

Gaming & Faith

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GAMING & Faith



This spring, students in the Engaging the World of Gaming class had the chance to try out Oculus, a virtual reality headset.

Dordt is one of few institutions talking about gaming and faith.

Years before he earned a Ph.D. in theology and culture and began his teaching career at Dordt University, Dr. Brad Hickey found solace in video games.

"I came from a dysfunctional family and had a difficult childhood. I struggled with confidence and had a major stutter," he recalls. "I couldn't even order a cheeseburger at a restaurant without significant issues."

Some of his earliest, happiest memories

involved playing games with his grandmother, who was particularly adept at pinball; she came in second at one of the first gaming competitions. As he got older, Hickey found World of Warcraft, an online gaming world. While playing, he met people from around the world of different ages and professions; they spent hours gaming together, but they also connected outside of gaming.

"We'd go to each other's weddings. If someone got sick, we'd visit one another," he says. "It was the first time

I ever felt belonging in my life. It built up my confidence—having these relationships through gaming."

He also saw how video games could positively transform the lives of those with disabilities. He knew of players with muscular dystrophy who learned how to use their eyebrows and cheeks to manipulate controllers; some went on to win or place highly in world gaming championships.

"Being part of the gaming community

helped them to do what they otherwise wouldn't have been able to do," he says.

When it came time to pick a dissertation topic for his Ph.D. program at Fuller Theological Seminary, he felt challenged by a question a friend asked him: what do you love?

"What do you love' is a very Reformed question to ask," reflects Hickey. "I said, 'I love video games; they've been so meaningful in my life.' Since then, my primary question has been, 'What is the Holy Spirit doing in video games?' I'd seen addiction, and I'd seen violence. But as Reformed traditions such as that espoused by Abraham Kuyper teach us, 'everything is complicated'—and video games are no different."

While Hickey was delving into a Reformed view on gaming in his Ph.D. program, future Dordt students were getting their first taste of gaming. In high school, Ethan Haeder spent hours playing Titan Quest, a video game that follows a warrior through Ancient Greece, Egypt, and China on a quest to defeat the Titans after escaping from an ancient prison.

"I still play through it at least once a year. Usually I'll call my dad, and we'll play it together," he says.

Isaac "Nemo" Rohne was most interested in playing "think-y strategy" tabletop games.

"Playing board games was always an activity where my parents and I could have a good conversation or interaction. It was a really healing thing especially for my dad and me, because we didn't always get along. Playing games was a place where we could communicate."

Eden Winslow loved playing board games with her family as well.

"I enjoy spending time with the people I love, doing something fun together where we can have conversations and laugh," she says.

In 2019, Vice President for Student Success Robert Taylor was beginning to realize just how interested the current

generation is in gaming, whether that be video or tabletop. Taylor invited Hickey, who was just wrapping up his Ph.D. program, to give a presentation on campus to a group of undergrads on the topic of a Reformed view of gaming and e-sports.

"We had about 40 students show up," says Taylor. "What floored me is that

“Brad Hickey may be the only Reformed scholar that’s studying gaming to this level.

— Robert Taylor, vice president for student success

I didn't know most of the students in the room, and I try to know as many students on campus as possible. As the evening went on, I realized that many of the students didn't know each other, either. That grieved me—I don't know them, they don't know one another, but they're connected to people all over the world in their rooms by themselves. This is a problem."

Taylor also saw how excited the students were about the possibility that Dordt might do something in the area of

gaming, especially from a Reformed perspective.

It wasn't any surprise, then, that at the first Gaming Guild meeting Hickey held on campus this past fall, more than 100 students showed up, and that Engaging the World of Gaming—Hickey's theology class—has more than 35 students enrolled. Students like Winslow, Rohne, and Haeder found gaming to be an important part of their lives, just as Hickey had when he was young.

"Brad Hickey may be the only Reformed scholar that's studying gaming to this level," says Taylor. "If Dordt is going to talk about Christian perspective on gaming, then he's someone we need to know."

GAMING GUILD AND ENGAGING THE WORLD OF GAMING

Simply put, the Gaming Guild offers gamers a chance to connect.

"The vast majority of students want community through gaming—to have their gifts honored in a unique way," says Hickey, who leads the Gaming Guild. "They want to have meaningful events, build community, and talk about faith and gaming. So that's what we try to provide with the Gaming Guild."

JAMIN VERVELDE (99)



Dr. Brad Hickey holds a Ph.D. in theology and culture from Fuller Theological Seminary and specializes in teaching about video games from a Reformed understanding.

With more than 80 members, the Gaming Guild is one of the most popular clubs on campus this year. There are five chapters within the guild—console gaming, roleplaying, PC gaming, traditional gaming, and Minecraft—and each chapter has a vice president who orchestrates events for their particular area.

In some ways, the guild helps to reach a different type of student, says Guild President Ethan Haeder. Such students might be more comfortable playing a game with one or two other people than going to large on-campus events.

"The guild is a way to have social connections and discipleship with those of us who would rather not be around 400 people at a time. The guild has an opportunity to reach out with gaming—to go to them, rather than having them come to us," says Haeder.

Peter Shippy can attest to the desire for building meaningful connections through shared interest minus the large crowds. He says he's not the most outgoing person, and the Gaming Guild has given him the opportunity to meet people he might not bump into otherwise.

"A lot of Gaming Guild members might say something similar, because most of the time people play games in their dorm rooms or apartments or with a set friend group. A club dedicated to getting to know other people who are enthusiastic about gaming really brings together people from all walks of life," he says.

The guild holds casual events the last Friday of the month, where students are invited to use the Gaming Guild's PlayStation 5 console, Nintendo Switch, PCs, and an impressive variety of board games. The guild supplies snacks and great conversation, too.

During finals week last semester, Hickey and the Gaming Guild held a gaming triage event where students could stop by and relax for a bit.

"When they got tired of studying, students came in and played a couple games to try to get their minds off their next tests," Hickey says. "It was a big success."

The guild has become so popular that it has outgrown the club room in the basement of Covenant Hall. Recently, they relocated to Kuyper Apartments, where they have more room to spread out.

MINDING MINDCRAFT

Another event sponsored by the guild is a semester-long Minecraft competition where students use Minecraft building to say something meaningful about the world or about a social conflict. A panel of judges, including Dordt professors and a Minecraft expert, examine the Minecraft builds and consider what the creations say about what it means to be a kingdom citizen.

"It's pushing them to think about their Minecraft playing in a different way," says Hickey.

Connecting through gaming can happen in the classroom, too. In addition to leading the Gaming Guild, Hickey teaches Engaging the World of Gaming, a theology class that is "designed to enable students to reflect upon the broader world of gaming, evaluate it from a Christian perspective, and live out a biblical perspective as disciples

of Christ in whatever gaming-related capacity they might find themselves." Hickey hopes that, through his class, students will look at video games as a cultural artifact and from multiple historical and cultural perspectives in order to think theologically about video games as a cultural good and a meaningful Christian calling.

The class isn't purely lecture-based. In one activity, participating students take part in a gaming-related dramatic presentation where they perform a dramatic dialogue that looks at the ethical responsibility of Christians in online spaces. In another activity, students choose to play one of several lesser-known video games, such as Papers

Please, that draw attention to important current social issues like immigration; students must then reflect on and respond to how these games might contribute to shalom and a healthy society. In yet another activity, students are invited to take part in a tabletop roleplaying game with other students and to write a reflection on their

MELISSA LAARMAN '22



Caleb Hoke (left) and Nicholas Stoltzfus (right) play through a significant battle from World War II using miniatures that Hoke and his father crafted by hand.

preconceived notions and what stood out to them about the experience.

Eden Winslow appreciates the fact that there are so many different assignment options to choose from. As an engineering major, she decided to write about the uses of virtual reality as training in engineering disciplines.

"It's great that we get to put what we are learning into practice," she says. "My favorite part of the class so far was when Professor Hickey brought two virtual reality headsets to class, and I got to play a game in virtual reality for the first time. It was so cool and fun."

When she signed up for the class, Winslow saw playing games as a way to build relationships and to just have fun.

"But I am learning through this class that the games themselves can also have value in educating people, in shaping philosophies, in improving mental health, in training, and even in glorifying God in the act of playing," she says. "What I've learned this semester is that the value of gaming goes deeper than I thought."

Kendal Zylstra isn't a huge gamer, but he's glad he's taking Engaging the World of Gaming. He has friends who are interested in roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons, and he knows plenty of people who love video games. Not only has this class taught him more about what gaming entails, he's gained a new perspective on gaming and faith.

"There are people who think my generation is spending too much time on technology and that we need to cut down on screen time. There's probably some merit to that, but at the same time, while we're using our technology or while we're playing games with friends, there are ways to honor God," says Zylstra. "To distinguish our faith from our recreation and play isn't really correct. Dordt is just starting to look at gaming and say, 'There's a lot of people who are passionate about this. How can we implement a Reformed Christian worldview and faith into this?' That's a challenge this class is hoping to address, and I appreciate that so far."

“Before God, play is both freedom and responsibility. That’s what I want them to grasp—whether students play video games or not, play is very valuable to our lives.”

— Dr. Brad Hickey, student success specialist and director of e-sports

THE NOTION OF PLAY AND PERCEPTIONS ON GAMING

We often think of play as childish or something that needs to be given up once we become adults, says Hickey. But that shouldn't be the case. As he conducted his dissertation research, Hickey found evidence that early church fathers and thinkers interpreted creation through the lens of play.

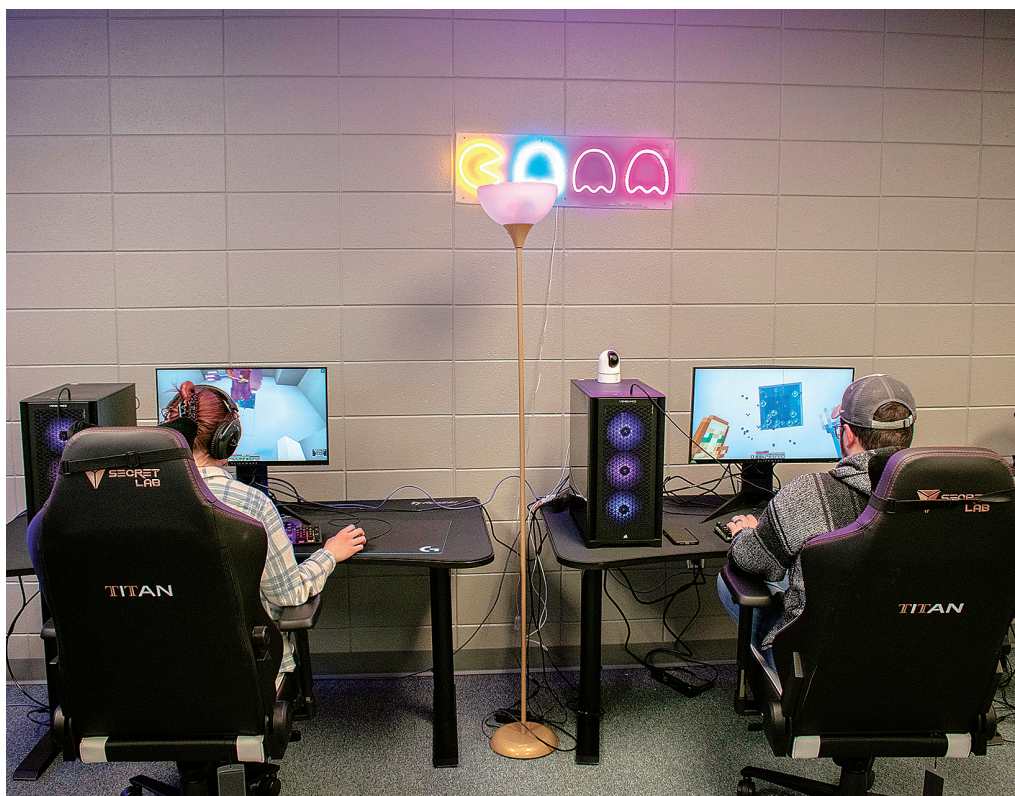
"That is, for them, God approached creation playfully, as a noble game that balances freedom, responsibility, love, and creativity in equal measure—a pattern that we ought to emulate in our own lives," he says. "We can see echoes of this in Jerome's translation of Proverbs 8:30-31 that translates a key word in that passage as a form of playfulness, so that even divine wisdom dances playfully before God, that delight of the divine wisdom contains elements of playfulness."

Throughout history, gaming and play haven't just been about entertainment, adds Hickey. Games have been used to diffuse tension between tribes. In the

Middle Ages, poets and artists used play to give hope to peasants, whose lives were difficult.

"I approach games with this understanding that we—video gamers, role players, any sort of players—are scions, we're standing in this rich tradition of how God has used play, not just for entertainment but to create rich soil in society from which work—good

MELISSA LAARMAN (22)



Students in the Gaming Guild have access to high-powered PC setups for gaming.

work—and cultural activity springs,” he says.

Over 2.6 billion people play video games, according to recent data. There are also professional industries where gamers can make upwards of \$40 million as prize money at major events. Brands, companies, and influencers—even the government—are capitalizing on the popularity of video games in ways that would have been unheard of 10 years ago.

Unfortunately, the church has largely ignored gaming. When conducting his Ph.D. dissertation research, Hickey found two Christian books on gaming that were limited in scope, minimal Christian academic research, and very few gaming-related church resources or classes.

“If we say that every square inch is God’s, then we have to include digital pathways and virtual worlds as well,” he says.

Part of the reason Christians and the church have developed a negative response to gaming may be because video games are often seen as violent and addictive—and there is some truth to that. Ethan Haeder recalls a time in high school when there was an imbalance in his life between his desire to play video games and his interest in other activities. At one point, he spent upwards of 10 hours a day playing video games.

“My grades didn’t take a noticeable slip, but if you’d seen me day to day, you would have been able to tell that I wasn’t prioritizing my life very well,” he says. “I wasn’t healthy.”

Eventually Haeder tackled his video game addiction and reprioritized his life. Now, years later, he’s thriving at Dordt and hopes to become a middle school history teacher once he graduates.

“Parents might look at my experience and say, ‘It’s the video game’s fault that he spent so much time playing.’ But, for me, I had some things going on in my life that led me to spend more time gaming,” he says. “What I learned is that it’s important to pay attention to what games you play and why you’re playing them. Also, you should prioritize your life



Gaming Guild President Ethan Haeder helps to organize on-campus events such as a gaming-themed trivia night in Kuyper Apartments.

and not make video games 100 percent of your life.”

Haeder has also learned, since joining the Gaming Guild, that God finds joy in what his children find joy in.

“God likes to see his creation happy—when we’re enjoying ourselves or having fun and doing so in a way that honors

“If we say that every square inch is God’s, then we have to include digital pathways and virtual worlds as well.

— Dr. Brad Hickey, student success coach and e-sports director

God. When I play Minecraft with my fiancée or I call my dad to play Titan Quest, that’s something God smiles upon. Again, I shouldn’t play to the detriment of other aspects of my life; if I’m playing video games and failing my classes, that’s a different conversation. But if I can do that healthfully, then that’s something I should do. Joy is good to seek out, and gaming is one way to seek out joy.”

Given the popularity of video gaming and the lack of resources available to guide gamers, it’s not surprising to Hickey that there are addiction problems.

“We should help gamers see that part of play and the kingdom is freedom and delight,” says Hickey. “God delights in a well-played video game, where shalom is being created, as much a beautiful piece of pottery or a well-done piece of legislation.”

Still, everything is complicated, including how we approach violent games. Should Christians play violent video games? What’s the context around when and what games Christians play, and why? What is the desired outcome of playing a video game? Hickey mulls these questions over when considering gaming and faith.

“I’m a parent with two gamers myself. I studied this for 10 years, and I still struggle with how to approach video games. That’s why I’m trying to get more Christians to talk about this—so we can think more intentionally about faith and gaming,” he says.

And then there are roleplaying games like Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), which have been criticized because players take on roles of dubious characters in a fictional setting. Especially during the 1980s, the church viewed D&D as satanic; that perception was an oversimplification, though, because D&D relies on the narrative that the Dungeon Master—the game’s lead storyteller and referee—creates.

Isaac “Nemo” Rohne grew up voraciously reading fantasy fiction like J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* series and *The Silmarillion*. He also has a love for D&D, and he’s found a way to combine those two interests.

“I’ve been told by people, ‘D&D is satanism!’ And I tell them, ‘No, it’s telling a story! I get to

build a character and navigate a story.’ Now, you can be human and decide to do bad things with the story, but that’s your prerogative. As Christians, we can approach roleplaying games from a different perspective. With roleplaying games, you could be Tolkien for a while. You get to create worlds using storytelling. Why wouldn’t I want to do that? It’s amazing.”

Rohne says the actual roleplaying game one plays is created by a player. For example, he built a script based entirely on Norse culture. It was interesting to explore different legends and history, and he found it to be an educational experience.

"It's almost like reading a novel or getting to know someone," he says. "It requires attention and empathy."

GAMING AS CHRISTIANS

Should Christians game?

"We are called to engage in every aspect of culture and bring Christ to it—as Kuyper says, 'every square inch,'" says Winslow. "Games are becoming more prevalent, especially in younger generations, and so it is important that parents know how to talk to their kids about games from a Christian perspective, and that the church knows how to address problems that may come up because of gaming."

Such a conviction seems to be supported by the fact that video game tournaments today can draw more viewers than the Super Bowl.

"There's going to be this cultural moment regarding video games, and if Christians aren't speaking into that moment, it's a missed opportunity," says Taylor.

In part because of its popularity, gaming provides an opportunity to witness to nonbelievers, adds Winslow.

"Games are a great opportunity for Christians to reach out to non-Christians, through sharing a time of community together or even creating games that serve others through education or healing."

Shippy thinks that Christians should be involved in video game production, particularly to address the violence that can be found in some games.

"So often the video game industry gets shunned by Christians because of the violent games that are being produced," he says. "This occurred with the film industry as well. Violence and other problems are not inherent in gaming itself, but in the fallen state of humanity and in the humans developing the games. Although involvement will not make all problems go away, Christians should be in those 'trouble' industries

if possible. Change does not start with avoidance, but with action."

Video games offer an exciting opportunity for Christians who enjoy playing, making, or using video games to explore God's world and to glorify him through thoughtful and creative use

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— Robert Taylor, VP for student success

of games, gaming imagery, and more, Hickey believes. And, at this point, the gaming industry and the development of gaming culture has pressed forward largely without Christian influences.

"Many gamers have never heard the Gospel proclaimed in their digital

languages. They have never met Christian programmers, online streamers, or players who have openly been transformed by Christ's power and who can share their faith in winsome and appropriate ways," says Hickey. "It's as if we have purposefully turned our eyes away from a vast mission field—a mission field that is just as complicated, beautiful, and hungry for tangible expressions of the Gospel as any other. If we fail in this, we will lose many of the younger generations for whom video games are an essential and meaningful part of their lives."

Hickey hopes the church and other Christian institutions will begin to prioritize efforts to educate and equip Christians who feel called to gaming-spaces or those such as parents and pastors who may raise or minister to gamers. And he hopes to see increased academic attention related to gaming and faith—whether through books, podcasts, theological classes on gaming, or other media.

SARAH MOSS ('10)



The Gaming Guild has an impressive collection of board games available to club members.

MELISSA LAARMAN ('22)