BOOK REVIEW

Issue Two / 2022

Playing for Eternity

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Bosman, Frank G., *Gaming and the Divine: A New Systematic Theology of Videogames* (Routledge, 2019).

Introduction

At the end of the first year at a new job, I rewarded myself with the purchase of a retro 8-bit gaming console, a purchase that gave me access to games I played as a schoolboy. I was a kid all over again, losing myself in worlds where I fought street thugs, gathered powered up mushrooms, and warded off alien invaders. Now playing as an adult, I have come to appreciate these video games more out of nostalgia than entertainment. However, as a researcher in theology and culture, I wondered if more was at play than just mere entertainment. Such questions persisted as I surveyed the more recent offerings of more sophisticated platforms, endowed not only with exponential technological advances, but also designs and stories—and with these, flows of capital—that used to be the reserve of print and movies.

A rich literature has explored our collective immersion in gaming from various angles. For instance, Daniel Muriel and Gary Crawford have provided entries that discuss gaming not just as products of culture, but culture forming. Frans Mäyrä has gone further, considering gaming to be so all encompassing as to warrant being a culture unto itself, meriting a discipline in its own right. Jamie Madigan has looked into the psychology of gaming at the level of those who play them as well as those who make and sell them. There are gaps, however, at an intersection between gaming and the pursuit of the transcendent, as well as gaming as a theological issue. While D. Brent Laytham's *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play* has looked at the theological dimensions of our culture of entertainment, David Miller's *God and Games* and Hugo Rahner's *Man at Play* have looked at play more generally through a theological lens. Kevin Schut's *Of Games and God* has gone some way in bringing focus on video gaming as an issue of concern for Christian living (especially the lives of Christian gamers). However, a

significant gap persists: the specific phenomenon of video gaming treated as a specifically theological concern.

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Frank Bosman's *Gaming and the Divine* fills this gap with a laser-like focus, exploring video games specifically as a subject of interest for systematic theology. This seemingly narrow focus, however, has enabled Bosman to explore video games' capacity to delve into a plethora of issues pertaining to the divine, that in turn require a theological vocabulary to decipher. These Bosman unveils clearly and concisely, enabling this quintessential artifact of postmodern culture to become a touchstone for the continuation of some foundational cultural projects, one artistic, the other religious.

Art

Is Gaming art? The philosopher Monroe Beardsley once defined art as arranging "conditions intended to be capable of affording an experience with marked aesthetic character or (incidentally) an arrangement belonging to a class or type of arrangements that is typically intended to have this capacity."[1] By this definition, many arrangements of conditions can be classified as bearing aesthetic potency. While paintings use dyes and orchestras use wood and string as their conditions, video games arrange pixels to enable the player to perceive people, buildings, maps, and monsters. More than depict, games cohere these elements into a unity, a world into which players are drawn out of themselves and affectively transposed into the world of the game. Bosman takes this a step further, observing that the conditions of video games are not pixels strictly speaking, but texts, "discourse[s] fixed by writing." Games work because a communication of information, facilitated by strings of subterranean code, underlies our perception of the movements of pixels from one set of plot points to another. Video games are then life-giving texts, fonts of animation to myriad places and beings.

What cements their aesthetic valence is their ubiquity in everyday life. If Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can posters and Brillo box sculptures have taught us anything, it is that quotidian objects can also constitute the conditions whereby aesthetic experiences emerge. Therefore, we cannot deny this aesthetic capacity to a form of everyday entertainment like video games. Indeed, aesthetic experiences form the *raison d'être* of video games, experiences that gamers enter into frequently, if not every day. However, does their quotidian quality make games parallel the *kitsch* so prevalent in other products of pop-culture? To this we can say that a game cannot afford to be kitsch, since kitsch does not enrich our associations of the objects depicted.[2] Far from mere representation, a video game's success as an aesthetic experience depends on more than simply an arrangement of pixels. It also transforms our experience of what is depicted, making the arrangement point beyond itself to something more.[3] For Bosman, part of this "something more" is their being inherently interactive. While other artifacts of pop culture make interaction an optional extra, video games from their inception are designed to elicit external input. A game graphic is no mere static representation, but is oriented towards eliciting a player's response, whether as the player's enemy, ally or even a representation of the player itself. In the same vein, a game's landscape

can be a place of traverse, a trap or a deposit of treasure. Bosman plots the interactivity and aesthetics of games along two vectors, namely the play of the game (the ludological) and the story the game conveys (the narratological). Aesthetic experience can be gauged on the basis of whether the game provides entertaining puzzles and/or whether the game inserts the player into a story whose unfolding is commensurate with the player's advancement in the game. These two cannot be separated from one another easily, and what is evident in Bosman's volume is that games are works of art inasmuch as they are works of puzzle-based literature.

Religion

Games nonetheless render something more than mere entertainment, which keeps consumers returning again and again to the console. The stretching of reality, the visceral high drama and sometimes sensory overload into which players are thrust suggests that the appeal lies in an experience that transcends the mundane. For Bosman, games can pull the player out of his mundane context and put him in touch with the sublime, something so incomparably great that it extends beyond the range of what our avatars could deliver, and what players can comprehend. Here we enter the transcendent realm of the spirits and the gods, and this is where Bosman's volume really shines.[4] Bosman makes the stunning claim that video games are not only works of art, but also theological acts. Bosman builds this claim on a familiar theological foundation, that all created things bear within them an imprint of the Divine Word, hidden seeds through which the Word of God may be more fully known. As one of these created things, Bosman argues that video games cannot be ruled out as one of these *logoi spermatokoi*. Going further, games do not merely refer to religious themes as a narrative decoration. Playing these games is an act whose religious valence can only be deciphered by a theological vocabulary. Bosman asserts that as the avatar is solving the game's puzzles—battles, races, obstacles and so on—the game is training the player into an affective regimen. Every button pressed, stage revisited, and choice of action made is a ritual in microcosm, making the game an affective school.[5] Through their avatars, players may need to dialogue with interlocutors and arrive at pivotal realizations about the world, other game characters, him- or herself or even God.

Such realizations can concern our dwindling humanity in the face of an unstoppable cyberization (as in *Nier: Automata*), the foundations of moral reasoning (as is the case in *Bioshock*), theodicy (as in *Wolfenstein*), identity (as in *The Turing Test*), and even God's posture towards his creatures (as in *Assassin's Creed: Rogue*). These questions may sometimes be embedded in the course of a story's unfolding, or may even be forced upon the player in the making of a choice. Such choices can either *immerse* one in or *reveal* the moral or metaphysical undercurrents that players rely on in real life. Often, the choice lies between choosing vice for ludological advantage (such as killing innocents to gain more resources) or virtue for the sake of narratological advancement (such as saving one's enemy to earn greater respect or unlock a hidden stage). Here, players face forks in the road, either towards the very familiar instinct for self-preservation, or the loftier heights of self-gift. In more Augustinian terms, we can say that games reveal the divide within the human heart, and putting before the player the choice of curving in on oneself and becoming a utilitarian interest maximizer, or forgoing that instinct in favor of surrendering one's self for the sake of another (including one's enemies within the game, as is the case in *Metro Last Night*). Should the player choose the latter path, avatar and player alike can, even without their knowledge, align their progress with the dragmarks of the cross and, in Bosman's words, "join him- or herself into the...*descensus Christi ad inferos* between Good Friday and Easter Sunday." A game may therefore be an affective approximation to Calvary, where avatar and player alike may become participants in the divine economy, the heart of which is an encounter with Christ, the

word who searches the heart and reveals their true identity as bearers of Christ, as *Christophoroi*. Even in games premised on an apparently open defiance of divinity—whether it is the Greek gods in the *God of War* franchise, or of a thinly veiled God of revelation in *The Talos Principle*—those who can recognize God's creativity might notice signs of divine imagination weaving its way into even the most defiantly profane of gaming environments.

Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of the culture wars where Christians are involved is a dialectic between the Christian and a particular artifact of the contemporary milieu. In this dialectic, the latter is labelled by the former as an inherent threat to apparent Christian morality, community, or ideals. Video games do not escape this dialectic. What Bosman has done in laying out facets of the Christian theological tradition is cut through this posturing by analyzing the concrete aspects of video games in the light of the deposit of revelation and tradition. What is produced is an appreciation of what games are seeking to do, while also critically evaluating whether they actually do what they seek to do.

As a reader, Bosman's volume has led me to ask myself how serious I am when I affirm Psalm 19's claim that the heavens proclaim God and the firmament shows forth his works.[6] On the other hand, it has also given me yet another instance in which we can see that those who invest in their games are doing so with more than just their money or even their emotions. With Bosman's work, I am given the chance to see the way in which a significant portion of humankind—the portion that drips with material wealth—is using an avatar to reach something beyond the material. Not only that, Bosman has also given me the opportunity to see how games provide an opportunity to transport us beyond the City of Man, and how the digital story-scapes of video games can interpolate—however faintly—with the urban landscapes of a heavenly city.

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[1] Monroe Beardsley, *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 299.

[2] Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch & Art* (University Park, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 35.

[3] Ibid.

[4] On this see Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008). See especially 4.

[5] There are resonances between gaming and what James K.A. Smith calls a cultural liturgy where the patterns of actions of the body become a fulcrum to guide the heart to desire in ways unanticipated by rational calculation. See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

Psalm 19:1