WoW are treated as such. Even overtly Christian symbols, like the cross, are tossed around apparently at random in the game. Many pictures include the cross, but since Christ (or an overtly Christian worldview) is not part of the WoW design, this is nonsensical. Sometimes, the

cross is associated with healing abilities; sometimes, to powerful attack abilities; but most often, it appears to be “eye candy” that is present to make the game look more attractive.

A Postmodern/Relativist, Young White Male Theology for Sale

Based on these observations, it is logical to conclude one of two things. First, it is possible that the designers of WoW know the proper uses of theological language and symbolism, but felt they had to radically repackage almost all of it to sell their product. However, this is unlikely, given that the designers of AoE2 managed to use theology and history in an accurate, responsible manner, and still sell millions of copies.

This is also unlikely, given the fact that the overwhelming majority of video game designers today belong to a specific demographic category. The “typical” game designer is a 31 year-old, heterosexual, white male. (83.3% of game designers are white.) 88.5% of all game designers are male, which goes a long way towards showing why sexual content is portrayed in the way it is in popular video games today.³⁹ Young men are one of the least likely demographic groups to be involved in a church community, which means that it is probable that the “typical” game designer has had little or no interaction with theological terms and symbols. This explains some the unusual use of these elements in WoW.

Second (and much more likely), it is possible that the designers of WoW are *postmodern/relativist*. In short, this means that they challenge the very idea of whether the truth can even exist. If truth does exist, the only thing that can determine truth is an

³⁹ International Game Developers Association, “Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workplace Diversity,” *IGDA.com*, 2007, http://www.igda.org/diversity/IGDA_DeveloperDemographics_Oct05.pdf , p. 9-10, 12 (viewed March 25, 2007)

individual's opinions. Blizzard Entertainment, the creator of WoW, is based in California, a state that is well known by the church as being a post-Christendom culture. The relativist worldview has been identified as a factor in the decline of the church, and in a pluralistic area of the United States like California is, it is quite possible that this philosophy has had some impact on the designers of the game.

This might explain the bizarre use of terms like *holy* in the WoW. A postmodern, relativist person could claim that because all truth is relative, the word holy has no real definition. Therefore, they can claim that they are free to define it in any way they please, and can choose to be as consistent or inconsistent as they like.

If we take the available evidence that WoW was created by a demographic of the population which is very unlikely to be involved in the church, and we take the evidence that the theological terms and symbols are used without apparent concern for accuracy or consistency with reality, it follows that WoW is a repackaging of Christian theology from a relativist, postmodern, young white male point of view.

This would not ordinarily be a concern for the church, except that games like WoW now have (potentially) more influence over the younger generations than the church does. As we have already noted, the video game industry is growing at an incredible rate. Even the most dedicated Christians, on average, are spending more time playing video games than participating in church activities. It would seem obvious to point out that people play video games for very different reasons than they participate in church activities. Still, with the growing cultural influence of video game companies that repackaging Christian theology and sell it for profit, there is sufficient cause for the church to engage in serious theological reflection and analysis of this emerging culture.

CHAPTER 6

THE PRIEST IN ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

Role-playing video games that contain any religious references—such as World of Warcraft—almost always include a priest character class (often referred to as a “cleric”). In video games, priests have certain defining characteristics similar to those of the monks in Age of Empires II. They use defensive skills or magic, and are generally not very strong.

The Origins of Priest Weapon Restrictions in Video Games

One of the more curious characteristics of priests in video games is the restriction that priests may only use “blunt” weapons. A blunt weapon is any weapon that does not have a sharp edge or a point on it. Therefore, a club, mace, or staff would be considered a blunt weapon, but a sword, axe, or spear would not.

The restriction on blunt weapons for priests in video games was solidified in the 2nd Edition Rules of the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (AD&D) role-playing game. AD&D was originally conceived as a table-top, pencil-and-paper game, but in the 1980s and 1990s, AD&D games began to be created for the personal computer. The 2nd Edition Rules were in place for many AD&D games that were created during this time, and this popular fantasy universe set the standard by which all other fantasy role-playing games were judged. Before long, the decision to disallow religious character types from using anything than a blunt weapon in combat had become an unbreakable law of role-playing

video game design.¹ These video games were making a theological statement about the way religious people viewed war, but what was the basis for this rather odd characteristic of priests in video games?

One Theory Explaining Priest Weapon Restrictions

One explanation for this development is that some Christian warriors during the crusades of the Middle Ages saw battle as an expression of their biblical piety. In reading Genesis 9:6 (“Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed...”) and the Ten Commandments (“you shall not murder”) these pious crusaders could obviously see that God did not condone killing.

The explanation goes that the crusaders interpreted these passages as commandments against *shedding blood*. Since they desired to go to war—which would obviously involve killing—they designed blunt, crushing weapons that could kill without cutting, like the mace and the morning star. In doing so, they could claim to be following God’s commandments while they were engaging in warfare.² Support for this theory comes from a reference to Thomas Aquinas, perhaps the most influential scholastic theologian of the Middle Ages. Aquinas, quoting from the common teaching of the church of his time, said that “it is altogether unlawful for clerics to fight, because war is

¹ In the early 21st century, some game designers—responding to the demands of gamers who wanted more flexibility in their characters—loosened the restriction on priests and weapons. Bioware’s “Neverwinter Nights” is an example of this, though this change is still not a common sight in the gaming world.

² The historical files contained within Age of Empires II make this argument, though they do not list sources for their information.

directed to the shedding of blood.”³ Thus, the theory says that video game designers used this explanation as justification for the characteristics of priests in their games.

There is definitive evidence that many church leaders during the time of the Crusades reinterpreted the Bible in such a way that it could support the idea of a “Christian holy war”, in response to their critics who believed that such a concept was clearly against Christian teachings.⁴ Such reinterpretations were the core of theological arguments in favor of the Crusades.

Historical Practices of Priests of the Middle Ages in War Situations

However, there is virtually no historical evidence to support the fact that there was any real relationship between priests, weapon selection, and biblical piety. Church canon taught that members of the priesthood were forbidden to fight or carry any weapons. Any priests that did would be humiliated, confined to a monastery, and omitted from the prayers of their brethren.⁵ Biblical reinterpretations that encouraged citizens to fight in a holy war were not applied to priests, who were expected to hold themselves to a higher standard by refusing to take up arms. Like women and children, priests were considered non-combatants.⁶ Until later in the Crusader Era, they were not even allowed to travel alongside the soldiers without the special permission of the bishop. Most were

³ Ronald C. Finucane, *Soldiers of the Faith: Crusaders and Moslems at War* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983), 71.

⁴ Christopher Tyreman, *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 96.

⁵ James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1969), 28.

⁶ Finucane, *Soldiers*, 71.

expected, by the church authorities, to travel with the families that followed the military forces to the Holy Land.

The actual practices of clergymen on the expeditions differed considerably from the official teachings of the church. Given that they were far away from church authority in a hostile land, many priests did not hesitate to arm themselves and charge into battle. As one historian writes of this practice, "...not all clergymen were interested in the subtleties of canon law or spiritual counsel."⁷

When they did fight, priests most often joined with the ranks of footmen, which primarily used the spear (clearly, a weapon intended to shed blood) to defend the knights that fought on horseback.⁸ A short spear could be concealed beneath the traditional robes that a priest wore. The other melee weapons used by the footmen (that the priests fought alongside, and shared weapons with) were the short sword, the axe, and the pike—all of which are obviously weapons intended to cut one's enemy.⁹ The only soldiers that commonly used blunt weapons like morning stars were the knights. However, these mounted warriors preferred the use of weapons designed to cut, like the sword or the lance, over the use of crushing weapons.¹⁰

The best available evidence clearly shows that the relationship between a priest's sense of piety and the use of blunt weapons has no basis in historical fact. How, then, can we explain such a peculiar and pervasive characterization of religious clergy in video games?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 68-69.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

The Convergence of History with the Needs of Game Designers

The problem for game designers comes when they want to include real-world elements in their games that are inherently peaceful in nature. Designers wanted to have religious character types that resembled Christian clergy, but—the exceptions mentioned above notwithstanding—they knew that priests were not exactly the combative warriors that would make for exciting gameplay. (Does the idea of playing a video game in which your character spends all of their time reading the Bible and praying silently sound like fun?) The designers knew that virtually all video games that generate large profits for gaming companies include violent themes, graphics, and gameplay. Every game mentioned in this writing, except the classic game “Pong”, has a violent component to it.

As the old saying goes, “necessity is the mother of invention”. By giving their priest characters the ability to use blunt weapons, the designers felt they were serving the needs of the violent style their gameplay required without making the priests appear to be acting in a way that was contrary to their identity in reality. While it is unlikely that anyone who plays video games will actually expect members of the clergy to begin wielding clubs in their daily lives, this is a fascinating and rather odd example of what can happen when Christian theology intersects with video game design.

CHAPTER 7

OTHER EXAMPLES OF THEOLOGY IN VIDEO GAMES

Strong theological statements are also being made in many other popular video games. Many such games only occasionally reference religious issues—but when they do, a definitive point of view is presented. This point of view is usually hostile towards religion in general and Christianity in particular.

The Theology of “Galactic Civilizations”

One example is Stardock Entertainment’s “Galactic Civilizations”, an outer-space turn-based strategy game. The player can win the game and defeat one’s opponents in several different ways, including what is called a “technological victory”. To achieve such a victory, the player must research so much technology that they are able to turn the people and armies they control into “gods” that “transcend” the mortal life. One of the final technologies, “Beyond Human”, is described this way: *We are the alpha and the omega!*

This is an obvious reference to the book of Revelation, which says of the savior, Jesus Christ, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Rev 22:13; see also 1:8 and 21:6). In other words, the theology of Galactic Civilizations is that humanity can be its own savior, and our salvation will come through our own technological capabilities. In a way, they believe that Jesus Christ will become obsolete through humanity’s self-initiated creative development.

The Theology of “Rise of Nations”

Another game, Microsoft’s “Rise of Nations”, believes that Jesus Christ will (or has) become obsolete through philosophy. Rise of Nations, like Age of Empires 2, is a real-time strategy game that has the player commanding large armies. However, it does so over the course of many millennia. Along the way, the player can research religious technologies that give certain powers to the player. Monotheism, one such technology, is rendered obsolete once one “researches” Existentialism.

Existentialism, a 20th-century philosophical school of thought, argues that life has no higher purpose. There is no God (or gods), and all of life is utterly meaningless. Existentialists argue that the only thing to do in life is to pursue reason, create art, or seek pleasure. The designers of Rise of Nations believe that this school of thought not only cancels out the monotheism of Christianity (and any other related understandings), but that this nihilistic philosophy is superior to it. If you refuse to research Existentialism while playing a game of Rise of Nations, your civilization will be less powerful than those of your enemies.

The Theology of “Civilization IV”

Yet another game puts religion on the free market, to be used or discarded at will by a player seeking certain powers. “Civilization IV” by Firaxis has the player command an entire civilization through the course of history using a turn-based strategy model. Along the way, a player can choose between a number of different religions to practice. Different religions give different powers to one’s civilization.

The theology being demonstrated here is that of consumer religion (common in the capitalistic, free-market Western world) where people look at what benefits *they* will

receive upon choosing a religion, and commit to it on that basis. Religious loyalty and commitment in such a society only lasts so long as the individual feels like they are receiving the benefits they believe they are entitled to.

Pastors and church leaders that combine Christianity with consumer capitalism are often accused of preaching a “prosperity gospel”. This is a derogatory term that implies that the true gospel is being undermined by leaders that claim that Jesus wants to make them rich, successful, and happy. Critics say that such desires are inherently selfish, and directly contradict the commandments to love God above all—and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self.

More importantly, they are contrary to the “theology of the cross”—held most strongly by the Lutheran reformers—that God is most clearly recognized in the person of Jesus Christ dying on the cross for the sins of humanity. This identification of God as an agent of sacrifice and reconciliation is the basis by which most Christians see the prosperity gospel movement as an expression of human greed.

Civil religion, which results from the merger of nationalistic ideals and religion, inevitably leads to the claim that what God wants and what the nation wants is the same. In the capitalistic United States, this manifests itself when people replace the Christian narrative with one that says that God wants a specific group of chosen people to have money, power, and the “freedom” to do whatever they want. The video game Civilization IV is one example of civil religion replacing orthodox practice.

CHAPTER 8

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY IN THE HOME

Over the course of this writing, we have established that video games are becoming a dominant source of entertainment in Western culture. We have also established that game designers are now using Christian theology (appropriately or inappropriately) to enhance the immersive character of their video games. Now, it is time to explore the implications of these developments for the church in this technological era.

If the church can only do one thing in response to the emergence of video games in popular culture, that one thing must be to learn how to use existing video games as a tool to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation. If parents can be trained to critically examine gaming culture in a partnership with their children, this ministry could have a significant impact on the faith formation of innumerable youth—as well as the adults themselves.

Redefining Ministry to Include the Home

The concept of “ministry in daily life”, grounded in the mission of the Triune God to all of creation, seeks to redefine the term “ministry” in order to broaden the understanding of Christian witness. This redefinition is critical in order to come to an understanding of how video games relate to the practice of ministry.

The historical Protestant denominations identify ministry as the work of the ordained pastor. While official confessional documents might support the priesthood of

all believers (1 Pet 2:9), many congregations have identified the pastor as *the* “minister” who is charged with the task of providing care for a congregation. In contrast, the contemporary evangelical traditions have often equated the term “ministry” with the work of evangelism. If an activity does not have the goal of bringing about the conversion of an unbeliever, that activity is not ministry. Since any Christian can testify about their faith, ministry (as evangelism) can be undertaken by anyone, and does not require any pastoral presence.

Both of these definitions of ministry are inadequate for the missional church. The congregational practice of identifying the pastor as the only minister is driven by a Christendom worldview that sees everyday Christian witness as largely unnecessary. Since the clergy-centered institutional church is struggling to survive in the pluralistic culture of the Western world, continuing to restrict “ministry” to pastors will only increase the attrition rate of the clergy without improving Christian witness among contemporary disciples in their daily lives.

On the other hand, the practice of ministry as exclusively evangelism (seen in many newer Protestant churches) is sometimes driven by a dispensationalist theology that reduces the holistic scope of God’s work to providing lifeboats to a few faithful people who wish to escape the sinking ship that is God’s fallen creation.

Redefining Ministry: The *missio Dei*

In opposition to both of these definitions of ministry is the confession that the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is a missionary God. God is on a redemptive mission to bring new life to the world: to love, to bless, and to save all of creation.

God's ultimate goal is the renewal of all of creation in the original divine image, not the destruction of all creation in an act of anger and vengeance. Ministry, therefore, cannot be appropriately equated with an evangelistic witness that is driven by a dispensational eschatology.

There is no part of the world in which the *missio Dei* is not occurring. God didn't send the Son because God so loved the *church*; God sent the Son because God so loved the entire *world*! (Most biblical scholars argue that the most accurate translation of the word "world" from its original meaning in Greek in this famous John 3:16 passage is "cosmos" or "universe", which broadens the scope of God's mission even further.)

Because of this reality, we can know that ministry is not exclusively the work of the pastor within the congregation. Ministry isn't so much about what *we* are doing on our own; it is the process by which everyone can participate in the *missio Dei*, which is taking place everywhere.

Four categories have developed in the study of "ministry in daily life" to help us understand the locations in which this process can take place in, around, and through us. These four categories are the home, the workplace, the community, and the congregation. Video games relate most strongly to the home, and it is in that context we will consider the implications of video games for the work of ministry.

Redefining Ministry: Martin Luther

The sixteenth-century church reformer, Martin Luther, believed that the home was the most important location in which ministry could take place. Luther had a strong sense that Christian identity must be focused on loving others rather than fulfilling self-righteous standards of piety. This made the home a natural place for Christian ministry—

ministry being the process by which God's calling for us to love God, and to love one another, was lived out. Luther did not use missional language to describe ministry, since this language did not come into practice until the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, his basic theological assertion that God calls us into ministry in the midst of our ordinary, daily lives is a powerful missional statement in the context of his time.

Although it seems to be an unusual idea today, Luther understood that the home was the primary location for the work of evangelism. He argued that the Christian faith was primarily learned when a parent passed on the story of Jesus to their children. (For a variety of reasons, Luther had little faith in the ability of the existing church institution of his time to do this work.) Passing on the faith was not just the work of biological parents—it was the responsibility of all adults to do so for the children that they interacted with.

In our 21st-century context, we are living with the consequences of turning over this responsibility to a select group of church professionals. Without the holistic support and witness of Christian parents and adults in daily life, the younger generations have been giving up on the Christian journey at astounding rates. Now that many congregations are struggling to pay the salaries of people employed in youth ministry, we are forced to reconsider the wisdom of Luther's assertion that the home is a vital place for ministry to take place.

Five Principles for Using Video Games in Faith Formation

We will consider the insights of David Anderson and Paul Hill as we discern strategies for engaging video games in the home. Anderson and Hill identify five principles that describe the way in which the Christian faith is passed on:¹

- 1) Faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships
- 2) The church is a living partnership between home and congregation
- 3) Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too
- 4) Faith is caught more than it is taught
- 5) If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian parents and adults

Faith is Formed through Personal, Trusted Relationships

If it is true that the Christian faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships, then any attempt to engage video games in a meaningful way must be done in community. Some critics of Western culture point out that parents are increasingly turning to technology to “raise their children”, often using things like television or video games to distract their children so the parents don’t have to spend the time to engage them in significant ways.

While the percentage of children that play video games is very high, only about one-third of parents play video games. While most gaming parents do play video games with their children, parents only play about nine hours a month, which is approximately the same amount of time their children are playing video games each week.² This means

¹ David W. Anderson and Paul Hill, *Frogs Without Legs Can’t Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 11.

² Entertainment Software Association. “2006 Sales, Demographic, and Research Data: Essential Facts.”

that two-thirds of children that play video games are doing so without any parental engagement in their activity. The other one-third of gamer children only play video games with their parents 20-25% of the time.

If parents want to engage video games in order to help pass on the Christian faith, they must do one of two things (in response to these statistics). Either more parents need to start playing video games with their children—and play those games more often; or parents must start placing restrictions on the amount of time that their children can play video games without supervision. We have gone to great lengths over the course of this writing to show the way that bizarrely altered Christian theology (heretical, in some cases) is being presented in video games. If children are formed into the faith by playing video games more than by learning from other adults, those children will grow up with very distorted ideas about who God is and what God is about.

Neither one of these two decisions will be easy to make. For parents who feel stretched between so many different demands on their time, the idea of giving up other activities in order to play video games with their children may seem absurd. Many parents may have no interest in video games, and are probably happy to have their children playing games instead of bothering them. Conversely, children who were accustomed to playing two hours of video games every day by themselves would likely rebel if they were allowed to play games for “only” 30 minutes at a time—especially if the rules dictated that an adult had to be present while they were playing.

However, it will take these types of courageous decisions by parents who are committed to forming personal, trusted relationships with their children around gaming if video games will be able to be used as a method for passing on the Christian faith. Such

decisions will be well worth the effort. Anderson and Hill have discovered that parents are the most powerful relational influence that a child has when it comes to faith formation:

“For years we have asked groups of Christians in parenting or Sunday morning education classes, or lay and clergy leaders in workshops, training sessions, or retreats, ‘Who or what has influenced your life of faith?’ In one group of about 50 adults in a Sunday morning forum, the first answer placed on the chalkboard was ‘mother.’ The second was ‘father.’ The third, ‘grandparent,’ and then ‘godparent.’... These observations are consistent with formal research on the topic... Youth from seventh to twelfth grades were asked this same question. The number one and two answers *they* gave were ‘mother’ and ‘father.’”³

The Church is a Living Partnership between Home and Congregation

The church is no longer the only voice that is defining Christian theology. The rise of a secular culture has not generally been a threat to the church’s orthodox belief and practice, because the surrounding culture has usually seen little value in the language, symbols, and practices of the church. However, now game developers are using these (modified) Christian elements to sell their products, and children playing video games will have a very difficult time differentiating between what is good theology and what is bad theology. Because of this, parents can no longer assume that the language and symbolism of the church will mean the same thing to their children as it has to them.

This is where the ministry of the congregation intersects with the ministry of the home. The discipline of weekly worship teaches families about how good theology is put into practice in community. It is out of this gathered congregation that the people can be a resource for bridging the current gap between worship life and home life:

“...[one way in which] the church is experienced as a partnership between home and congregation is through the edification of the home that enables the witness,

³ Anderson and Hill, *Frogs*, 28.

leadership, and service of the larger Christian community. Not only public preaching grew the church, but the ‘breaking of bread’ from house to house. Acts 2 identifies public *and* domestic worship, generosity, and praise that resulted in the good will of all the people and the evangelization of the greater population (2:46-47). . . . Just as the public ministry of the church builds up individuals and households, so individuals and households build up the public ministry of the church.”⁴

Congregation members who enjoy language (book readers, writers, poets, and musicians, for example) can offer insight into how words shape our Christian identity, as a way to help families see how game designers alter Christian language for entertainment purposes. Members that are sensitive to visual symbols (like painters, communion stewards, liturgical arts directors, carpenters, architects, gardeners, and the like) can help families to interpret the symbols of Christianity, so that they can compare those symbols with the ways the game designers use them.

Pastors who have some knowledge of gaming culture can use a reference to a video game in a sermon to illustrate a point (where a reference to a movie, book, or song would also be appropriate). Sunday school classes help children learn about God’s love and God’s hope for their lives, themes that are generally not present in today’s entertainment-based popular culture. Educated and experienced leaders (whether clergy, staff, or otherwise) have the ability to nurture relationships that connect the home and congregation more closely together, whether this happens through a formalized small group program or through conversations over coffee.

In these ways—and many more—a partnership can be formed between the home and the congregation. The congregation can take the gifts, graces, and talents that God has given them and use them as a resource to equip families for ministry in their homes.

⁴ Ibid., 47-48.

As life in the home begins to be transformed through these acts of devotion and discipleship, the very identity of the gathered worshipping congregation is bound to be publicly transformed as well.

Where Christ is Present in Faith, the Home Is Church, Too

Congregations that use a Christendom paradigm to define the word “church” restrict the practice of ministry to weekly worship, where the people gather in the official church building in the presence of the pastor to receive certain benefits. (“I went to church this week. Did you go to church?”) In contrast, advocates of “ministry in daily life” identify the home, the workplace, and the community as locations for church to happen (as well as in the gathered congregation). This is because the church isn’t the steeple—it’s the people!—and embracing ministry in daily life means taking this literally.

The identity of the church isn’t about gathering; it is about sending! As the Father sends the Son, and as the Son sends the Holy Spirit, we are sent out into the world for the purpose of participating in God’s redemptive mission to all of creation. Weekly worship is still important, but it is when we are sent in the world—into our homes, into our workplaces, and into our communities—that “church” really happens. Ministry is what takes place when the people that make up the church intersect with God’s mission out in the world, and then return to worship to celebrate and reflect upon their experience.

When Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too. When parents spend time playing video games with their children in order to help bring them up in the Christian faith, their work is just as important as the pastor preaching the sermon on Sunday morning. By using “sending” language related to the *missio Dei*, a congregation will have

the theological grounding to direct the resources that parents and adults need to carry out effective ministry in the home.

Anderson and Hill believe that the home can be church even amidst the brokenness of contemporary society and its related family structures:

“We need to acknowledge, of course, that not every Christian child, youth, and adult lives in a home (residence) filled with other Christians. This has been true since the beginning of the church...our assertion is that the principles...can be of immeasurable support to those who feel alone in their own homes...”⁵

Where God has been sent before us (into a broken world), and where Christ is acknowledged in faith (where we are), we can have confidence that the Holy Spirit will intersect with the lives of ordinary people, in extraordinary ways, in their ordinary lives. Video games may seem like quite an ordinary part of life in the technological era, but we have an extraordinary God who can be revealed through these ordinary things.

Faith is Caught More Than it is Taught

The Christian faith is learned most powerfully when it is experienced. As Anderson and Hill put it:

“Today learners and teachers are increasingly encouraged to acquire valuable insights and data from daily life encounters, and to attach valuable insights to these encounters. One of the great challenges of education is to connect information and life experiences...the principle that faith is caught more than it is taught simply reminds pastors, Christian educators, godparents, grandparents, and parents that Jesus often taught his followers in a classroom without walls.”⁶

The central role that experience plays in current educational thought means that video games can be an important tool for passing on the Christian faith. Putting aside the concerns we have raised in the course of this paper about language and symbolism for the

⁵ Ibid., 59-60.

⁶ Ibid., 71-72.

moment, we can recognize that the immersive and interactive characteristics of video games are specifically designed to engage the human brain on a complex level.

Knowing that, how can we use video games for faith formation in such a way that we do not teach youth to accept their altered and flawed theology? A church can institute a program that puts the theology of the church and the theology of video games side-by-side.

Leaders could observe the symbols present in a video game that were borrowed from the Christian tradition. Then, they could find those symbols in the architecture of their own church. By structuring a program that gave learners the chance to play the video game *and* experience the symbols of the church architecture, a conversation could begin as to what symbols mean for Christians.

For example, the game *World of Warcraft* uses the Roman cross of crucifixion as a symbol, as does virtually every church worship space in the world. Yet, there are obvious differences between each use of this symbol. For example, there is no such thing as a Roman civilization, execution by crucifixion, or Christ in *World of Warcraft*. What, then, does the symbol of the cross mean in the game (if anything)? How does that compare to the meaning of the cross for Christians?

Through the use of creative, structured experiences, congregations can help people engage the world of video games in their homes in order to help Christians pass on the faith to the next generation.

It Takes Christian Parents and Other Adults to Raise Christian Youth

Although we have been focusing on how parents and other adults can help pass on the Christian faith in this section, the reality is that those adults often feel that they are not

capable of the task. This has been a strong factor in the rise of church professionals who specialize in youth ministry in the 20th and 21st centuries:

“The old paradigm for youth ministry assumed that the congregation would delegate the faith formation of children and youth to a youth pastor, a youth director, or a charismatic volunteer. But one cannot hire out faith formation. The act of ‘faithing’ the next generation is directly related to the faith formation activity that takes place in the home.”⁷

At the same time that professionals have taken the place of parents in the catechetical process, the parents themselves are in need of the same education:

“...the faith maturity of half of all men in their 40s is not that different than that of adolescent youth...only 32 percent of U.S. Christians have a mature faith...given this lack of adult faith maturity, one-third of mainline Protestant adults believe that ‘through meditation and self-discipline I come to know that all spiritual truth and wisdom is within me’; a decidedly un-Christian theology, but appropriate to a consumer culture that worships individual cravings at any cost.”⁸

We must remember that video games are not just toys for children, but are being played by people of all ages—even seniors! If the faith of many of our adults isn’t any more mature than that of our teenagers, many of these adults will be influenced by the flawed “Christian” theology in video games today. If our adults can’t tell a good theology from a bad one, they won’t be capable of teaching their children how to do so either.

Any congregational program that attempts to engage video games seriously as a ministry in the home must take into consideration the reality that some parents are in need of faith-formative practices just as much as their children are. In fact, some children may be more mature in their faith than their parents are! It would be a remarkable act of witness and discipleship to see the younger generations using video games to engage the older generations for the purpose of faith formation. A congregation seeking the

⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁸ Ibid., 92.

resources to begin a program to support ministry in the home should not neglect to ask whether God has given them children and youth who could be equipped as leaders in that ministry area.

Final Reflections

Over the course of this writing, we have attempted to address some of the challenges that a technological, consumer culture presents to the Christian faith. After describing and analyzing the world of video games, some practical suggestions for engaging this emerging context have been given.

In the same way that parents cannot help but pass on values to their children, the church cannot help but respond to the “theology-for-sale” phenomenon taking place in this post-Christian world. Will we see this as a threat, or as an opportunity? Perhaps it is a little of both.

The prophetic word to us today is that the church must find creative ways to engage the new realities of life for people living in the 21st century. Choosing not to respond to these changes *is* a response in itself. Such a choice will virtually assure that future generations of faithful Christians will have an even more difficult time dealing with these questions than we do.

The pastoral word to us today is that we already know who wins! The Crucified One, the Lamb of God, who has already triumphed over death itself, will ultimately preside over the new heaven and new earth. At that time, the *missio Dei* will be fulfilled, and the ministry of reconciliation given to us by God will be complete. Surely, that will be a time of great joy and celebration.

God's work in, through, and around us has begun. But, it is not yet finished. Only one question remains. What will we do now?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarseth, Epsen. "Our Mission," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 2007. <http://www.gamestudies.org> (accessed January 16, 2007).
- Anderson, David W. and Paul Hill. *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003.
- Associated Press. "Video Games Calm Kids Before Surgery," *CNN.com*, December 10, 2004. <http://www.cnn.com/2004/HEALTH/12/09/hospitals.gaming.ap/index.html> (viewed December 11, 2004).
- Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft* (video game). Irvine, California: Blizzard, 1999. <http://www.worldofwarcraft.com> (viewed March 28, 2007).
- British Broadcasting Corporation. "Hordes Queue for Burning Crusade," *BBCNews.com*, January 16, 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6263987.stm?ls> (accessed March 25, 2007).
- British Broadcasting Corporation. "Virtual Pals Soar in Importance", *BBCNews.com*, November 30, 2006. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6158935.stm> (accessed Thursday, January 18, 2007).
- Brundage, James A. *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1969.
- Burke, Spencer and Colleen Pepper. *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations About God, Community, and Culture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003.
- Coleman, John. "Black Youth Seek Leadership Roles, Respect In Church," *UMC.org*, November 12, 2003. http://archives.umc.org/umns/news_archive2003.asp?ptid=2&story=%7BB3F03142-FF22-4915-A890-BEB103E68D11%7D&mid=2406 (viewed January 19, 2007).
- Entertainment Software Association. "2006 Sales, Demographic, and Research Data: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry," *TheESA.com*, 2007. <http://www.theesa.com/archives/files/Essential%20Facts%202006.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2007).

- Entertainment Software Association. "Facts and Research [2006]: Game Player Data," *TheESA.com*, 2007. http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Entertainment Software Association. "Facts and Research [2006]: Sales and Genre Data," *TheESA.com*, 2007. http://www.theesa.com/facts/sales_genre_data.php (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Finucane, Ronald C. *Soldiers of the Faith: Crusaders and Moslems at War*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1983.
- Geary, Patrick J. *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003.
- The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Heaven Games. "Quotes from Sandy Petersen," *AOK.Heavengames.com*, 2004. <http://aok.heavengames.com/thegame/sandy/sandy.shtml> (viewed March 11, 2007).
- Hobart, Todd. "Megachurch Evangelism Models." Presented at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, December 5, 2006.
- Intel Corporation. "Moore's Law, The Future," *Technology and Research at Intel*, 2007. <http://www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/index.htm> (accessed January 17, 2007)
- International Game Developers Association. "Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workplace Diversity," *IGDA.com*, 2007. http://www.igda.org/diversity/IGDA_DeveloperDemographics_Oct05.pdf (viewed March 25, 2007).
- Kolo, Castulus and Timo Baur. "Living a Virtual Life: Social Dynamics of Online Gaming," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 4, Issue 1, November 2004). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/kolo/> (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Kreider, Alan and John H. Yoder. "Christians and War," in *Introduction to the History of Christianity*, ed. Tim Dowley, 51-54. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2002.
- Kurt, Kelly. "Ministries Use Tech, Flash to Attract Teens," *STNews.org*, March 2004. http://www.stnews.org/archives/2004_march/rlr_ministres_0304.html (viewed November 24, 2004).

- Maddox, Randy L. *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Maier, Christoph T. *Crusade Propaganda and Ideology: Model Sermons for the Preaching of the Cross*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000.
- Mäyrä, Frans. *Digital Games Research Association*, 2007. <http://www.digra.org> (accessed January 16, 2007).
- McFarland, John Robert. "The Theology of Pac-Man," *The Christian Century*, September 29, 1982. <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1341> (accessed January 17, 2007)
- Microsoft Corporation. *Age of Empires 2* (video game). Redmond, Washington: Microsoft, 2004. <http://www.microsoft.com/games/age2> (viewed March 28, 2007).
- Mitchell, E. "The Dynamics of Family Interaction Around Home Video Games." *Marriage and Family Review* 8 (Special Issue: Personal Computers and the Family), 1985, 121-135.
- Montfort, Nick. "Combat in Context," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 6, Issue 1, 2006). <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/montfort> (accessed January 17, 2007).
- Motion Picture Association of America. "U.S. Theatrical Market: 2005 Statistics," *MPAA.com*, March 9, 2006. <http://www.mpa.org/2005%20Theatrical%20Market%20Statistics%20Report.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Munoz, Angel. "CPL Background History", *TheCPL.com*, 2007. <http://www.thecpl.com/league/> (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Potter, Ned. "Video Game Makers Get a 'C' For Effort, Critics Say," *ABCNews.com*, November 23, 2004. <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=277677&page=1> (accessed November 23, 2004).
- Radwick, Dora and Sean P. Dolan. "First Quarter 2002 Video Games Fact Sheet," *NPD.com*, May 20, 2002. http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_020520.htm (accessed January 27, 2007).
- Rauh, Sherry. "Video Game Addiction No Fun," *WebMD.com*, June 26, 2006. <http://www.webmd.com/content/article/124/115554.htm> (accessed January 19, 2007).
- Rendle, Gilbert R. *Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders*. Herndon, Virginia: Alban Institute, 1998.

- Reuters. "Kids Prefer Video Games Over TV, Toys," *CNN.com*, October 27, 2004.
<http://www.cnn.com/2004/TECH/fun.games/10/27/media.videogames.reut/index.html> (accessed November 23, 2004).
- Riley, David M. "2006 U.S. Video Game Retail Sales Reach \$13.5 Billion Exceeding Previous Record Set in 2002 By Over \$1.7 Billion," *NPD.com*, January 19, 2007.
http://www.npd.com/press/releases/press_070119.html (accessed January 27, 2007).
- Sax, Leonard. *Why Gender Matters*. New York: Broadway Books, 2005.
- Snoek, G.J.C. *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction*. Leiden, The Netherlands: E.J. Brill Publishers, 1995.
- Steinke, Peter. *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times*. Herndon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006.
- Tierra, Michael. "The Herbal Tradition", *Planetherbs.com*, 2005.
<http://www.planetherbs.com/showcase/docs/herbhist.html> (viewed January 27, 2007).
- Tyreman, Christopher. *Fighting for Christendom: Holy War and the Crusades*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- United Methodist Church. *2004 Book of Resolutions*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- Viacom International. "Foxtrot's Bill Amend Discusses World of Warcraft with Allakhazam," *Allakhazam.com*, February 28, 2005.
<http://wow.allakhazam.com/news/sdetail5190.html?story=5190> (accessed January 18, 2007)
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995.
- Waters, Darren. "Game On For Console Conflict," *BBCNews.com*, November 9, 2006.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6132358.stm> (accessed January 18, 2007).
- Wright, Talmadge, Eric Boria and Paul Breidenbach. "Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games: Playing Counter-Strike," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (Volume 2, Issue 2, December 2002).
<http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/wright/> (accessed January 19, 2007).