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Making Moral Choices in Video Games

Video games can provide immersive experiences in fantasy stories of good and evil. As we become agents in their complex narrative arcs, we develop skills of moral perception and decision-making. More importantly, we may experience what J. R. R. Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe."

Responsive Prayer

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer for all who find their
livelihood and leisure in virtual technologies,
   **that they may have the wisdom and will to use them properly,
   in service of human life and creativity;**
for all who suffer from addiction, who are drawn away from the
world you created to a world of screens and images,
   that they may rediscover the joys of life in flesh and blood;
for all who are lost in our wired world, who have grown passive,
reactive, and detached,
   **that they might reconnect to the Source of life and find a
   renewed sense of purpose serving God and neighbor;**
Ever-living and ever-loving God, breathe your life into us that we
might live the words we pray and be signs of your great love
and presence in the world. **Amen.**

Scripture Reading: Philippians 4:8-9

Reflection

We tend to dismiss video games as mere commercialized entertainments. When they appear at all in serious moral reflection, it is because we fear they have nurtured prurient appetites for violence or colossally wasted their players' time. There is not much commendable, we think, and little of the gospel in games.

Yet Cameron Moore invites us to consider some video games "as works of art that express and explore philosophical ideas," especially those games that "create elaborately imagined other worlds in which characters pursue intricate plot-paths that require important moral choices."

Because such video games are close in structure and content to literary fantasy, Moore employs Christian theories about the fantastic imagination—most fully developed by George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien—to appreciate and evaluate them. These theories "offer a perspective from which we can articulate these video games' potential as an art form and critique particular examples and trends," he writes. These four writers, despite their differences, agree on three fundamental principles of fantastic imagination.

‣ *Fantasy lets us participate in secondary creation.* "Fantastic artists do not create *ex nihilo*," Moore notes, but "they take up elements of the actual world created by God and refashion them to make coherent secondary worlds." This creativity continues when readers or video game players imaginatively enter these fantastic worlds in a consistent, believable way.

‣ *Fantastic secondary worlds help us engage the primary world with renewed appreciation.* "[Fairy] tales say that apples were golden,"

Chesterton notes, "only to refresh the forgotten moment when we found that they were green." Returning to the primary world, things are no longer mundane, but filled with wonder. Lewis says that our "excursion into the preposterous sends us back with renewed pleasure to the actual."

The best fantasy allows us to experience what Tolkien calls "eucatastrophe"—the unexpected, final defeat of evil and victory of the good, which is an echo of the gospel. With eyes renewed by this encounter, we can notice God's gracious activity in the primary world.

▸ *Fantasy helps us notice the moral fabric of the universe that holds everywhere.* "While the fantastic imagination legitimately imagines cities floating in mid-air and populated with rational creatures quite different from humans and angels, it must not imagine that the good is evil or an injustice is just," notes Moore. "Since we make by the moral 'law' in which we are made, our creations ought to accord with the law that governs our own beings." Or, as MacDonald once put it, the fantastic artist "must not meddle with the relations of live souls. The laws of the spirit of man must hold, alike in this world and in any world he may invent."

Admittedly, Tolkien believed fantasy is more successful in stories than visual art, because the former require more imagination from the audience. However, Moore notes that role-playing games require players to make significant moral choices that help shape their unfolding narrative. "The right sorts of games provide opportunities for significant artistic expression and meaningful engagement of the intellect and will," he concludes.

Study Questions

1. Do these three principles of fantastic imagination help you appreciate fantasy in general? Discuss how Cameron Moore uses them to critique particular video games.

2. "In deciding which fantastic video games to play and which to leave alone, we should examine their presentation of good and evil," Moore writes. What should we be looking for?

3. Select Edward Hopper's *New York Movie* or *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* and draft a three-line story based on the painting. How does your act of imagination compare with playing an immersive video game? Or with reading a short story?

Departing Hymn: "Creation's Lord, We Give You Thanks" (vv. 1 and 5)

Creation's Lord, we give you thanks
that this your world is incomplete,
that we may join creators' ranks,
that work awaits our hands and feet.

Since what we choose is what we are
and what we love we yet shall be,
your kingdom ever shines afar—
the will to win it makes us free.

William D. Hyde (1903), alt.
Tune: WINCHESTER NEW

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Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Responsive Prayer	Responsive Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To articulate three fundamental principles of Christian theories of fantastic imagination.
2. To use these fundamental principles to appreciate immersive role-playing video games in general, and to critique specific examples.
3. To appreciate the role of fantasy more generally in Christian discipleship.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Virtual Lives (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Creation's Lord, We Give You Thanks" locate the familiar tune WINCHESTER NEW in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (*www.hymntime.com/tch/*).

Begin with an Observation

According to an Associated Press/America Online Gaming Study (April 28, 2006), 40% of adults in America play video games at home on a computer or electronic gaming console, and 45% play games online. 12% of gamers play the sort of role-playing games that Cameron Moore discusses in this study. About half of the adult players are younger than 35; most live in the south (37%) and are male (55%) (http://surveys.ap.org/data/Ipsos/national/2006/2006-04-21%20Gaming%20Study%20topline.pdf).

In this study Cameron Moore adapts Christian theories of the fantastic imagination to appreciate role-playing video games and critique specific trends and examples. He says the best games may help their players develop moral skills and perception that are important in the life of discipleship. Indeed, players return from their virtual forays in fantasy with a renewed appreciation of the world God created.

Responsive Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the responsive prayer in the study guide. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Philippians 4:8-9 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The third study in this series, "Faithful Criticism of Popular Media Technologies," introduced the theme that technological innovations are not morally neutral. Each communication technology has its inherent biases and values or, as Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) famously put it, "the medium is the message." In this study Cameron Moore focuses on how an inherent value of the immersive, role-playing video game—the exercise of fantastic imagination—can edify or deform its players. The best sort of video game gives its players the joy of secondary creation, returns them to the primary world with heightened awareness of God's gracious activity and appreciation of the moral fabric of God's creation, and forms the intellect and will through the moral choices players must make in the fantastic world of the game. He shows us how to evaluate games according to these standards.

Encourage group members who are avid video gamers to critique the games they play. Other members can employ Moore's analysis to evaluate the fantastic television shows, movies, books, and stories they enjoy.

Study Questions

1. Cameron Moore summarizes the three fundamental principles of Christian theories of fantastic imagination: "First, fantasy as an artistic endeavor allows us to participate in an act of secondary creation, which Tolkien calls 'sub-creation.' This art is so enjoyable precisely because sub-creation is proper to us as human beings. Second, as we enjoy fantastic sub-creation, our powers of perception and experience are broadened beyond normal reality. The best fantasy allows us to experience 'eucatastrophe,' the good ending drawn out of the midst of evil. This widened experience should lead us to greater appreciation of the actual world we inhabit. Finally…the same moral law holds in all worlds, created or sub-created."

   Applying the first principle, Moore appreciates that the *Elder Scrolls* series of games has a free roam option that allows players "to participate in the central story line, or ignore it altogether and spend hours engaging in hundreds of other stories and quests." Regarding the second principle, he complains about *Fable 2* (and similar games) that "players' choices for good or evil in no way affect their participation in the final victory. As a result, every choice is morally insignificant or, worse, amoral. It does not matter in the end whether one chooses to murder the innocent villagers or save them. All that matters is the exercise of one's will." Applying the third principle, he praises *Final Fantasy VII* for providing players new insights and sympathy for moral acts that require self-sacrifice. "Ask most 20 or 30-something males about *Final Fantasy VII* and they are likely to bring up Aeris's sacrificial death as one of their most artistic experiences," he writes. "This carry-over effect is possible because the secondary world of the video game exemplifies the moral law that holds in the primary world."

2. Cameron Moore admits that "many role-playing video games blow it" because either (1) players' choices have "little effect on the narrative development in the game," or (2) players' participation in the eucatastrophe—"the ultimate triumph of good over evil which comes as an unexpected victory at the hour of apparent defeat"—is unrelated to whether their game character is good and has acted well, or is evil and has acted badly. In the second case, the amoral secondary world actually "destabilizes the distinction between good and evil."

   "The best way to discern a game's presentation of good and evil is to play at least some of the game for yourself," he suggests. "If you are evaluating the game for children, try taking some evil actions, insofar as the game allows them, and see what happens in the secondary world." Reviewers should ask these questions: "Does the game offer choices between good and evil? Do these choices affect both the play experience and the narrative progression of the game? What view of good and evil does the game proffer as a guide for making these choices?"

3. Give each member a 4"x 6" index card on which to draft a brief narrative based on one of Hopper's paintings. (You can find color images of the paintings online.) Heidi Hornik notes that such a "scenario will be a personal narrative that is more indicative of the moment and emotional life of the viewer than of the artist and his painted figures. Thus, Hopper's image remains mysterious, an invitation for viewers into a virtual reality they imagine."

   Encourage members to discuss and compare which elements of the paintings (figures, faces, lighting, clothing, building details, furniture, etc.) they incorporated into their stories, which they noted as mysterious, and which they simply ignored.

   Consider Tolkien's view that literary fantasy is "more universal and more poignantly particular" than visual fantasy because readers must flesh out more details. On the other hand, stories and video games provide more unfolding narrative than do Hopper's images.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.