Philosophy of Religion and Art

Philosophy of Religion and Art

Edited by

Gregory E. Trickett and John R. Gilhooly

To Ben and Meg.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

What, exactly, are we doing when we consider the philosophy of religion and art? How do these concepts relate to one another, and what happens when we put them into dialogue with each other? To help us have a full grasp of the project at hand, and not merely a superficial idea of it, let us make a short excursion into the etymology of these three words.

The word 'philosophy' comes to us from ancient Greek; its etymological history is relatively straightforward – even if the subject is not. Its components *philo* and *sophia* give us the root meaning "the love of wisdom."

'Religion' comes from the Latin *religionem*, referring to reverence and worship of the gods, with its deeper source in the word *religāre*: to bind up, to tie something together. Religion can thus, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, be "taken as 'that which ties believers to God.'"[1]

'Art' has barely changed its shape over the centuries, coming from Latin *ars*, and before that, from the Indo-European base **ar-*. Yet this short word carries the weight of many levels of meaning. We think of 'art' today as primarily meaning creative art, and usually visual in form, but the Oxford English Dictionary observes that "Although this is the most usual modern sense of *art* when used without any qualification, it has not been found in English dictionaries until the 19th century."[2] The older and more extensive use of the word 'art' is to mean "skill," tracing in turn back to meanings of "craftsmanship" and "knowledge."

We might then gather up these threads and say that in this volume, the contributors are aiming to practice the love of wisdom, by exploring how the practice of our faith binds us closer to God, and tracing the ways in which our knowledge finds expression in artistry, the crafting of things. This 'crafting' is theologically and philosophically significant. As J.R.R. Tolkien says in his seminal essay "On Fairy-stories," "we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker."[3] He was referring specifically to the

---

[1]"Religion, n.," etymology. *Oxford English Dictionary*, oed.com.
[2]"Art, n.," definition 8a. *Oxford English Dictionary*, oed.com.
[3]J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London: HarperCollins, 2014), 66.

making of fantasy literature, but the observation is true on a larger scale as well. To *make* is a fundamentally and profoundly human act. The things that humans make include creative expressions like stories, paintings, music, films, and games, but also everything from architecture, gardening, carpentry, and cookery, to . . . philosophy. Recognizing that philosophers, just as much as writers and artists, are engaged in sub-creation, in making things in the image of our Maker, can help us engage in a mutually enriching collaboration among disciplines.

One of the greatest strengths of the imaginative arts is the availability of narrative and imagery to convey meaning. As I have written at some length elsewhere,[4] one of the fundamental problems of Christian apologetics (and catechesis, and discipleship) in the modern era is the *meaning gap*: when we try to communicate about the faith, we find that many key concepts are essentially a blank to our interlocutors, or are understood in shallow or distorted forms. The same problem exists for philosophers. What does it mean to talk about the soul, or the good life, or virtue and vice, or suffering and redemption, or even truth, goodness, or beauty, when these words have little or no substance attached to them? Literature and the arts – by which I mean a very broad spectrum of forms, including relatively recent forms such as graphic novels and video games – have the potential to draw people into an experience that offers something different from a propositional statement. The imaginative approach can help draw in someone who would otherwise never seriously consider doctrine or philosophy, and it can 'incarnate' abstract ideas so that a person can more deeply and fully engage with them. When imaginative expression provides meaning for a philosophical concept, that concept becomes significant: it then becomes worthwhile to ask the question "Is it true?"

Conversely, the thoughtful and sustained exploration of ideas and their implications, undertaken under the aegis of philosophy, helps to ensure that these imaginative expressions are grounded in truth. The goal of 'leading with beauty' is not simply to engage in aesthetic appreciation, but rather, as Bishop Robert Barron points out, is to enter into a movement "from the beautiful to the good to the true."[5] This is not to say that art must be explicitly didactic. Far from it. Rather, it is to suggest that good art and good philosophy are both in dialogue with reality – as it is, and as it could

---

[4]*Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith* (Emmaus Road, 2017).
[5]Robert Barron, "Evangelizing the Nones," in *Renewing Our Hope: Essays for the New Evangelization* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press: 2020), 24

or should be – and therefore both are ultimately concerned with beauty, goodness, and truth.

Propositional statements about doctrine or philosophy by themselves will do little or nothing if people do not find them meaningful, and if they are not embodied in some way, in life or art. But equally, imaginative approaches need the bones and ligaments of specific ideas, doctrines, and philosophical claims, if they are to help people move toward the truth. By itself, an experience is simply an experience. To make sense of it, we must have an interpretive frame to understand the experience – what it means, and how it relates to or conflicts with what we believe. The lively interplay of imagination and reason, art and philosophy, helps to provide material and scaffolding for the building-up of ideas.

But as we were reminded by our earlier etymological exploration, we also have reason to be cautious. The OED points out that one thread of meaning for the word 'art' is "deceit," "guile," "artifice." The making of things is a reflection of the *imago Dei* in human beings – but the ability to make things that are false, deceitful, even treacherous or toxic, is a reflection of the damage done to human nature by the Fall. Anything can become an idol – the creations of the intellect as much as the inventions of the imagination. As Tolkien notes:

> Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true? Men have conceived not only of elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors' own evil. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice.[6]

An intellect grounded in truth helps to guard against the excesses of the imagination, and a healthy and well-nourished imagination helps to guard the intellect from turning inward and becoming sterile, losing its connection to what is good.

This winding etymological path takes us to the heart of the endeavor in this volume. If we wish rightly to practice philosophy – *philo sophia*, the love of wisdom – then we should have our eyes open to the various ways and means by which wisdom can be discerned, and we should seek to love that toward which wisdom points. It is a fundamentally *integrated* endeavor, not limited to the intellect but engaging our emotions, our wills, and our actions.

---

[6]Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, 66-67.

Such an endeavor is by no means easy, for dis-integration is much more characteristic of our modern era. Reason and imagination are often viewed as incommensurable; philosophy is assumed to be the territory of the cold intellect, while art is treated as a pleasant extra at best, and religion is assumed to be merely one's personal preference. It is hard work to push back against these false assumptions, to reclaim a more integrated view of the human person, in which reason and imagination are both necessary human faculties, and to reclaim an understanding of religion as fundamentally being about truth. Hard work, yes, but necessary. We need to recover a more integrated view for the sake of the discipline of philosophy – and also because in doing so, we are also contributing to a more coherent, healthy, humane experience of life.

—Holly Ordway

INTRODUCTION:
PHILOSOPHY, ART, AND COVID

From television and movies to modern and classical galleries, art has had a definitive influence on culture. Likewise, religion has had its influence on art, from Dante's *Inferno* to Beethoven's *Fifth* and from *Jesus Christ Superstar* to Kevin Smith's *Dogma*. In our first year, with help from an SCP small department grant, we were able to host the first Weatherford College philosophy of religion conference on the theme "Open-mindedness in Philosophy of Religion." In the Spring of 2019, in its sesquicentennial celebration, and as a legacy of the first year's grant, Weatherford College was pleased to host a second annual philosophy of religion conference on the theme "Philosophy of Religion and Art." The conference was a resounding success. We had twenty-four presenters from all over the nation and over fifty enthusiastic attendees. This volume offers a selection of presentations from the conference as well as works in keeping with the conference theme and a preface by our esteemed plenary speaker.

As with the first conference, my co-editor, John R. Gilhooly, and I are excited to publish the proceedings of the event. While we prepared to put together this volume, we also made plans to organize the third annual conference in the Spring of 2020 on the theme "Philosophy of Religion and Science." Future conference themes were also penciled into our plans.[1] Things were going smoothly. We had a great line-up of papers for the 2020 conference and we were excited at the prospect of continuing with conference proceedings publications. Then 2020 actually happened. In a year that has become little more than a punchline, our modest (though well attended and received) conference was not spared. Schools shutdown their campuses and moved online in mid-March, just a couple of weeks before the conference was to be held. Of course, WC responsibly did the same and events like our Philosophy of Religion conference were casualties of the circumstances around a growing pandemic and what would turn into a year-long (plus) nightmare for the world. In the midst of these disappointments, to honor the hard work of our presenters who were ready to present their

---

[1] The plan was to host a Philosophy of Religion and Humor in 2021 and Philosophy of Religion and Politics in 2022, just in time for mid-term elections. As I write this, we are re-evaluating those plans.

research at our conference, we held and online workshop. But that was the extent of the third annual Philosophy of Religion conference. I'm not sure what the future holds for the WC philosophy of religion conference. I have no doubt that the WC administration will be supportive of starting up the conference again once attending conferences becomes a viable option. In the meantime, we have to make due with online events and gatherings. For our part, while I support and encourage online conference events, I have made the difficult decision to postpone the 2021 conference until an in-person event can be held. We hope and pray that will be soon. We also hope that at that time we will be able to resume the publication of the conference proceedings. In the meantime, we are pleased to be able to offer the proceedings of the Philosophy of Religion and Art Conference.

In addition to the pandemic, 2020 continued to live up to its reputation when, in early November, one of the WC Philosophy of Religion conference's most avid supporters and one of our personally close and dear friends, Ben Arbour, perished in a car accident along with his wife, Meg, on their way home from a date. Though Ben did not contribute to the present volume, he was a presenter (to both the first and second conference), and was a rich source of advice and encouragement. Ben and Meg leave behind four children ages 10-16. It is to Ben and his wife, Meg, that we dedicate this volume.

My thanks to the Weatherford College administration for recognizing the potential an academic event such as this holds for our community of educators and students, and agreeing to fully fund this year's conference. I also appreciate the support and encouragement of the greater Weatherford College community including her faculty, staff, and students. Of particular note are Mike Endy, Vice President of Instruction and Student Services; our facilities manager, Loretta Huddleston; administrative assistants, Dana Orban, Debbie Alexander, and Susie Brooks; my colleagues in the Humanities Department and in my office bay, especially Scott Tarnowieckyi; Chelsea Cochran from the graphics department, and all of the other support staff from the Business office to Public Relations to Graphic Design . . . you all have my deepest, heartfelt thanks. My hope with this conference, and future conferences, remains the same as it was the previous year; to be able to host a respectable conference on a timely topic that would showcase the often-overlooked role of academics at a two-year institution. Once again, Weatherford College has been given the opportunity to show that not only are such academic endeavors possible at an institution such as ours, but also that they can provide the means for a community college to add its diverse voice to a conversation taking place in the broader academic community. I hope you enjoy this volume and participating in that conversation.

—Gregory E. Trickett

SECTION 1:

TEXT AND CULTURE

CHAPTER 1

VIDEO GAMES AS SERIOUS CULTURAL TEXTS: *THAT DRAGON, CANCER* AS A CASE STUDY

CHED SPELLMAN

Can you beat death? If so, what would it take? If not, what could possibly console you in this defeat? In the face of terminal illness, how would you respond and what might bring you hope or despair in these moments? Works of art have the ability to prompt dialogue and reflection about this type of experience and these forms of response. It might be surprising, then, if a video game was capable of engaging these themes with care and creativity. Rather than being only an avenue of "escape," some video games can also force a player to "enter into" consideration of emotional and reflective responses to weighty matters. Though often considered juvenile, trivial, or violent, certain video games harness their medium in an artful way. In this essay, my basic contention is that certain video games are serious cultural texts that merit theological reflection. To illustrate this basic claim, I will consider the form and message of the video game *That Dragon, Cancer* on its own terms and in light of its theological content.

§1. Video Games as Serious Cultural Texts

What is a Cultural Text?

A cultural text is any physical or conceptual object in a culture that communicates meaning and is capable of analysis. Literary texts of course fit this description, but the concept of a cultural text envisions works in other mediums with the basic characterizations of a literary work, namely, coherence as an entity and the ability to consider its meaning and message. For example, a film, song, painting, or cultural practice might be explored as a distinct network of signs that generate meaningful effects in particular

situations. A cultural text in this sense is self-contained (it actually communicates a message) but is also embedded in the social and relational aspects of the culture in which it is produced and received.

Along these lines, Kevin Vanhoozer argues that a cultural text is "a *work* of meaning because someone or some group has produced it," and also "a *world* of meaning because its work is precisely to provide form and shape to our world." Accordingly, cultural texts are "communicative acts that achieve diverse aims through a variety of means" and are a form of "cultural discourse."[1] The cultural artifacts in view here, then, are those that are intended by a person or group to communicate some sort of message (e.g., a story or theme) and function in a discernible way (e.g., as education or entertainment) for an envisioned audience.[2]

What is a Video Game?

The study of video games, the stories they tell, and the experiences they invoke shares a family resemblance to the study of movies, television, and other similar cultural texts.[3] However, there are also genuinely unique

---

[1]See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, et al (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 44. Moreover, Vanhoozer directly defines a cultural text as "any human work that, precisely because it is something done purposefully and not by reflex, bears meaning and calls for interpretation" (248).

[2]This understanding of cultural texts as communicative events does not deny the range of effects produced by different individuals who receive a given cultural artifact (sign systems with unlimited possibilities of meaning) but is simply specifying the type of cultural text in view here. For a discussion of cultural texts in relation to unlimited meaning potentials (highlighting reader-oriented forms of intertextuality) and the broader field of semiotics, see Leonard Orr, "Intertextuality and the Cultural Text in Recent Semiotics," *College English* 48.8 (Dec 1986): 811-23; Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3-87; and Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader, *The World is a Text: Writing about Visual and Popular Culture* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2018), 9-32. Silverman and Radner assert along these lines "that texts, including those that are non-traditional, such as public spaces, songs, and advertisements, have meaning that can be uncovered through the exploration of their elements" (12).

[3]For an introduction to the academic study of videogames, see Tom Bissell, *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter* (New York: Random House, 2010); Simon Egenfeldt-Nielson, et al, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 229-54; and Ian Bogost, *How To Do Things With Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 1-17. While the study (and playing!) of videogames was once seen as a trivial pursuit (due in large

aspects of games in general and video games in particular that must be taken into account. The nature of player involvement and participation is at the center of these considerations. In fact, the primary question in whether or not a video game is capable of serious theological analysis is, *What* is a video game?

Perhaps surprisingly to some, there is a longstanding debate about the answer to this question. This definitional discussion aims to identify the characteristic feature of a video game: story or play? How does a game's narrative flow relate to its gameplay mechanics?[4] This particular question helps challenge the easy identification and characterization of video games. The fact that *Tetris* (featuring drop-down puzzles), *Call of Duty* (featuring first person shooting), and *The Last of Us* (featuring extended storytelling) each qualify as a video game shows both the complexity of the issue and also the basic coherence of the concept (these examples are diverse but are nevertheless widely received as "games"). The video games in view in this essay are those that contain a robust narrative and also require significant player input.[5] These two features are at the core of the contention here that certain video games are significant cultural texts worthy of general and theological analysis.

In this type of game, the quality of narrative, depth of subject matter, and engaging nature of gameplay require extended reflection in order to comprehend and assess. Because of this quality and depth, moreover, the discipline of theology also offers several resources that can assist in the

---

part to the perception that videogames are inherently childish), many scholars now recognize the staying power of the medium. As Bogost comments, "Videogames are not a subcultural form meant for adolescents but just another medium woven into everyday life" (7).

[4]In games studies, this distinction is between narratology (the nature of the story) and ludology (the nature of the gameplay). Though sometimes seen as a "debate," most designers and theorists note the complex interrelationship of narratology and ludology in most videogames (while emphasizing one or the other in specific instances). For an overview of this discussion, see Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Espen Aarseth, "A Narrative Theory of Games," *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (May 2012): 129-33.

[5]Cf. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 71-83. They define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (81). In *Games & God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), Kevin Schut unpacks this definition and reflects on the unique way that video games "communicate" meaning (see 17-26).

analysis and reception of these games. As Matthew Millsap argues, "Video games are a narrative medium deserving of theological engagement." He explains, "Because video games have progressed from electronic playthings to cultural texts capable of vibrant storytelling, they should be thoroughly examined and critiqued theologically, thus creating a beneficial dialogue between theology and video games on par with what already exists between theology and other artistic, narrative media such as literature and film."[6] Moreover, in cases where theological content is implicitly or explicitly found in the game itself, this mode of analysis is actually required in order to reflect on the game's basic message.

Why so Serious?

What makes a cultural text or a video game "serious" in some way or another? One way of studying video games is to apply developed tools of analysis to a game that is trivial or not intended to convey a coherent message (e.g., *Flappy Bird* or *Solitaire*). However, in the case of more sophisticated video games that include narrative as a central component of the game and are designed to directly engage the player with puzzles to solve but also meaning to consider, a different mode of analysis is possible. Here serious tools of analysis are utilized because the game itself is serious.

Along these lines, "serious" here does not necessarily mean somber in tone but rather substantial and capable of sustained and careful analysis. With this definition, a serious game would not be limited to ones that have solely educational ends (this is how the label "serious games" is often understood in games studies).[7] A game that sought to entertain or tell

---

[6]See Matthew C. Millsap, *Playing with God: A Theoludological Framework for Dialogue with Video Games* (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 5. He also clarifies: "By 'dialogue,' I mean a conversation between theology and video games which allows for input from both sides, yet still allows for theological primacy" (5n12). See also Millsap's extended argument for viewing video games as "cultural texts" alongside artistic works such as film and literature (58-89). Similarly, note Schut's discussion of these issues in *Games & God*, 1-49; and Frank G. Bosman, *Gaming and the Divine: A New Systematic Theology of Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2019), 1-56.

[7]On this type of "serious game," see Fedwa Laamarti, et al, "An Overview of Serious Games," *International Journal of Computer Games Technology* (2014): 1-15; and Kathy Sanford and Lisa J. Starr, "Serious Games: Video Games for Good?" *E-Learning and Digital Media* 12.1 (2015): 90-106. There is also a well-established expansion of the category "serious games" to include video games not explicitly designed for therapeutic reasons. See Michelle Colder Carras, et al, "Commercial

a story as an end in itself would also qualify for this characterization and be capable of this level of interaction. Serious study of games like this would seek to make the tools of analysis match the object of study. As mentioned above, the nature of the video games under consideration here include a substantial narrative and integral player involvement. The serious study of a serious video game, then, would home in on these elements.

While this preliminary discussion might be expanded in several directions, these working definitions show some of the ways that certain video games can be rightly understood as serious cultural texts that are worth examining from a variety of angles

§2. Slaying that dragon, cancer – playing *That Dragon, Cancer*

As mentioned above, my contention is that the video game *That Dragon*, *Cancer* is a serious cultural text and merits general and theological reflection. In what follows, I consider the form and message of the game itself and then reflect on this message from a theological perspective. The game meets the qualifications for a serious cultural text and the theological reflection prompted by a close reading of the game demonstrates this basic thesis.

That Dragon, Cancer is a first-person, point-and-click interactive video game that follows the story of a young child's diagnosis and death from cancer.[8] In the game, the approach of a single character's death and its immediacy within the context of a family is what prompts the internal contemplation for the characters in the story and also the player as the game progresses. Most of the gameplay includes the dialogue and internal thought processes of the father and mother of Joel, their young son who is diagnosed with cancer at the beginning of the game. The mother and father are Christians, and their in-game discussions consistently examine the relationship between their faith in a good God and the horror of childhood cancer.

Adding another layer of complexity, the game is also autobiographical. Ryan and Amy Green are the basis for the father and mother in the game. Together with a small team of designers, the Greens developed this game in the midst of their real-life journey with their son Joel Green's cancer diagnosis as a one-year old and eventual death as a five-year-old.[9] Most of

Video Games as Therapy: A New Research Agenda to Unlock the Potential of a Global Pastime," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 8 (January 2018): 1-7.

[8]*That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016).

[9]For an introduction to the Green family and an account of the development process, see *Thank You for Playing*, directed by David Osit and Malika Zouhali-Worrall

the voices and dialogue you hear in the game were recorded by members of the Green family.

In terms of reception, for an independently produced work, the game has been widely played and favorably reviewed in both Christian and non-Christian contexts.[10] Obviously, this game's subject matter is emotionally charged and so understandably has impacted players.[11] However, the overtly Christian themes and its autobiographical features create a further dynamic to consider for those who choose to play. While there are many facets to explore with this game, I will focus on a few aspects that illustrate that the game is a serious cultural text worth contemplating: genre, point of view, imagery, and gameplay mechanics.

The Reflective Genre of First-Person Interactives

Serious cultural texts have the ability to communicate both complex meaning and engage a range of human emotions. One of the reasons

---

(FilmBuff, 2016). This documentary was produced and distributed as part of the game's launch.

[10]The awards the game has won include "Best Emotional Indie Game" (2016), "Most Innovative" at the Games for Change Awards (2016), "Games for Impact" at The Game Awards (2016), "Cultural Innovation Award" at SXSW Gaming Awards (2017), and "Game Innovation" at BAFTA (2017). The depth of the game's message and design has been noted from a variety of viewpoints. For example, see Chris Casberg, "'That Dragon, Cancer': A Video Game on Death, Grief, and Our Living Hope" (https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/that-dragon-cancer); Keith Stuart, "That Dragon, Cancer and the Weird Complexities of Grief," *The Guardian* (January 14, 2016); and John W. Auxier, "*That Dragon, Cancer* Goes to Seminary: Using a Serious Video Game in Pastoral Training," *Christian Education Journal* 15.1 (2018): 105-17.

[11]For example, the framing of many reviews of the game (from both Christian and non-Christian viewpoints) highlight this emotional response: Chris Suellentrop, "This Video Game Will Break Your Heart," *The New York Times* (February 5, 2016); Richard Clark, "Playing with Empathy: How Video Games with a Christian Twist are making their way into the Industry," *Christianity Today* 59.4 (May 2015): 62-63; and Tom Hoggin, "That Dragon, Cancer review: A remarkable piece of work that challenges everything I thought I knew about grief, hope and faith," *The Telegraph* (January 15, 2016). Further illustrating this function are the studies that suggest this game can be used to teach professionals in the medical field to consider the strategic importance of empathy. For example, see the research and argument to this effect in Andrew Chen, et al, "Teaching Empathy: The Implementation of a Video Game into a Psychiatry Clerkship Curriculum," *Academic Psychiatry* 42.3 (June 2018): 362-65; and Sean F. Timpane, "New Media: That Dragon, Cancer— An Interactive Video Game," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 20.3 (2017): 308.

That Dragon, Cancer is able to communicate its strong collection of themes and sub-themes is due to its genre. The game is a first-person interactive game, sometimes called a "walking simulator." There are various kinds of first-person interactives, and this game involves pointing and clicking on prompts that allow the player to progress through the story.

Part of what this type of game does is intentionally subvert the power fantasy that is at work in some other types of games. Consequently, this genre is uniquely suited to conveying coherent messages capable of genuine theological reflection. In large scale action games like the recent *Spiderman* (2018) or *God of War* (2018), first person shooters like *Call of Duty*, *Halo* or even *Fortnite*, the game is designed to enable the player to fly or be a God-like figure or conquer a field of fierce and challenging foes, constantly leveling up to higher levels of power, and gaining the feeling of being larger than life while playing. This is certainly not the only feature of these games, and titles like *Spiderman* (2018) and *God of War* (2018) combine action packed sequences with compelling narratives. However, the "power fantasy" is typically a component of both large-scale action/adventure games and first-person shooters.

First person interactives, by contrast, force the player to walk, to investigate mysteries, to find hidden objectives, to listen to voiced narration, and read text displayed in various places on the screen. In direct contrast to the *power* fantasy, the player in these games voluntarily chooses to imagine themselves *weak*, slow, even vulnerable to outside forces. The end game in this genre is often *discovery* rather than *domination*; *exploration* rather than *exploitation*. To "win," in other words, is often *to wander* and then *to wonder*.

There are several instances in *That Dragon, Cancer* where this feature of the genre serves an important purpose. Just before one of the most important sequences in the story (where the family receives Joel's diagnosis), the player must walk through the halls of the hospital. On the walls and strung across the ceiling are cards from the families of patients at varying stages of treatment. The player can choose to walk directly to the door at the end of the hall (which transitions to the next part of the game) or read some or all of the cards. Reading all of the cards and looking at all of the artwork in this section requires a time commitment and affects the flow of the game. Similarly, in the next major section of the game, the player can move from point to point on a body of water where the mother is in a boat and the father is sinking below. Bottles with messages in them are strewn across certain areas on the lake. A series of these move the story along but others are technically optional. The guided path around the lake, though, encourages the player to examine each of these notes containing snippets of letters, responses, or reflections of people dealing with terminal illnesses.

Some of *That Dragon Cancer*'s main themes are death, grief, memory, and the role of suffering in relation to the meaning of life and the nature of Christian faith.[12] The intensity of these themes, the density of the gameplay itself, and the relatively short length of the game has the dynamic feature of both forcing you to gradually and progressively explore each of these themes but also abruptly conclude the exploration. This jolting dynamic, too, is part of the design of the genre. The story concludes in a way that naturally invites further reflection. Does the player accept the way the game has both surfaced and juxtaposed its themes?

If games are a communicative medium, this genre has a potential impact that far outweighs its relative size or length (which is generally short). The typical playtime of *That Dragon, Cancer* is around two hours. In this brief time-span, a host of theological questions are prompted and addressed in the context of this single family's experience. The required participation by the player and the optional elements of exploration are also designed to encourage players to identify with the perspectives being presented by the various bits of dialogue and reflection embedded in the course of the game. This feature of the game's genre enables and enhances the centerpiece of the story and the gameplay: the multi-layered point of view.

The Skillful Use of Perspective Shifts

One of the unique features of *That Dragon, Cancer* is the way the game utilizes shifts in the player's perspective at strategic points in the game's story. The player is forced to consider the same event and the same scenario from multiple viewpoints. For example, the game opens in a park where the family is feeding ducks pieces of bread in a small pond. At first, the player controls the duck who must fetch the pieces of bread thrown in by the family. In the next sequence, you return to this scene but from the perspective of the father sitting on the bench watching his sons play. From both of these vantage points, you overhear dialogue that orients you to the situation the family is facing and also the way the game will center on the

---

[12]On the game's treatment of death as an embodied theme, see Schott Gareth, "That Dragon, Cancer: Contemplating Life and Death in a Medium that has Frequently Trivialized Both," *Proceedings of the 2017 DIGRA International Conference* 14.1 (2017): 1-10. For a discussion of these themes in the games *What Remains of Edith Finch* and *That Dragon, Cancer* in dialogue with the biblical genre of lament, see Ched Spellman, "What Remains of Our Lament? Exploring the Relationship between Death, Memory, and Grief in the Christian Life and in Recent Cultural Texts," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 69.1 (Fall 2019): 33-55.

response and reflection of the mother and father as they grapple with this tragedy.

During this opening scene in the park, for instance, the player hears the father and mother in the background talking about whether or not the other children in the family understand what is going on with Joel and how they will respond to his illness. The father also reflects to himself as he plays with Joel, "What am I to him?" After recounting the limited amount of words that his son knows, the father asks, "What is pain without words for it? What is hope without words for it?" These bits of overheard dialogue prepare the player for the heaviness and reflectiveness of the scenes that follow.

Drowning in a Diagnosis

The showcase example of this technique in the game is when the family receives Joel's final diagnosis ("I'm Sorry Guys, It's Not Good"). The setting for this scene is a small room and the diagnosis conversation can be repeated several times from different vantage points: the perspective of the child himself, and then from each of the doctors, then from the father, and then from the mother. Beginning as Joel in the waiting room, you must choose an animal from a See 'n Say style toy he is holding. At the top of the toy, there is a horizon that a sun traverses. With each pull of the lever, the sun progresses from dusk to dawn. Interacting with this toy teaches you as a player the technique that will be required for the multi-perspectival conversation that follows.

When the conversation begins after the doctors arrive in the room, the toy replaces the images of the animals with pictures of the people in the room (two doctors, the father, and the mother). You now choose a person, pull the lever, and hear the same conversation from a new person's vantage point.

The doctor speaks to the family but the player also hears his internal monologue. He begins the conversation by saying, "I'm sorry guys, it's not good." When the mom asks how long Joel has to live, the first doctor thinks, "Prediction time again. No matter what I say, they'll wish it was longer. But sometimes longer is worse."[13] He later explains that "any recurrence means that the chemotherapy has failed. This is a tragedy." The second doctor adds, "We're very good at end of life care. We're very good at managing the pain and masking symptoms at the end of life." Later in the

---

[13]He also notes to himself that "parents always ask, 'how big?' Wrong question. They should ask where it is, location is everything. Slow death or quick? Symptoms and losses all come down to where."

conversation she reflects, "There it is. They get it now. Sometimes I wish we could just leave them waiting a few more minutes. Because once they get this news, their life never goes back to how it was before. Those were their last normal minutes . . . and they didn't even know it."[14]

The father processes the nature of his questions in this moment. He comments, "If I ask enough questions . . . maybe I could get my brains around this cancer . . . and I can choke it to death."[15] After reflecting on how science is straightforward but can do nothing in this moment, he thinks, "but now all we have is a miracle, and miracles are . . . fickle. They don't always come and we don't always know why. What if Joel's miracle doesn't come?" His final thoughts are that if this were a movie, "I'd be kicking things and throwing chairs through the windows. Amy would be sobbing, back against the wall, slowly falling to the ground." He then thinks, "I should be yelling. Why am I not yelling?"

When the doctor begins to speak, the mother thinks, "Oh wow, this is *that* conversation. I can't imagine we're having that conversation." After hearing the prognosis time frame, the mother says to herself, "Four months? What is that, February?" She further reflects, "and ugh . . . we still haven't told anyone I'm pregnant. Too scared they'd think it was irresponsible. And now this? They'll think it's a replacement baby." Her last desperate words are, "Oh God, I do not want a replacement baby. If that was your plan, I am *not* onboard . . . Oh God, Joel has to live or I will not love this baby."

The conversation draws to a close when the doctor explains that radiation or further treatments will not help, that they will make Joel as comfortable as possible, and the family will need to come in the following week for an appointment. He says, "We're so sorry." At this point, the water that began to fill the room is up to their necks and the sounds of a storm begin to overtake the voices in the conversation.

Whoever the player has chosen last finishes his or her thoughts and then the perspective shifts to Joel, who is in a small boat navigating the storm. The adults in the room appear as giants almost submerged in the

---

[14]She also comments on the other doctor ("I'm glad he's so good at this. He takes the losses so personally") and further reflects on Joel's condition ("Joel's looking good. He's been making progress. His weight is up, but it's just hard to believe that we only made it halfway through chemotherapy. It was rough at first but I really started to think that he was gonna make it").

[15]The father's mind also drifts to the inexplicable nature of Joel's disease. When the doctor speaks, the father thinks, "I'll nod my head. Whenever I ask a science-y question, I nod my head. Digesting every Latin word, hoping it will stick to my ribs, become part of me . . . I love asking good questions. It impresses them. They'll be impressed with the way we handle all this; such good thoughtful parents that ask such good questions."

stormy sea as the thunder is garbled with distant snippets of the previous dialogue. The clear symbolism is that the family is beginning to drown in the wake of this diagnosis. The water imagery never goes away throughout the rest of the game. In this scene, the same event is quickly seen and heard from five different perspectives. Even in this single moment, the doctors, the mother, and the father articulate a range of responses to this tragic news. This technique makes this scene the most complex and densely structured moment in the game. The multi-layered conversation along with the water imagery create a dynamic that is explored throughout the duration of the narrative.

Drifting Together and Apart

Gripping moments like this in the game's storyline provide a framework within which the player hears and must consider multiple ways of understanding the way Christian hope relates to an acknowledgement of human suffering. As Joel's death approaches, you experience life events of the father and mother but also hear their thoughts and listen to their explanations and their exasperated frustrations. They speak to one another, and they also speak to God. You see flashes of the mother floating in a boat on the surface of the water (she believes it is God's will that Joel will be healed). You also see flashes of the father sinking deep beneath the surface of the water (he does not believe Joel will be healed). The game progresses in creative ways and there is emotional development for both the mother and the father.

In a pivotal scene, the father surfaces next to the boat the mother and Joel are floating in ("Drowning"). The mother beckons him to get into the boat with her. He refuses, not able to accept or entertain the notion that good will come from this situation. She responds, "You have to, you'll drown." "We're already drowning," the father replies, "How can you sit there like that?" When she says, "Despair doesn't help anything," he continues, "Neither does false hope." The striking image of the father treading water beside the mother and the boat stands in for their relational tension and differing emotional perspectives. She screams, "How can you say 'false hope,' You're DROWNING!" He again counters, "Well you're missing your oars, and you don't even know where you're going . . . and yet you're so sure you're going to get there." At this point, the mother insists, "There's nothing deep about drowning! Just get in the boat!" This provokes the father to exclaim, "You have to let me feel this . . . someone has to!" She then says, "That's not fair, I love him as much as you do. I just really

believe he's going to be okay." With these words, the father takes a breath and sinks below the surface again.

The game centers on this juxtaposition of the father and mother's perspectives and responses within their family unit. One note from the mother speaks about praying for small miracles even as they see Joel's condition worsen. Her perspective is not naïve about the reality they are facing, but she strains to articulate a clear expectation that healing will come. After one of these notes, the scene shifts to the father deep under the water as he grapples with the mother's sometimes "maddening expectation." He recounts a comment she made before Joel's first surgery: "I seriously feel like a kid on Christmas Eve." He reflects, "I'm pleading for God to spare his life and I'm tempted to despair because self-reflection leads me to conclude that I shouldn't expect much of anything . . . and yet my wife is expecting a surprise party from the Lord, replete with presents and supernatural miracles." He sighs, "I envy her." The mother and father must endure the slow loss of their son but also the relational tension that flows from differing ways of relating their suffering to their faith.

Alone Among a Sea of Voices

This development in the game exemplifies another reality that attends enduring long journeys with cancer: they are not the only ones going through a trial such as this. Just as the father and mother articulate their care for their son and their response to suffering in different ways, so too do the other people around them. Two moments in the game in particular illustrate this feature. Before Joel's diagnosis, the player can read cards around the hospital (as noted above). Some of these notes include general encouragement and sentimental expressions ("You're stronger than you know. Love will keep you strong"). Others articulate the same type of faith that the Greens have ("Have faith like children, and love like Christ"). Several of the notes also express a range of human emotions ("For Scott and the worlds we never built"). This slow walk with these reflective prompts prepares the player for the multi-layered diagnosis conversation.

Additionally, as the mother floats on the surface of the water, there are messages in bottles that float in clusters around the lake. There are journal entries from the mother expressing her hope that Joel will be cured and her certainty in God's purposes. Alongside these entries are notes that express compatible perspectives and also differing views. For example, one entry includes a poem about the purpose of life and the beauty of persevering in suffering. Another series of notes expresses anger, frustration, and disgust at the death of a family member.

These features of the game provide a dynamic that prompts players not only to respond to the mother and father's voices but also to this spectrum of responses. This reflects the reality of real-life struggles but also serves an important narratological function. The fullness of this perspectival spectrum is made possible by the genre (first-person interactive), the subject matter (an approaching death), and also by the rhythm of the game (shifting from the mother to the father's vantage point). This feature is the emotional and artistic heartbeat of *That Dragon*, *Cancer* and perhaps its most meaningful achievement.

The Atmosphere of Poetic Imagery

Another way the game communicates its message and conveys these perspectives is through its imagery and settings. For instance, the space of the hospital has low ceilings, horizontal lines, and muted tones. This is where the family descends into a hellish darkness. This setting contrasts directly with the final scenes in the chapel sanctuary. Here there are high ceilings, vertical lines, and vibrant colors. This is where the family lifts prayers toward heavenly light. The dynamic of the player's experience is generated by the actions being taken in these spaces.[16]

In this manner, the imagery of the game complements the features mentioned above about differing perspectives. The vibrant colors of the opening park scene includes an ominous black tree of thorns. This same color and design scheme are used to represent the cancer cells within Joel's body in other parts of the game. This technique allows the player to see and feel the disconnect that often exists in these situations. Just as the lush greenery of the forest is interrupted by the dead, thorny tree, so too playtime at the park is darkened by the immanent news about a treatment failure. As Timothy Haase notes, the "game's dazzling symbolic imagery" is a "combination of fantasy and menace."[17] Along these lines, Gavin Craig notes that the game is oriented around "the spaces in which we encounter the holy."[18] Accordingly, there is often "a tension between space and story in *That Dragon, Cancer* because there is a tension between the story the Greens want to be able to tell themselves and the experience they are forced to inhabit."[19]

---

[16]For these insights into the structural design of these spaces, see Gavin Craig, "Terrible Fascination | That Dragon, Cancer," *Heterotopias* (November 2017).

[17]See Timothy Haase, "That Dragon, Cancer and the Limits of Catharsis," *Eidolon* (June 2016).

[18]Craig, "Terrible Fascination."

[19]Craig, "Terrible Fascination."