Review of: Schut, Kevin (2013). *Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video*

Games. **Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press.**

By Mark J. P. Wolf, Concordia University, Wisconsin

Despite their wide variety, video games are often stereotyped as being violent, with fast-paced action that involves shooting, enemy monsters, and quick reflexes; in fact, many of them do feature these things. Yet other games, even some best-selling games like *Myst* (1993) and its sequel *Riven* (1997), or Jenova Chen's *flOw* (2006) and *Flower* (2009), are quiet and contemplative, without being any less engaging. Indeed, one might easily find them more immersive than noisy, violent games. In any event, Christians can, and must, be involved in the discussions surrounding video games. Kevin Schut's book *Of Games and God* (2013) is a conversational, readable introduction to the topic of video games written for Christians, particularly those who have never considered the value of video games or who wish to defend them as a worthy pastime. Balanced in its perspective, broad in its scope, and written for a general audience, *Of Games and God* fills a niche that has long been waiting to be filled, while indicating that more research in this area needs to be done.

The first two chapters introduce the topic and main ideas. In his first chapter, Schut describes his desire for a balanced approach, looking at various attitudes people have toward video games and new media and technology in general, ranging from fearing it to worshipping it. Schut believes we can have a balanced attitude and find a place for faith as well. His tripartite plan of engaging, understanding, and transforming culture is one that provides the *raison d'être*

for the book as a whole. The second chapter describes the different types of games in an attempt to define what the medium is and how it communicates. This chapter is necessary for those readers who need to understand how meaning can be created, even when no story is present, and how playing is more than simply viewing. The chapter ends with a summary that Schut asks readers to keep in mind as they read the rest of the book.

The rest of the book's chapters looks at various cultural aspects of video games through a Christian perspective. Chapter three looks at the compatibility of video games with religion, spirituality, and God. Video games feature worlds with different religions, including fictional ones, and convey a variety of attitudes toward religion; the goals and objectives of some games can also feature actions that run counter to what a Christian believes. What should a Christian make of it all? He describes how morality in games is often rather black and white and points-based, with good and evil given numerical values and religion as just another faction, one of the attributes that defines characters, along with race, gender, guilds, and so forth; religion is therefore reduced to a function. Of course, video games do this to practically everything; so far, anyway, video games have tended to lack depth in most areas. Schut points out that other media have done similar things, and that non-Christian religious perspectives are not necessarily anti-Christian; they can share values and agree with certain beliefs. The latter part of the chapter discusses attempts to break away from the mechanistic outlook embodied by video games through such things as the use of random numbers, social interaction, and interpretation. Still, such an escape is difficult since video games remain algorithmic entities which are digital in nature. However, Schut's main point is that we should be more aware of the medium's limitations and try to overcome them as much as possible.

Chapter four takes on the topic of violence, examining just how violent games are and whether violent games encourage real violence. After considering the variety of research in the area, Schut asks whether research as to what effects media have on people should be the measuring stick for assessing games, an astute question, since human free will always necessarily limits video games to an influence on, rather than being a cause of, the behavior their audience. He next looks at the place of violence in other media, and in Christian works specifically, like the books of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. It is not the presence of violence but the attitude taken toward it that makes the difference. Stories need conflict, and the diegetic worlds of stories and games are removed from our own, but a game's philosophical outlook exerts its influence, whatever that may be, on the meaning of violence and what we are asked to think about it. One area where Schut could have gone further, however, is in investigating the more subtle ways that games shape our thinking and problem-solving, some of which might spill over into our real-world behavior; after all, many games encourage a utilitarian outlook that has us see everything in terms of tools to help us or obstacles to overcome, including other game characters. Self-sacrifice for others is something one generally does not find in video games, where one's self-preservation is usually the top priority, something which runs counter to Christian belief.

Chapter five looks at fantasy and escapism and whether or not games can be addictive. Schut carefully examines the case for video game addiction, looking at the theories and evidence in favor of that view as well as the arguments against it. Here, too, he points out that reading books and other activities can become obsessions as well, so video games are not alone in this regard. However, as Tolkien pointed out, fantasy and imagination have an important purpose, so

the "Escape of the Prisoner" (that is, someone who wants to transcend limitations and imagine possibilities) should not be confused with the "Flight of the Deserter" (someone who wants to run away from his or her responsibilities). Such arguments apply to all media and not just video games. But video games differ from other media in that the fantasy worlds they present are interactive and can be explored by the user, an experience that can be as compelling as reading (or for some, even more so).

Chapter six considers gender issues, and not only the way video games depict and assign gender roles but also the way gender stereotyping surrounds video gaming itself. Schut looks at both male and female stereotypes and their implications, placing them in the broader context of cultural attitudes toward gender roles. Here he even includes an essay by a former student of his, "Growing Up (Girl) Gamer," by Janelle Weibelzahl, adding another gendered perspective to his own. What Schut's chapter also does, especially in its last section, is to consider gender issues from a Christian standpoint, something that one rarely finds in discussions of video games and gender, and the idea that for a Christian, freedom is a means, not an end.

Chapter seven looks at education and video games, a topic of much scholarly discussion, and the oft-heard criticism that video games are a waste of time. This chapter covers a broad range of examples and issues, including the area of media ecology, always considering multiple perspectives. The discussion expands beyond video games but is always brought back to them—in this case, a section on what we lose in a video game world, followed by a section on what we gain in one, striving for a balanced approach. The discussion of education, however, remains rather general, and perhaps more might have been said specifically about children, especially younger ones, and the extent to which games might be helpful or harmful to them.

The eighth chapter is about Christians designing and creating video games, something which also has been largely overlooked in video game scholarship. The chapter also discusses conditions for workers in the video game industry, another subject that is rarely, if ever, touched upon in video game studies. The result is an interesting and informative chapter, with material from interviews with seventeen Christian game designers; we only get glimpses of this material, however, and one hopes that Schut will some day publish an anthology of the complete interviews. There is also a discussion of "Christian games," comparing those which are marketed as such (many of which are heavy-handed enough that they end up preaching only to the choir), to games that are designed for a general audience but present their material from a Christian outlook. Schut is not afraid to tackle the problems involved with marketing to Christians and the questions about what kind of content should be included. This chapter, probably the best in the book, expands its discussions to include Christian involvement in other media as well, without leaving the discussion of video games; it could easily have been the basis for an entire book on its own.

Chapter nine examines the social side of gaming and gamer communities, and then specifically Christian gamer communities and the ways that faith plays a role in them. Schut believes that gaming communities can be as Christian as any other Christian group. Here, too, Schut's material is compiled from a survey of 125 Christian gamers, perhaps the first such research of its kind. One senses that here is another topic waiting for book-length treatment. The final chapter continues some of the discussion from chapter nine and revisits some of the criticisms mentioned earlier, and what healthy Christian-based game criticism might be like. The chapter is a bit short, though, and could have perhaps provided examples.

Overall, the book has a positive, thoughtful approach and is not afraid to look in-depth at the problems and criticism leveled at the topic. The book's style is for a general audience beyond an academic one and should be of interest to an audience interested in video games as well as one interested in Christianity and media. While the book may be on the light side for graduate student readers, it should be ideal for undergraduates. I highly recommend the book, and I hope that it finds all its audiences and inspires further investigations into the issues examined here.