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Book Review
Frank G. Bosman, Gaming and the Divine
A New Systematic Theology of Video Games

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With the series "New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies" Routledge is publishing new approaches in well-established academic disciplines. Amongst the volumes published in this series so far is Frank Bosman's *Gaming and the Divine*, and not only does it fit perfectly with the purpose of the series, it is in itself (spoiler alert!) absolutely worth reading.

In his introduction, Bosman establishes the connection between computer games and theology using an episode of *Assassins Creed Rouge*, which thematizes the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. He then notes popular misconceptions about the personality of gamers (3) and alerts readers to a blind spot about (serious) theological topics in computer games. Bosman's discussion of the state of research shows not only great competence but also a high level of experience with the products he is analysing. Yet for me, as a fundamental theologian, his next step is even more important. He discusses the value of computer games as a *locus theologicus*, referring to Cano's definition from 1563 and arguing for its applicability to the topic of this book (6). In the following chapter, he even describes video gaming as a religious act: "The act of playing particular games can, in some specific cases, be interpreted as a religious act in itself" (8).

Chapters 1 and 2 contain what Bosman calls "Fundamentals". He presents a "Theology of Culture" and a "Study of Games", both urgently needed because of the diverging terminology in scholarly discussion. Here Bosman's systematic focus becomes obvious. In his discussion of contemporary cul-

tural theology, he shows profound knowledge of historical proposals (e. g. *logoi spermatikoi* or *praeparatio evangelica*, 20–25) and of the contemporary approaches of Moltmann and Tillich. After a reference to Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, which pledges the Catholic Church to read the signs of the times, the author describes the two main positions of "God" in the modern world: Nietzsche's "dead God" and the "hidden God" that Bosman prefers, noting "the Western world is the exception to the world's rule" that being religious is self-evident (31). This enables Bosman to state that the "veiled God" is still "Creator, Savior and Whole-Maker [and] still revealing himself to his creatures" (32), yet in new and sometimes surprising forms that are, he concedes, to be critically discussed.

In the section that follows, Bosman defines what he understands as video games. He points out the importance of textuality (40–41): in light of their communication potential, video games qualify as texts. These digital, interactive, playable and narrative texts (43) communicate meaning and are objects of interpretation.

The following paragraphs describe the methodology Bosman proposes: a four-step process of "internal reading" (playing the game), "internal research" (collecting all available in-game information), "external reading" (cross-linking intermedial relationships) and "external research" (gathering additional information about the game and its background). This method enables the identification and examination of five forms of religion in any given video game: material religion (the explicit occurrence of religion), referential religion (allusions to religious traditions in the real world), reflexive religion ("the reflection on existential notions that are traditionally associated with religion within the game itself", 49), ritual religion (the involvement of the player's avatar in what is usually associated with religious practice) and gaming as religion (the experience of gaming provides the player with feelings usually associated with religious practices).

Chapters 3 to 8 discuss the classical treatises of dogmatic theology through the lens of video games, illustrating the main theses with references to representative games. In chapter 3, on creational theology, Bosman discusses "the three divine attributes", omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence (60) and points out that these are also the attributes of the "god-gamer", but only in an imperfect manner, such that the latter is more similar to the gnostic demiurge than to the Christian God, a diagnosis applicable for both the player and the developer of the game. The author then unfolds the Genesis creation myth and points out that while the Genesis narrative holds that the human

being is made in the likeness of God, even most scholars in theology do not share this view anymore. What if one applies this changed perspective to the interpretation of games? Here a core question pops up almost casually: "Does the player and/or the developer share with his or her digital followers the ability to establish and maintain relationships with one another […] and do the digital followers have this ability among themselves?" (67). The ontological status of the game as an existing relation between the programmer, the player and the "product" is worth considering and has indeed extensive consequences for both theology and philosophy. The humans involved could possibly be considered "created co-creators" (68).

Chapter 4, on Christology, draws on the expected "messianic aspects of the heroes of many video games" (77), but Bosman adds another perspective by pointing to the legend of St. Christopher. This type of reference avoids the problem that arises from Christ-like messianic interpretations of the protagonist of a game (almost all of these figures have substantial attributes and/or tasks that could be interpreted as supporting such a view) by shifting the key role to the player. He or she is enabled to "become Christophoric" (91). Yet how is the necessary prerequisite of something Christomorphic to be integrated into the (at least in most cases) very violent protagonists; although Bosman dedicates the next paragraphs to "The Christophoric Player: Descending" (92), the reviewer is not (yet) completely convinced.

Chapters 5 through 7 are dedicated to theological anthropology, theodicy – the problem of evil – and ethics respectively.

Chapter 8 focuses on what in classical dogmatics is the treatise of eschatology. Unlike in real life, in gaming death is an experience the player usually undergoes repeatedly. It is a feedback mechanism of almost any game (172). Death is the consequence of failure; those who succeed can win the game or at least solve the next puzzle. This progression is in sharp contrast to the concept of death as an absolute end in (real) secular life. Even though there is a slight similarity – in both cases the situation is out of the player's control – the identification of player and avatar ends but can easily be restored either by restarting the level or by loading a saved game status. Bosman supplies a table that shows the variability in integrating the idea of death in a game (174), unfolding the concepts on the next pages (175–192). Then, interestingly, he brings up the topic of death as a result of sin and refers explicitly to Romans 5:12 – a theological reflection of high quality connected to the body-soul problem (197).

Chapter 9 is somewhat different. Not only is it the longest chapter in the book, but whereas the preceding chapters mirror the core treatises of dog-

matics, this one is – at least in the European tradition – genuine fundamental theology. Here, Bosman engages with the critique of religion found especially in the aggressive (and often not well-founded) diction of the "new atheists" (205) and identifies five categories, again based on extensive references to games, of religion as fraud, as blind obedience, as the source of violence, as madness and as an instrument of oppression (206–240). He concludes the chapter with thoughts on how to deal with this challenge and pleads for a digital iconoclasm as a befitting strategy. His interpretation of iconoclasm offers new elements and refers to the shattering of religious idols (including false images of God). Bosman suggests that players integrate the inherent critique of religion in the games and use them to "critically examine their own collective and individual behaviour and history" (243).

In his conclusion, Bosman comes back to his two hypotheses from the introduction (video games as genuine *loci theologici* and video gaming as a potentially religious act). He finds them validated and adds that the player does not have to be aware of the implications he has carved out in this book. He draws parallels between the Donatist dispute and the orthodox characteristics of a sacrament (in both Catholic and Protestant traditions), finally stating that video games have sacramental potential (256): "They are new vehicles of God's self-revelation and grace […] God did not die; He has been hiding himself, waiting to be found by the gamer."

I am impressed by this book. Bosman demonstrates not only praiseworthy scholarship and a talent for systematic thinking, but also an instinct for burning questions. Above all, he draws on plentiful resources from his own experience, being a gamer himself.

Yet there are some issues that dampen my enthusiasm somewhat, most of them minor, such as the dating of the rise of liberation theology (15) or a less than convincing definition of the terms "ethics" and "moral" (esp. 155–158). In terms of ethics, an additional challenge would be to explore the behaviour of players not only in-game, but also in their game-related practices in real life. Do they use a legal copy of the game, a walkthrough or a savegame editor? Even though these aspects are not strictly in-game, it would be very interesting to have at least some paragraphs on them in the next edition of this book. And how about illustrations? The print version of the book does not include a single screenshot. This absence is a pity, because video games offer plenty of opportunities to illustrate the theses Bosman develops.

My major concern is Bosman's conclusion about the potential sacramentality of games (255–256). I am not convinced by his arguments. Even if one

were to concede that playing a game might have sacramental quality, a major problem remains: at least according to Catholic theology, the sacraments and sacramentals require a conscious decision from the persons involved, i. e. of the priest and the receiver (or their godparent). To administer a sacrament without this conscious engagement is not only forbidden but also threatens its validity; consequently, unknowing participation in a sacrament or even a sacramental by playing a video game seems impossible to the reviewer. Furthermore, both sacraments and sacramentals usually have to be celebrated in highly ritualized forms. Even though the author offers a suggestive argument, I cannot follow him in this last step, and at present I do not see any way of overcoming that hesitation.

Frank Bosman's *Gaming and the Divine* is a book worth reading and what is more, a book worth buying. I have learned much from it and will definitely include it in the recommended reading for my course on media and religion.