

Gaming as an essential part of the Catechetical framework:

Addressing Gen-Z's needs

Cultural theorist Johan Huizinga argues that we are *Homo Ludens* – we are born to play. He describes play as “stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own.”¹ Character formation, and hence catechetical formation, happens in community, and thus, Huizinga argues that “the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual normal, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”² During gameplay, the gamer is invited to embrace the game’s world once she has crossed the membrane of the video-game. In this digital-space, she is met with dreams and fantasy, where she can escape the mundane while character formation happens. Hence, within the magic-circle, everything is, in some way, transformative.

The aim of this essay is to propose a prolegomenon towards a Catholic practice of digital-catechesis which values, and dare I say, centralises gaming as *the* preferred medium. I will be introducing Gen-Z’s fascination with gaming, basic my research on cultural-psychology and marketing trends. Then I will theologially engage with the idea that God is a playful God, and thus, we are invited into God-play, which proposes the conviction that gaming is essentially catechetical. I will conclude by proposing two areas where gaming can be transformed into *the* missional tool.

Gen-Z: Identity and Needs

I will be understanding Gen-Z as those born after 1997 as per APA³ and PEW.⁴ While Millennials would remember the introduction of high-speed internet, Gen-Zs were introduced to the game-controller from an early age. Gaming is an intrinsic part of this digital-generation

and hence, 58% gamed in the last month, with one-fifth of these playing over 20 hours a week.⁵

Whereas Millennials saw the need to compete in games, Gen-Zs see games as a way of socialising.⁶ According to the same research, sixty-eight% identified that “gaming is an important part of their identity.”⁷ It is important to highlight, that whereas for Millennials, gaming was a more low-class male domain, this changed with Gen-Z. Their gaming encompasses all genders and all social and economic classes. Mobile-gaming is also a staple.⁸

We may be tempted to interpret the apparent mobile immersion as being lonely.⁹ But, what at face value might be labelled as a lonely generation, it seems that socialisation has evolved.¹⁰ In fact, gamers feel closer to their friends than non-gamers.¹¹

By way of introducing this shift in socialising, let us visit the currently most played game which occupies twenty-five% of Gen-Z’s free time.¹² *Fortnite*’s way of presenting itself as a social-network rather than a game is one clear example of this social-evolution.¹³ It is perceived as helping the player feel part of a community, with a stunning forty-seven% difference between social-networks and *Fortnite* when asked about helping to forget real-life problems; 48% acting on feelings which cannot be acted upon in real-life; and a 28% difference in increase of self-confidence.¹⁴ These statistics witness the power of games to create a communitarian shared experience. As game theologian Alan Thomas postulates, “connection and isolation are inseparable”¹⁵ and as disciples we are called to reflect on this technology-mediated community-formation.

Thus, as a Church, what are we going to offer to a generation which prefers stimulating products over meaningful experiences? Gen-Zs are driven by influencers who are taking the role of the role-model. The world they know is digital, connected and only a swipe away. That does not mean that we are to shun the brick-and-mortar catechetical framework,

because Gen-Z still prefer physical locations over webstores.¹⁶ Thus, the crux of the issue lies in one question: is our catechetical framework perceived as ‘fun’, ‘friendly’ and ‘genuine’ by Gen-Zs? These three adjectives need to be at the foundation of our catechetical endeavours.

Deo Ludens

Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff speaks of the information age as becoming “the gaming age, and thus [...] gaming and its associated notions of play could become master metaphors for a range of human social relations.”¹⁷ Hence, we can speak of witnessing a fun revolution, which when paired with Berger’s “argument from play”¹⁸ becomes ‘sacred time’:

One aspect of play [...] is... that play sets up a separate universe of discourse, with its own rules, which suspends, ‘for the duration’, the rules and general assumptions of the ‘serious’ world. [...] In playing, one is on a different time [...] Joyful play appears to suspend, or bracket, the reality of our ‘living towards death’¹⁹

In other words, gaming can be considered as transcendental, and is a form of a spiritual experience. Ludology-theologian Hugo Rahner develops this idea and speaks of fun-playing as evoking religious symbolism where God becomes a player and the church the community of play.²⁰ His ‘theology of play’ is rooted in participation of God’s freedom and God’s own playing *ad intra* as Gregory Nazianzen muses, “For the Logos on high plays, stirring the whole cosmos back and forth, as he wills, into shapes of every kind.”²¹

Hence, theologian David Miller notes that a post-lapsarian understanding of labour is void of play, but pre-Fall, labour, was as playful as games are.²² In the ‘serious business’²³ of playing, *Homo Ludens* retrieves the gaiety,²⁴ sacramentalise the ‘Artisan Father,’²⁵ and journeys towards the beatific vision.²⁶

Bishop Moulins-Beaufort notes that today, our “social relations are governed mainly by the search for pleasure,”²⁷ and thus notes that we have “a duty to evangelise this new world.”²⁸ Hence, a theology of fun opposes hedonistic ideas which are self-centred but opens

us to the other. Considering, we are created playful,²⁹ and the enjoyment of the senses is seen as a God-given gift that reveals that we are created for “happiness, heavenly beatitude and eternal joy,”³⁰ we can speak of a fun-loving God because God is a relational being.³¹ Theologian Josh Amstutz further theorises that all relationships are founded on playful-fun and hence, one can posit that part of our *imago Dei* is the nature to play, which through death is transformed to eternal playing with God. Thus, fun becomes eschatological, for in playing we not only enjoy the present moment but anticipate the promised-Joy. When we are opened to the other, recreation becomes *re-creation*, a participation in the Sabbath’s nurturing and resting in God.

In the synoptic healings of a non life-threatening condition on a Sabbath, we see a sure sign of the proclamation of the *euangelion* ‘to the poor’, a central identity in Christ’s mission.³² Gamers, through their fun-gameplay, are participating through Christ’s evangelisation mission by participating in the Sabbatical rest. Echoing Ratzinger’s claim that the “deepest poverty is the inability of joy,”³³ gaming, when performed socially can be seen as a *missio Dei* participant.

The Christian is called to become a child again, and thus to play for fun: “The end will be even as the beginning – an eternal childhood.”³⁴ Thus, I argue that in playing, the gamer is participating in the eschatological dance before her own death, what Julian of Norwich calls ‘eschatological-pleasure.’³⁵

Hence, I conclude that through gaming, the player can transform frippery to a joyful participation in the eschatological hope while living the gospel, and ultimately participating in God-life.

Gaming as essentially catechetical

Digital theologian Rachel Wagner discusses the digital-space as a platform where the self is continuously being constructed, hopping from one virtual identity to another. Thus, one becomes an “ephemeral collection of dots and pixels, built and rebuilt again and again.”³⁶

In this light, I would like to highlight two different avenues for when gaming can be catechetical: engaging Christian games as part of the catechetical journey and discuss game-theology during catechesis.

Engaging Christian games

While it may be easy to pepper our catechesis with a game akin to the occasional video, this will not work. Christian games harbour many theologies which may not be deemed Christian.³⁷ Hence, careful theological exploration is needed by the catechist prior to introducing play. Themes such as the human person as body and soul, violence, hope, portrayal of death, justice, Christology, and ecclesiology are to be sieved.

For example, the themes of violence and hope. Games tend to use violence as a way to propel the storyline forward, even at times hiding violence through cartoonish-looking figures.³⁸ Games’ often expose violence as the “myth of redemptive violence,” under “the belief that violence saves (and) that war brings peace.”³⁹ Christian games such as *Invisible Enemies*⁴⁰ present violence as the surrounding culture, which can elicit the instinct to return to violence and thus supplanting God with violence. Furthermore, violent video games, would tend to evoke eschatological salvific hope in both a temporal and individualistic manner, robbing the Paschal mystery of its uniqueness, and often replacing Christ with the player as the new messiah.

As evident from these two themes, the choice of Christian games in catechesis is more involved than merely finding a game which is marketed as a Christian game. Dissecting the game into game-bricks is one methodology to differentiate these themes.⁴¹

Akin to what *Mission Generational*⁴² and *Bible Story*⁴³ are doing, as a local Church, we can start tinkering with VR/AR to “inform, expose and help young people explore faith, mission and evangelism.”⁴⁴ Through VR/AR we can invite our youths, to engage their imaginative faculties, akin to Ignatian Spirituality 2.0 and experience the mediated-encounter with Christ. One can also be more creative and develop a discipleship experience where the youth embarks on a discipleship journey and is mentored by the catechist. The narratological script can take the form of being vocated, witnessing key Gospel episodes and becoming “onlooker-participants,”⁴⁵ so the pupil doesn’t merely learn *about* Jesus but *experience* Him.

Discussing games

Wagner speaks of transmedia storytelling as world-building, arguing that religion and transmedia have a lot in common.⁴⁶ Thus, even secular games, function like religion and fascinate us with rule-based environments outside of our daily lives. Whereas traditional catechesis is characterised by the “fixedness of ritual and texts, by recognisable modes of performance, and by predictable methods of engagement and interpretation,”⁴⁷ games are characterised by fluidity, plasticity and multiple modes of performance.

In response to this generation’s need, we are to fluidise our catechesis and acknowledge Gen-Z’s fascination with the coded, screened, and mediated. What is shaping them, is to be ‘brought to light,’⁴⁸ discussed and engaged. In a media ecology manner, the catechist is invited to engage the group so they can tease out theological themes from popular games and discuss them. As evident from the exploration of death in *Fortnite*,⁴⁹ through

dialogue, the catechist can engage false ideas in the pupils minds and help them, in a true pedagogue-manner to distil these, and fill the gaps with true, liberating, Christian principles.

Concluding remarks

The gaming scene is ever changing. Similarly, the Church's vocation is to reform its catechetical ministry as the needs arise. Hence in this culture of flux, where is the Spirit leading us to explore? While our first reaction as carers would be to see the addiction to gaming as a problem to be tackled, the foregoing journey took gaming 'seriously' as a *locus theologicus*.

As teasers for further exploration, inspired by Craig Detweiler,⁵⁰ I present some takeaways:

- Games drive participation: gamers are invited to explore and unleash their imagination;
- Free play: gamers have a great deal of agency, and through games the pupils can learn to tackle issues of stewardship, morality, and conflict resolution;
- Death → Respawn: through this thanatological cycle, the pedagogue can develop the doctrine of forgiveness and healing, which is crucial in a pilgrim's journey.⁵¹ It is also vital for learning new ways to navigate the messiness of life;
- Gamification: the discipleship journey can be structured as a sequence of wisdom to be grasped, enjoyed, and calls for never settling;
- Multiple scenarios: through the many possible ludological and narratological outcomes, games help the disciple to realise that faith-living is not merely abiding by laws, but a personal relationship with Christ, which involves multiple mundane choices.

- Learning abilities: Gen-Z is an information age and thus they acquired the skills to be autonomous in making up of knowledge,⁵² and ultimately wisdom. They prefer to learn more soft-skills than data,⁵³ which is what ludologically games do;
- Communal: games are profoundly communal and bonds players together via a shared accomplishment, which can be transformed into building an ecclesial community;
- Mobile: Gen-Z is also known as the mobile-generation. Hence, we cannot keep asking them to leave their smartphone outside, because ultimately we are asking them to leave a part of their extended self. Their developed skills of multitasking and mediated social-interaction can be tapped into as long as the “rule of three”⁵⁴ is respected.

Douglas Rushkoff observed that the screens, “are the windows through which we are experiencing, organizing and interpreting the world in which we live.”⁵⁵ His remarks spearhead us to look at gaming as *the* medium to engage Gen-Z, by reflecting on their needs, and labour to satiate these needs, even if that means forcing ourselves to shed false stereotypical ideas that gaming is anti-social and/or a waste of time.

Religion is just one mode of human expression, but also a mode of encounter which shapes us. Another complimentary expression is gaming. Gen-Z are begging us to reflect on our catechetical programs to place gaming as a central tenet of our endeavours: not merely *using* games, but ludologically transform our catechesis into a *genuine fun* experience of *playing with* the Artful Player.

End notes

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