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No Sympathy for Devils:

What Christian Video Games Can Teach Us About Violence in Family-Friendly Entertainment

Vincent Gonzalez

Abstract
Public debates around video games and violence tend to be overwhelmingly focused on realistic attacks on bleeding, screaming, undeniable humans in a small number of blockbuster games. This essay seeks to open new possibilities for ethical reflection on video games by considering, instead, why games full of destroyable enemies of a somewhat less human sort are often engaged as uncontroversial *family-friendly* entertainment. This study opens with a brief historical analysis of *enemies* and *gamers* as conceptual pillars of video game culture. The strange entity I identify as the "gamer/enemy dyad" is then refracted through George Bataille and Giorgio Agamben to consider how some of its tendencies could become exempt from moral critique. This frame is then used to examine 50 games created for Christian players, a market well identified by a collective desire to enjoy family-friendly games, to discover what sorts of enemies these games include and what can be done to them. The result, finally, is neither a sense that more games should be kept from children, nor that more games should be given to them, but a clarified attention to the dramatic prioritization of the explicitly human over the nearly human and what this says about contemporary popular culture.
Keywords: violence, non-violence, children's media, Christianity, game studies, religious games, video games, empathy, ethics, murder, gamevironments

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"Video games are populated with a plethora of beings that want to kill you: aliens and androids, pirates and parasites, mercenaries and

mushroom people."
"But I say unto you, love your enemies"
- Jesus (Epigraphs from Rogers 2014, 305 and Matthew 5.44 KJV)

The video game violence debates have reached a stalemate. The two dominant camps articulate that either violence in games desensitizes players, causing social ills ranging from apathy to murder, or video games tend in a pro-social direction, building relationships and even acting as "empathy machines"[i]. Between these camps is a vast desert, larger than either and always threatening to swallow both up, wastes howling "it's just a game." This dominant non-position insists that video games do not transform their players at all, and that any analysis not focused "entertainment value" is irrelevant; it can be encountered most directly in the comments beneath any article offering an ethical examination of video games or of *gamer* culture, and seems to be the implicit position of a game industry whose top sellers have been either a *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-present) or a *Call of Duty* (2003-present) for twelve of this century's first eighteen years (collected from Welch 2013, Peckham 2014, Kain 2015, 2018, Morris 2016, Tassi 2017). The present essay will define a different path between the camps of boosters and critics by asking which entities are almost entirely excluded from the video game violence debates. Or, stated differently, how do we choose what sorts of creatures can be shot and stomped to death by children at play?

The object of this study is not the bloody and hotly contested part of the video game violence debates, but what is commonly called "family-friendly" media. This range can be well-understood in the overlapping standards of America's two most prominent media ratings authorities, the Motion Picture Association of America [MPAA] and the Electronic Software Rating Board [ESRB]. Just as the MPAA's "G" rating assures that "Depictions of violence are minimal" and thus not expected to

“offend parents whose younger children watch the motion picture” (MPAA 2010), so too the ESRB expects that games with “minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence” can be enjoyed by “Everyone” (ESRB 2018). To understand why squashing bugs and blasting spaceships is widely accepted as family fare, this study will begin with a brief history of “enemies” and “gamers” as conceptual pillars of games culture. I will then engage George Bataille and Giorgio Agamben to theorize how zapping generic bad guys could become exempt from moral critique. Finally, I will perform a case study of 50 games created for Christian players, a market known for its earnest experiments in “family-friendly” gaming, to investigate what sorts of enemies they include and what players can do to them. The goal of this analysis is not to inspire any moralizing equivalence, neither a “Goombas are people too” sentiment, which decries all action games, nor a “*Grand Theft Auto* is basically *Space Invaders*” relativism, which returns us to the desert of mere entertainment. Rather, the objective will be to locate the bounds of the video game violence debates in order to inspire new lines of analysis, which may break the present stalemate.

Beyond their fascinating relationship with non-violence, Christian video games merit attention within media studies because they comprise a data set which can be bounded and studied in near totality, while the field of video-games-in-general remains perhaps irremediably vague. In 2015, a list of 49,668 video games (DATA-BASER 2015), apparently the largest ever created, received some news coverage (Good 2014), but – to identify only one impressive omission – it only included 3 entries from the more than 84,000 games on the website Newgrounds (Feldman 2017). This is to say, we know so little about video-games-in-general that the words “video games usually” should be understood to be almost totally meaningless.

Better, then, to start some place in particular. Christian games, specifically, can be

approached as a relatively compact constellation of 1,084 titles on eighteen different gaming platforms, reflecting both dominant trends and surprising innovations across 36 years.[ii] We can study this data set in relative completion because game developers seeking to attract faithful players tend to brightly label their games with keywords like "Bible," "Islamic," or "Dharma." By rigorously searching for keywords of this sort, while filtering for blasphemous and ironic titles, I maintain www.religiousgames.org (Gonzalez 2018), a digital humanities project whose current collection of 1,651 entries strains toward a comprehensive vision of religious gaming between 1982 and 2016. Though the count of Christian games is necessarily incomplete because untold numbers of Bible quizzes have been created and lost by amateur programmers, this is nonetheless a reasonable approximation of Christian games in total. Perhaps, if research on video games were to begin with bounded data sets like this one, we could begin to collate our visions of video-games-in-particular into a defensible vision of video-games-in-general. Toward the question of violence in video games, then, I propose that to begin with violence in Christian games could tell us significantly more than the more frequent strategies of studying only blockbusters, or attempting to describe everything at once.

As I write this essay, a citation is desperately needed in Wikipedia. The article on "non-violent Gaming" contains a subsection on Christian games which declares that "Some of these games, despite containing objectively violent content, have been affirmatively labeled 'non-violent video games' by marketers and faith-based non-violent gaming communities" (Wikimedia 2018). The problem, however, is that "objective violence" simply cannot be located anywhere. While the Latin "*vis*," from which "violence" derives, could denote a neutral "force," the English word "violence" specifically implies force, which is a violation of good order (Williams 1983, 330). Consider, for instance, the ways force against inanimate objects can be identified as

"violent" when people deem it socially inappropriate: In 1972, 58% of American men agreed that burning a draft card was violent, and at present, it is common for newspapers, when describing street protests, to categorize dumpsters and windows as potential victims of violence (Bäck 2004, 219). Public controversies over media violence seem to apply the same conservative impulse to the good orders of imaginary worlds: a British study of reactions to cinematic and televised images found the

> "most prevalent general rule seems to be that behaviour which is judged to be appropriate, fair and justified – even when overtly violent – is not usually seen to be seriously or 'really' violent" (Morrison 1999, 6).

Saying that objective violence does not exist should not be mistaken for a defense of any kind of force. This is only to say that no evaluation of force as violent or non-violent, trivial or serious can be *objective*, in that it necessarily locates a *subject*. The question before us is "How and why does video game culture separate certain kinds of in-game force as appropriate only for adults and others to be appropriate even for children?" or, most generally, "Who is the subject who encounters enemies in video games?"

Of Gamers and their Enemies: A History

The genealogy which follows concerns only the commonsense argot shared between English speaking game players and designers, a collection of folk terms for in-game entities and player practices. Words like *griefing,* and *platformer,* emerging from this playful space should be approached as folk terminology, observed carefully as they change with time and become periodically involuted with paradoxes. How these relate to cognate terms in languages ranging from Japanese to C++ is necessary

work for later studies.

Though the word enemies classifies an immense field of in-game entities – ghosts, aliens, humans, abstract shapes – it demonstrates effectively no variation in use from official manuals to private banter. The word "enemy," in fact, is so ubiquitous in video game English that it is rarely defined. From common use, however, I propose that most players will agree that, first, enemies can be separated from obstacles (like holes in the ground or spikes) in that enemies have a capacity for action independent of the player. Second, enemies can be tidily distinguished from both targets and power ups; though entities in those latter classes often move about, and the player's actions can remove them from play, nothing is called enemy unless it threatens to end the player's turn or strip them of resources. Finally, though common usage most frequently describes hordes of computer controlled regular enemies, the word enemy also describes both bosses (climactic enemies, which establish a game's narrative pacing) and opponents (enemies controlled by other players). In short, an enemy is an in-game agent, which acts to the player's detriment.

Thus, if not dodged or destroyed an enemy will cause harm; it is a clay pigeon fired directly at the shooter. Clearly, then, self-defense is part of the rationale for destroying enemies in video games, and it is easy to find defenders of in-game force for whom this is sufficient explanation. *Psychology Today,* for instance, published an article tellingly entitled "Video Game Violence Does Not Cause Real-Life Violence," which ended with the assertion that video games "are centered more around heroism and self-defense than aggression for the sake of violence"(Marczyk 2016). While this may be true, it does nothing to explain the overwhelming presence of enemies in video games. When did we begin telling stories wherein our selves must be so frantically defended?

The notion that there exists a kind of self who must defend against waves of murderous enemies builds upon a particular type of hero tale. Consider Beowulf boasting that he "captured five, // slew a tribe of giants, and on the salt waves // fought sea-monsters by night" (Liuzza 2013), or the Bible's joyous singing accompanied by timbrels and lyres (Samuel 18:7): "Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands!" However, though this logic of heroism is ancient, it is neither ubiquitous nor evenly distributed. Because the annals of heroes includes also those like Johnny Appleseed, Asclepius, and Shennong who leave life, rather than death, in their wake, the overwhelming presence of cannon fodder in contemporary popular culture demands analysis. Heroism, as framed by recent blockbusters – whether in video games, films, novels, or comics – is frequently illustrated by scenes of protagonists battling waves of onrushing enemies by which they are vastly outnumbered. These media present pasts swarming with orcs and slimes to slay; modern realities overwhelmed by hordes of terrorists, zombies, and ninjas; and lean into fictional futures crowded with disposable robots, energy constructs, and masked storm trooper clones. The occasional caveat stating that the bad guys were not killed, *per se*, but only incapacitated, or the implication that they were never really alive, changes relatively little about the ensuing action. To quote an excellent study on the subject, "The steel sinewed fists of Superman can be as gentle as Walt Disney's mill wheel, knocking bad guys unconscious without raising welts on their jaws" (Shelton and Jewett 2002, 42). When a hero punches a thousand opponents until they stop moving, the fact that there was no death of consequence is tautological: what the hero does is justified.

There are many vectors along which one might follow this rationale of self-defense against the horde from ancient heroism into contemporary video games. Perhaps, for

instance, the mobs of orcs in the *Lord of the Rings* novels are the prototypical case, and perhaps their deaths were justified by extending theological defenses for the Crusades (Croft 2004, 142). Arguments of this sort are fascinating, but we can avoid speculation by tracing the thread of movie review standards, which were almost entirely reproduced in contemporary video game rating standards. Marking the stakes of youth desensitization, the Hayes code of 1930 stated clearly, “the important objective must be to avoid the hardening of the audience, especially of those who are young and impressionable, to the thought and fact of crime” (quoted in Black 1997, 249). But even as film rating standards protected children, they also made room for authorized use of force in ways that will be familiar to contemporary gamers. Consider the memos, which led to the creation of the MPAA standards in 1968:

> “Impersonal violence has traditionally been accepted as acceptable screen fare for audiences generally. War films have always fallen into this category. (...) Even the dreadful slaughter of the cavalry charge of the Light Brigade can be taken in stride” (quoted in Prince 2003, 34).

In these film regulations, most aspects of what we still call “violence” in media were established: a concern for impressionable youth, and an understanding that force, which reinscribes contemporary power structures (when relatively bloodless) is acceptable for all audiences.

In the MPAA standards we can see the exception through which family-friendly shooting will pass, but it is not yet clear why the great diversity of video game combat mechanics would default to being impersonal and thus appropriate for *Everyone*. Linguistically, the development of the words enemy and gamer allow us to view the emergence of a powerful sense that the strangest actions in the world –

shooting robots with lasers, dozens at a time, for instance – are so normal that they should be waved right past questions of moral judgment. Across the late 1970s and early 1980s, a massive acceleration in the popularity of game playing seems to have given rise to a compound entity that I will call "the gamer/enemy dyad." As we shall see, neither does one birth the other, nor could they exist separately. Gamers and enemies prove an excellent demonstration of the entangled ontologies mapped by Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, and other visionaries in Science Technology Studies: "The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters" (Haraway 2008, 5).

Enemy, in Victorian games discourse, could describe a rival player or – in a use inherited from military English – serve as a substantive adjective to describe all the forces at their command (*the onward march of the enemy*), but a single Chess pawn was consistently described as *an enemy's man* and rarely *an enemy man*, but perhaps never *an enemy*. Thus, across game books, chess reportage, and other forms of Victorian games journalism, though we find enemies, they never appear in the sense now common in video game discourse.[iii] This linguistic situation does not seem to change much across the succeeding century even in the long vogue of war gaming, a pastime characterized by conflict between swarms of opponents. In 1913, for instance, H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* included "troops," and the influential *Siege of Bodenburg* included "enemy men" and "invaders," but neither had enemies (Wells 1913, Bodenstedt 1967). The first signs of the singular "enemy" may be with *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974, 1981), a game, which famously adapts war game mechanics to emphasize the centrality of single heroes, though it was not immediately prominent. The original 1974 version of the rules effectively never mentioned enemies aside from the wand of enemy detection, describing the

victims of heroism as monsters instead (Gygax and Arneson 1974). The 1981 edition of the rules, however, used the singular "enemy" as the default word for all those in-game actors, which could stop a hero's progress (Gygax and Arneson 1981).

In video games, the enemy seems to appear at about the same time. When Stewart Brand wrote the first mainstream piece of video games critique in 1972, he only applied the forms of the word that would have been familiar in Victorian game books, using it to describe the opposing player and their "enemy torpedoes." Likewise, David Ahl's compendium *101 BASIC Games* (1973), published the following year, contains games where one must destroy an "enemy battleship," "spaceship," "fleet," or "outpost," but no indication that the individual ships or monsters are "enemies." As with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the contemporary use of "enemy" eventually becomes prominent in manuals for Atari 2600 games, but not immediately upon its release in 1977. The prototypical case seems to be the manual for *Space Invaders* in 1980: "Each time you turn on SPACE INVADERS you will be at war with enemies from space who are threatening the earth." It appears again in *GORF* in 1981, but the contemporary use of "enemy" becomes commonplace only in 1982, suddenly appearing in ten manuals, and then nine more the following year.[iv]

While monsters, bad guys, or military adoptions such as the enemy make sense for individual games, in 1980-82, enemies came to prominence as a term, which could describe the dangerous elements in all games at the same time. I propose that such a concept became necessary in this moment because game playing had suddenly surged from a niche hobby, perhaps necessarily experienced as a field of individual games, to what many contemporary observers described as a sort of ubiquitous field of games everywhere. Video arcades in America more than doubled after 1980, peaking at 10,000 in 1982, and home consoles had become so suddenly popular that

in December of 1981, *TV Guide* announced:

> "It makes no difference whether you've been naughty or nice; chances are that Santa will be dropping off a video game under your tree this year. It's almost unavoidable" (Wolf 2012, 4, Albin 1982, 50).

Just as enemies can be imagined across various games, the word gamer emerged in the same cultural moment to describe something like a player, but a player of any game at all or all games at once. As with the singular enemy, the word gamer seems to appear first among players of tabletop war strategy games with magazines offering "A NOTE TO THE NEW GAMER (and the Experienced Gamer, too!)" in 1977 (Simonsen 1977). And like the singular enemy, gamer rises from niche use to public conscious across the early '80s: In 1980, Gamer's Paradise opened in Chicago, catering to both *Dungeons & Dragons* and Atari players, and in 1982 a video game review magazine called "The Logical Gamer" filed the first trademark to clearly use the word in its present sense (Activision 1980, Justia Trademarks 2018). When the Washington Post used the word "gamer" in 1983, it was clearly presented as describing something that readers would find familiar with a word they would find foreign: "game-lovers, or 'gamers' as the company calls them" (Potts 1983, WB26).

Across the early 1980s, then, overlapping crazes for tabletop and video games seem to have created a sense, saturating and extending beyond player sub-cultures, that there exist both players-in-general and generalized victims of their fantastical heroism. Future research will be required to determine whether parallel emergences took place in other languages, but for speakers of English, this intensity leads to the appearance of a gamer/enemy dyad. It seems that the broad acceptance of what gamers do to enemies as impersonal (unless blood, realism, and screaming conspire to make the enemies unavoidably people) circulates as sense that their interactions

are inevitable. If gamers were not blasting enemies, they would no longer be gamers.

Resembling particles joined through quantum entanglement, or twins with a secret language, even where the words gamer and enemy are not explicitly found together, they cannot be fully separated. Some thirty-five years later, we can see their strange connection in the semantic debates recently raging on the Internet concerning both what is “really a game” and who is “really a gamer” (Sang 2015, Hathaway 2014). Like the factually incorrect but surprisingly persistent notion that comic book readers are effectively all young men, these frequently misogynistic debates imagine games as the proper province of men by both rejecting female player as *fake gamers* and rejecting games which do not prominently feature combat against swarms of enemies a *fake games*.[v] This is not to say that all manifestations of the gamer/enemy dyad are marked by misogyny, but rather that #gamergate misogynists built upon the decades old commonsense that the player-in-general is defined by their proficiency at destroying monsters-in-general.

In 1982s wild efflorescence of gaming, the heat from which the fused gamer/enemy dyad emerged was the strange sense that games were everywhere and every game could find players. This lead famously to over-manufacturing of under-vetted games like *ET* (1982) for Atari, but it also led to the birth of the first religious video games (New York Times 1983). In 1982, at least a dozen Christian games emerged for various home computer systems, and the first ten publicly circulated Jewish video games appeared the following year. How Christian games present their enemies will be the subject of our quickly approaching case study, but first, we must figure out how the gamer/enemy dyad is connected to a growing sense that unless enemies are quite obviously human, destroying them is family-friendly fun.

A Theory of Sacrificial Non-Violence

Georges Bataille, the philosopher of evil, offers a philosophical frame for violence, which clarifies how destroying objects (like enemies) could become inseparably bound to the creation of subjects (like gamers). In *Theory of Religion* (1973), Bataille presents the possibility that human subjectivity is a tenuous emergence from total immersion in the world. He asserts that animals cannot separate themselves from the surrounding environment, and thus exist in the world in a state of immanence like "water in water" (1973, 19). Early humans begin to withdraw from this delirious haze first by creating tools, which are hybrids of subject and object. A tool is subject in as much as it entails a movement toward a planned future, but an object because it only moves toward that future by being *used* (1973, 28). As humans begin surrounding themselves with tools, those subject-objects allow for a strange sort of reflection, which both implies a cold world of things, and remains haunted by the spiritual world implied by the vague memory of our animal past. Bataille's thinking is dialectical (Hegelian by way of Kojève) and these two worlds echo back and forth in a manner reminiscent of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[vi] As our tool building develops into religious, rational, military, and industrial engineering, we find more and more complicated ways of managing the distance between the worlds of spirit and things. According to Bataille, the characteristic gesture is sacrifice, separating potentially useful crops, animals, or even humans from the world of things and declaring with their material destruction: "I call you back to the intimacy of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is" (Bataille 1973, 44).

Very late in this story, science finally allows the world to reflect on itself, bypassing the constitutive ambivalence of the human. For our species, thus overcome, Bataille describes a future which "implies SELF CONSCIOUSNESS taking up the lamp that

science has made to illuminate objects and directing it toward intimacy" which apparently includes the collapse of the tenuous emergence from the world of things that *is* humanity (1973, 97). If the historical situation described here seems unclear, be comforted knowing that even the closest reading of Bataille will not help. We can only tell that there is something delirious and destructive which is taking place, and it seems to resemble (or entail) a drunkenness which forgets the purposeful orientation of things, as "it will rediscover the night of the animal intimate with the world – *into which it will enter*" (1973, 101). Whether such rediscovered immanence might be future of drunkenness and justice, or total annihilation at the hands of robots is unclear: "The destruction of the subject as an individual is in fact implied in the destruction of the object as such, but war is not the inevitable form of the destruction" (1973, 104). This flexibility is no accident. Bataille is quite clear that he hoped to create a "mobile thought" which could prove insightful across many futures: "detached from an elaboration of its historical or ethnographic forms" (1973, 11, 117). I, of course, will now argue that this helps us to think about video games.

Spacewar! (1962), a strong contender for the first video game, was created in 1962, the year of Georges Bataille's death, so it is would be reasonable if his theories could not accommodate them. However, within *Theory of Religion,* Bataille describes sovereignty as a co-emergence through destruction much like that, we see in the gamer/enemy dyad. In the sacrificial priest at his grand history's beginning, and in the philosopher drinking alone at its end, the perceptive reader will find a single character; unlike the farmers and scientists mentioned in passing, these two have speech and motivation, each one *turns its back on real relations* and is thrust upwards into individual existence by extravagant destruction of things which could have had functional value (1973, 44). Here, the single character does not have a name, but in Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1945), which we might read as the encyclopedic version

of *Theory of Religion,* he calls this figure the sovereign: “Sovereignty requires the strength to violate the prohibition against killing, although it is true that this will be under the conditions that customs define” (1945, 221). Across its various cultural manifestations, “Nothing sovereign must ever submit to the useful,” the task of the sovereign “is not work but rather play” (1945, 226). This character is never completely manifested, “it is only rarely condensed into a person and even then it is diffuse[,]” flaming into existence in those parts of humanity whose special subjectivity emerges in playful destruction (1945, 221, 226). The pressure that causes a hero to rise and the scores of victims beneath them to sink, whether the gamer out from enemies, or the superhero out from the sea of bad guys, may be called “sovereignty.”

I propose that Georges Bataille, in envisioning a time when science would invite humans to turn their backs on productive labor and discover an intoxication resembling the immanence of water in water, laid an adequate theoretical frame for the specific pleasures of video games, often called “flow” or “immersion.” Further, sovereignty seems to nicely encapsulate the playful destruction, which characterizes the gamer/enemy dyad. It is helpful that Bataille's sovereign need not be a political ruler or even engaged in literal killing, because game play is, of course, never quite as destructive as it seems. Critically, it is this material inadequacy, which makes it possible for games to present as much intoxicating destruction as they do: Consider the specific destruction for which a video game, enemy is destined. Unlike a glass bottle in a shooting gallery, the pleasurable shooting of a space invader leaves no fragments. Though the masses of enemies in archaic hero narratives, like the thousand men Samson kills with the jawbone of an ass, were similarly totally destroyed, they never emerged from prior imminence as distinctly as space invaders had. Video games, unlike shadow puppets, stories in voice or the mind, toy soldiers, or any other previous medium for fantastical destruction, allow the full emergence

and full elimination of potential victims, allowing for an unprecedented swell in the sensation of destructive sovereignty. However, the action takes place on a sort of treadmill. If, for instance, I were to spend ten hours completing the PlayStation 4 remake of *Shadow of the Colossus* (2018), I would burn about a pound of coal powering the console, but in the game world, I would have the pleasure of destroying 16 immense stone creatures, some the size of the Statue of Liberty (HowStuffWorks.com 2000, EnergyUseCalculator.com 2018). Thus, the destruction in video games is so economical that it seems to evade Bataille's concern that the intoxicating return to immanence would entail the physical destruction of the world. In these playful spaces, the gamer can emerge through an experience of joyous destruction vastly disproportionate to its material reality. In this sense, we can defend those who say, "it's just a game."

Unfortunately, Georges Bataille was no historian. By dealing with nebulous energies like the sacred, and seeking a theory, which encompasses every imaginable act of sacrifice, he created a vision with no room for the historical particulars – that is to say, the politics – of destruction. For this mystification, Walter Benjamin condemned Bataille's research saying, "You are working for fascism" (quoted in Agamben 1998, 113). Let us then modify our understanding of subject creation and violence by applying Giorgio ,Agamben's more historically rooted exploration in *Homo Sacer* (1998). The book's title is a reference to *homines sacri* or "sacred people," those who had committed such egregious crimes under Roman law that it was legal to kill them but forbidden to sacrifice them to the gods (Agamben 1998, 8). *Homines sacri*, then, are figures of "bare life," living in a sense, but also waiting for a system entirely out of their control to kill them. For Agamben, and for the present analysis, what makes *homo sacer* significant is the fact that it is both conspicuously inside and outside the law – inside in that its every possibility for action is shaped by a ruling on the value of

its life, but outside in that this ruling precisely excludes it from the world of laws proper. Politically, bare life is thus characterized by the state of exception, a place where sovereign power declares the suspension of the law: "The sovereign is the point of indistinction between violence and law, the threshold on which violence passes into law and law passes over into violence" (Agamben 1998, 32).

The legal and political history told in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* follows bare life as it drifts from the margins of society to its center. While the Roman case from which the book takes its name was very rare in practice, Agamben argues that the contemporary world is characterized by vast biopolitical order in which the state of exception bounding bare life has become the dominant social mechanism. Just as sovereignty is no longer predominantly concentrated in rulers, but distributed across the state itself, so too does the rare condition of *homines sacri* become the default position of all humans (Agamben 1998, 128). Consider, for instance, the place of refugees in contemporary politics: while citizens are granted civil rights by their states, as well as various human rights by international councils, those people who cross national boundaries can lose the former and tragically discover how little is promised by the latter (Agamben 1998, 126-127). Whether observed through the lens of *minimum wages* or the strange fact that the Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution spends fewer words abolishing slavery than it does assuring that it remains possible to enslave people *duly convicted* of crimes, states of exception reducing humans to bare life abound.

I propose that what we understand as family-friendliness in popular media is a smooth continuation of culturally dominant understandings of human life as clarified in *Homo Sacer*. Within the constellation of PG and G rated movies, young adult and children's books, and video games approved by rating boards for *everyone*, heroism

is defined by avoidance of certain kinds of forbidden shows of force, specifically those against screaming, bleeding, undeniable humans. Outside of that narrow prohibition, the overwhelming presence of unprotected life in these stories is a clear continuation of the biopolitical systems around them: inasmuch as creatures are not specifically drawn into the narrow circle of empathy, they default to existing among the swarm that establishes the hero's sovereignty by dying *en masse*. This baseline reality for pop cultural heroism, and not the surreal moments of sudden exposure, as when Ronald Reagan said, concerning Atari players, "The Air Force believes these kids will be our outstanding pilots should they fly our jets" or in the use of video games for military training, gesture most clearly toward the smooth integration of *homo sacer* in contemporary media (1983 cited in Detweiler 2010, 2, Goodale 2002). If heroes rise out of the surrounding chaos through the same mechanisms, which drive sovereignty, it should come as no surprise that we raise children to admire those who recklessly destroy the not-quite-human.

Here, then, we must note that heroes destroying swarms of enemies is not actually a continuation of an ancient pattern, but a fairly recent convention. While the *Mahabharata* describes how "Kunti's son Yudhishthira slew a thousand of the foe, and Bhima showed the abode of Yuma to seven thousand" lines like this are actually very infrequent in the text, as are David and Samson's kill counts within the larger biblical text (cited in Slavitt and Carrigan 2015, 376). On the other hand, the Lone Ranger, Iron Man, and Super Mario can hardly be imagined except as vastly outnumbered by onrushing attackers, because they developed in a biopolitical order wherein the state of exception has become baseline reality, and bare life is the background against which the specifically-human is necessarily imagined. Because the game violence debates are almost exclusively displays of anxiety around media where screaming, bleeding, obvious humans are shot, they largely serve to reinscribe

the assumption that only this should worry us.

Reading Agamben and Bataille together, the logic of the gamer/enemy dyad becomes clear. As the state of exception swells, and human bodies are increasingly situated as dispassionate casualties of rationalized warfare, medicine, and business, entertainment increasingly reflects the same vision of the human. Video games rise to prominence in a popular culture where heroes are defined as the lonely real humans beset by swarms of bare life. Similar to, but in many ways exceeding the other media around them, video games offer an intoxicating chance to enact this merciless heroism. Even (and especially) where certain games are restricted for being unnecessarily cruel to apparent humans, the culture that surrounds these games continually reestablishes that gamers and enemies each make the other's existence self-evident. This is not to blame anyone's dispassionate cruelty to bare life on video games – certainly immigration crises and decades-long wars of our present could be imagined easily in a world with a very different entertainment ecosystem – but it should make it clear that cultural analysis of enemies can tell us at least as much about contemporary society as studies of gamers can.

Fifty Christian Games and their Enemies

While game studies could break the current stalemate over video games and violence by seeking bare life in a synthetic image of everything which can be killed by children, this work is so far from begun that one could start effectively anywhere. As a scholar of digital religion, I offer Christian games as a place to begin. This is a fruitful field for investigating family-friendly gamer/enemy relations, because Christian game developers and critics frequently describe avoiding violence as one of their major motivations. Brenda Huff, owner of Wisdom Tree Games is quite clear:

“We were offering parents and gamers an alternative to the violence of so many other games. We were FAMILY FRIENDLY before family friendly was popular” (Gibson 2006). Or to quote a prayer for families considering video games, from the Southern Baptist periodical *Home Life:*

> “Dear Father, In the days of Noah, You were so angry about the violence in the world that you sent a flood. Today You're probably just as concerned about the violence in video games. Change our hearts so we'll desire a better way, and help us to seek games that are not violent. Amen” (DeMoss 1998).

Before facing the data, there are some preliminary issues to sort through. First, the nebula that I identify as “Christian video games” here is neither connected by the faith of the designers (which I cannot know), nor religious themes (which know no bounds), but through signs that the game's creators were seeking Christian players. Websites and other distribution networks with “Christian” in their name or mission statement were strongest contenders, but any game that attempted to recreate, however incompletely, the metaphysics of a Christian (or broadly biblical) worldview without dismissing it through blasphemy, irony, or fantasy, is included (Gonzalez 2018). Secondly, of the slightly more than one thousand games I have found for Christian players, approximately ninety percent do not include enemies of any kind. While we may speculate that Christian game developers consciously chose to create an abundance of word scrambles, quiz games, and tile based puzzles in order to avoid the moral quandary of appropriate victimhood, there is little evidence that this is the case. Christian game review sites will generally position “silly cartoon violence” on a single spectrum with “people killing people in cold blooded murder,” but they do not hesitate to endorse the former as a family-friendly alternative to the latter (Christ Centered Gamer Reviewing 2007). Likewise, it seems that effectively every distributor of Christian video games – whether software companies, online

storefronts, lists of resources for Christian players, or Bible believing game developers – includes enemy driven games in their catalogs without reservation.[vii] It is likely, then, that games with enemies are relatively rare, not because they were actively avoided, but because most Christian games are made by amateurs, who are adapting familiar paper-based Sunday school activities like quizzes and storybooks. Hoping to look directly at the merciless sovereignty, which mobilizes the gamer/enemy dyad, we now turn our attention to those Christian games, which do include enemies.

To investigate the patterns of family-friendly action, I selected fifty Christian games featuring enemies. This sample was selected to roughly match the chronological and denominational distribution of Christian games as cataloged at www.religiousgames.org as of the spring of 2018. I selected five of the 69 Christian games created between 1982-1993; 17 of the 386 games from 1994-2005; and 28 of the 625 between 2006-2016. I included one game each for LDS players, Catholics and Adventists (*Keep Your VL* 2006, *Friar Dude* 2016 and *Escape from Punch Bully Ranch*2008 respectively), to gesture toward the approximately 10% percent of Christian games which were made for specific denominations. Likewise, I included *Ark Dash* (2015), *David and Goliath Bible Story* (2015), *Fish Dodge* (2002), *Jonah Run* (2015) and *Moses the Freedom Fighter* (2016) in my data set to approximate the proportionate frequency of biblical content which could potentially attract both Christian and Jewish players. Wherever these proportions allowed, I also avoided redundancy by never including multiple instances from a series of sequels, and attempting to include all relevant genres from Role Playing Games to First Person Shooters.

We must begin with the premise that anything, which can be imagined can become a

video game enemy, and accept that whether a particular player interprets their victims as goblins, robots, or angry plants may depend unguided inferences from pixel-slim features and ambiguous lore. I examined the enemies I found using visual and textual cues from the games and their manuals, where available, and clustered them into six loose categories: conceptual, natural, mechanical, animal, human, and quasi-human. Because the goal of the present study is to document and not correct players' understandings, these six categories should be understood as spotlights rather than corrals, consciously porous, overlapping, and over-determined. To create an argument, which can survive every disagreement over whether a given enemy seems to belong elsewhere, I focus on fields of ambiguation between the categories wherever relevant, and will finally argue that the presence and absence of edge cases in fact tells us more about these categories than do their relatively unambiguous centers.

As I arranged enemies into the following table, I was surprised to find that there seemed to be no significant diachronic patterns: no vogue for fighting animals or humans appears across 34 years, only a gentle flickering between categories. A consistent focus on gamer-enemy relations – largely how each attacked the other– across these six categories of enemies, on the other hand, revealed fascinating diachronic patterns. This emphasis on the gamer/enemy dyad required me to table relationships among enemies (e.g., clustering or cooperation), as well as relationships between enemies and plot (what we may call the enemies' purpose); such enemy characteristics certainly deserve studies of their own. Though every entity I studied could generically be classified as an enemy, there were profound differences in the ways they and their gamers killed one another. To decide whether these differences are instructive, we will have to examine the categories each in turn.

			Conceptual	Natural	Mechanical	Animal	Human	Quasi-Human
Music Machine	1983	Sparrow						■
Christian Text Adventure #1	1986	Bob Nance	■					
Spiritual Warfare	1992	Wisdom Tree			■	■	■	■
Joshua: Battle of Jericho	1992	Wisdom Tree	■			■	■	
Super 3D Noah's Ark	1994	Wisdom Tree				■		
Captain Bible in Dome of Darkness	1994	Bridgestone Multimedia Group			■			
Adventures with Chickens	1997	Xtreme Games			■			
Bible Basher	1999	Creation Tips	■					
The War in Heaven	1999	Eternal Warriors						■
Saints of Virtue	1999	Shine Studios	■					
Firey Darts	2000	Godly Games	■					
Catechumen	2000	N'Lightning Software				■	■	■
Quest of the Apostles	2001	New Mercies Ministries				■	■	■
Fish Dodge	2002	Big Idea				■		
Monsters from Hell	2002	Robert W. Benjamin						■
David vs. Goliath	2003	Full Armor Studios			■		■	
Manna Munchers	2004	Full Armor Studios			■			
Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness	2005	Digital Praise		■	■	■	■	■
Captain Saint	2005	3rd Day Studios					■	■
Adventures in Odyssey: The Great Escape	2005	Digital Praise			■			
Keep Your VL	2006	BoMToons	■	■	■			
Left Behind: Eternal Forces	2006	Left Behind Games			■		■	■
Soldier of God	2006	AV 1611 Productions					■	■
Forgiveness	2006	Breakthrough Gaming			■	■		
Timothy and Titus	2007	Sunday Software				■	■	■
The Axys Adventures: Truth Seeker	2007	Rebel Planet Creations		■				
Hearts	2007	Bible Game Zone	■					
Escape from Punch Bully Ranch	2008	Review and Herald					■	
The Peacekeeper	2008	Robin Harbron, John and Sam Washburn				■		
Galagations	2009	Distracted Pear			■			
Attack of the Sunday School Zombies	2009	Sunday Software					■	
YaHero	2010	Yahero			■			
Current	2011	Matt Tuttle, Benton Keegan				■		
Gideon Wars	2011	A Little BC					■	
Brought 2 Life	2012	TeamBIO					■	
GLOW: Guardian Light of the World	2012	Morpheous						■
Sheep Among Wolves	2013	Peter Van Sandt and Mikale Erhart				■		
Bible Run!	2013	Scott Ware					■	■
Salvation	2013	Team Pet Rocket			■			
David and Goliath Bible Story	2014	Little Halo Games				■	■	
Christian: The Video Game	2014	Scott Cawthon	■					■
Blood Oath	2014	ROM12						■
Sheep Master	2015	Sunland Entertainment Studios				■		
Bible Venture: Beginning	2015	Integrity Bit		■		■		■
Ark Dash	2015	DimagicArt		■				
Jonah Run	2015	G-dcast		■				
Friar Dude	2016	Friar Babs	■					
Praise Evader	2016	New Genius, LLC		■				
The Aetherlight: Chronicles of the Resistance	2016	Scarlet City			■			
Moses the Freedom Fighter	2016	Refugee Production		■		■	■	

Table 1: Fifty Christian Games and their Enemies.

Conceptual Enemies

Conceptual enemies are found in *Bible Basher* (1999), *Christian Text Adventure #1* (1986), *Christian: the Video Game* (2014), *Firey Darts* (2000), *Friar Dude* (2016), *Hearts* (2007), *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* (1992), *Keep Your VL* (2006) and *Saints of Virtue* (1999).

Consider the aggressive shapes in *Geometry Wars* (2003) or words staged as enemies in some typing trainers: Conceptual enemies are those, which cannot be imagined in the physical world because they imply creatures of ideational (rather than physical, spiritual, or magical) substance. This is perhaps the most diverse of the categories considered here, not primarily, because it includes textual and geometrical enemies, but because it also contains homiletic enemies, those, which convey a moral danger through a visual metaphor. This continuation of biblical poetics – wherein the fountain of wisdom is a rushing stream (Proverbs 18:4) and sin is crouching at your door (Genesis 4:7) – potentially creates a soft edge between conceptual enemies and every other category.

Fortunately, when Christians have to destroy conceptual dangers, they have conceptual weapons. Ephesians 6:10-18 commands Christians to "Put on the full armor of God," a series of moral defenses such as the "belt of truth," and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." While *Fiery Darts* (2000) turns the sword of the Spirit against the eponymous darts of Ephesians 6:16, in all other cases, conceptual enemies vulnerable to player action are representations of vices. *Christian Text Adventure #1* (1986) offers a succinct description of this range of conflict (Vance 1986): "The creatures are allegorical, in that they represent problems that we all face from time to time. The winner of the game will successfully defeat all his opponents

using the appropriate weapons!”

Where monsters representing vices and sins appear, the player is given armaments: the First Person Shooter *Saints of Virtue* (1999) again invites players to fight “personified tendencies of the flesh” with the sword of the Spirit, while the Role Playing Game, *Christian: the Video Game* (2014), offers a menu of Faith, Truth, Promise, Grace or Power in precisely the manner a secular game might offer Fight, Magic, Item (Shine Studios 1999).

The weakest possible combat mechanism is presented in *Bible Basher* (1999), an ASCII Pong variant where the player uses an open Bible (depicted as “==”) to endlessly deflect a bouncing “seed of doubt” (depicted as “o”). Beneath this threshold, the player has no spiritual weapon and must simply avoid conceptual enemies. In *Hearts* (2007), one must avoid words like “selfishness” that drift across the screen. Both *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* 1992) and *Friar Dude* (2016), include enemies which are hieroglyphic images of things which must be avoided, a hand gesturing stop identified in the manual as “doubting God's plan” in the first case, and images for the exhausting duties of monastic life in the latter. Without context, of course, each of these could collapse back into literal representation, becoming a falling church rather than imposing church duties.

Natural Enemies

Natural enemies are found in *Ark Dash* (2015), *Axys Adventures* (2007), *Bible Venture: Beginning* (2015), *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho* (1992), *Jonah Run* (2015), *Keep Your VL* (2006), *Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness* (2005), *Moses: Freedom Fighter* (2016) and *Praise Evader* (2016).

From the falling rocks that threaten Lara Croft across the *Tomb Raider* (1996-present) series to the vicious plants and fireballs that pursue *Super Mario* (1985-present), video games often convey a natural world that is hostile even in its non-animal aspects.

In Christian games the bleed between the natural, conceptual, and quasi-human often creates enemies with faces, which are both natural and immoral. In *Light Rangers* (2005), for instance, a mad scientist unleashes the "nono virus," a swarm of visible viruses with googly eyes which make children say "NO!" to their parents, and the plants in *Axys Adventures* (2007) are explicitly stated to be homiletic representations of dishonesty. Whether the toothy apples and bananas in *Bible Venture: Beginning* (2015) are somehow related to the morally invested fruit in the biblical garden of Eden is less clear, but there seems to be some connection between the human-like eyes on every one of these natural enemies and the fact that the player must destroy them.

Where Christian games include natural enemies with the dumb brutality of nature, being invested with movement but not facial features, they tend to be indestructible. Floating debris in *Moses: Freedom Fighter* (2016), the hazards at sea in *Ark Dash* (2015) and *Jonah Run* (2015), and the stone pillars in *Praise Evader* (2016) all rush at the player who must scramble to dodge them. Even the faceless vine walls in *Keep Your VL* (2006), which can be destroyed in places, grow back quickly and cannot be removed entirely. Notably, each of these instances of a dangerously inhuman nature rush at the player in games with an inexorably scrolling screen, presenting an ambiguity between enemies (which act to the player's detriment) and mere obstacles (which the player must not accidentally touch). The reading that says the player is moving in these games, so these hazards are static and thus not enemies is

legitimate, but the removal of this second class of natural enemies would only further underscore the strange fact that all destructible natural enemies are bizarrely characterized with human features.

Mechanical/Artificial Enemies

Mechanical/artificial enemies are found in *Adventures in Odyssey: The Great Escape* (2005), *Adventures with Chickens* (1997), The *Aetherlight: Chronicles of the Resistance* (2016), *Captain Bible in Dome of Darkness* (1994), *David vs Goliath* (2003), *Forgiveness* (2006), *Galagations* (2009), *Keep Your VL* (2006), *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (2006), *Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness* (2005), *Manna Munchers* (2004), *Salvation* (2013), *Spiritual Warfare* (1992) and *YaHero* (2010).

Unlike the other types of enemies in video games, robots are in some sense not a metaphor, or even a representation. From futuristic battle droids in *Star Wars* (1983-present) titles to the thoroughly mundane automobiles in *Frogger* (1981-present), the machined and programmed aspects of reality sit comfortably in video games in that they act within their designed capacities until they malfunction or crash. Of the instances I investigated, *Adventures in Odyssey: The Great Escape* (2005) and *YaHero* (2010) presented the greatest intimacy between its artificial enemies and their digital substrate by staging fights with computer viruses and programs. That said, in-game computers are no more bound to behave like off-screen computers than in-game humans are, so while actually algorithmic entities, their behavior was often indistinguishable from that which we might expect of enemies that look like frogs, or missiles. In my selection, the greatest dissonance between artifact-enemy and actual artifact, and a true outlier in my life of gaming, was the final battle in *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* (2006) wherein the player shoots at the exterior of an office building until it dies.

The curious fluidity between mechanical and human enemies in Christian games is deeply resonant with Bataille's conception of the tool as a subject-object. Non-anthropomorphic robots with human mouths, as in *Manna Munchers* (2004) and *Keep Your VL* are rarities in this regard, with far more games presenting bipedal robots distinguishable from humans by their hinged jaws and visibly electronic parts. Following the convention of secular games, the humanoid robots in *Light Rangers* (2005), *Forgiveness* (2006), *Captain Bible in Dome of Darkness* (1994), *the Aetherlight* (2016) resemble humans in their gait and two-legged structure but they can be destroyed in quantities that would be quite family-unfriendly if they were flesh toned. *David vs. Goliath* (2003), strangely, uses this violence exemption to add robots alongside humans in a Bible story. Though David and many of his enemies remain human, he now also must fight beings like Hammer bots, humanoid machines with huge silver crushing arms. Appropriate to this escalation, David now carries both his traditional sling and a launcher, becoming in a significant sense robotic himself:

> "The types of Sling Bullets you can pick up are: Triple Bolt, Wave Bolt, Hand Grenades, Fusion Grenades, Freeze Bolt, and Bounce Bullet. The types of Launcher Weapons you can find are: Rockets, Tracker Rockets, Swarm Rockets, Flamethrower, Railgun, Gatling Gun, Tesla Module, Lightning Gun, The Kingpin, The Redeemer, Plasma Beam, and The Angry Chicken" (Full Armor Studios 2004).

The second soft edge between machines and humans in Christian games, as in non-Christian media, concerns vehicles. Because the drivers of cars, boats, and spaceships are not necessarily visible, destroying their crafts allows the thrill of consequential combat without the discomfort of obvious killing. To cite only one very famous example, though the official Star Wars role-playing game states that the Death Star contained 1.161.293 soldiers and crew of various kinds, the single shot, which

destroyed all of them is the crowning heroic moment in a film marketed to children (Slavicsek 1991, 17). Similarly, within the present sample, *Adventures with Chickens* (1997), *Salvation* (2013) and *Galagations* (2009) all include battle with space ships, and while some players may infer that a pilot and crew are implied, none are ever explicitly revealed. In *Galagations* the ambiguity of a human pilot is especially interesting because its secular namesake *Galaga* (1981) was one of the first games to include the possibility of strategically losing a ship to enemy forces and reclaiming it. *Galagations,* on the other hand, removes this fluidity between friend and foe, presenting enemy ships only as destroyable antagonists.

Whether as programs, humanoid robots, or spaceships, artificial enemies were notable among my data set because they seemed to be ineligible for mercy. They were rarely indestructible, and could never be pacified or recruited.

Animal Enemies

Animal enemies are found in *Bible Venture: Beginning* (2015), *Catechumen* (2000), *Current* (2011), *David and Goliath Bible Story* (2014), *Fish Dodge* (2002), *Forgiveness*, *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*, *Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness*, *Moses: Freedom Fighter*, *The Peacekeeper* (2008), *Quest of the Apostles* (2001), *Sheep Among Wolves* (2013), *Sheep Master* (2015), *Spiritual Warfare*, *Super 3D Noah's Ark* (1994) and *Timothy and Titus* (2007).

It is notable, perhaps, that the singular “enemy” was present in Victorian naturalist writings (as in “a natural enemy of the badger”) though it did not become prominent in games writing for another century. Animals are narratively convenient enemies in games, requiring neither explanation for their aggression, nor their existence. Of course, in creatures such as centaurs and werewolves, animal enemies become

fantastical as they shade ambiguously into the human, and video game dogs follow cartoon dogs, walking on their hind legs whenever they please.

There is strong overlap between adaptations of biblical stories as games and complex, not entirely hostile depictions of animals. Unlike the humans and demons in *Bible Run!* (2013), for instance, animals included in the Noah level cannot be classified as enemies because they are not dangerous to the player. Similarly, *David and Goliath, Sheep Among Wolves* (2013) and *Sheep Master* (2015), each presents a biblically inspired occasion to protect livestock from other animals.

Biblical promises regarding angry animals ranges from faith calming snakes and lions (Mark 16:18, Daniel 6) to believers being able to trample these same creatures (Psalm 91:13), and this ambivalence translates fluently into the structure of animal enemies in Christian games. While only four of the sixteen games featuring animals as enemies made it clear that they were being pacified rather than destroyed, this is notable because no vices, robots, or killer plants received this same courtesy. *Super 3D Noah's Ark* (1994), in fact, is a First Person Feeder which adapts the code of the blockbuster Nazi shooting game *Wolfenstein 3D* (1993) to create a game about settling down angry animals with food. Though animal whispering is less prominent in *Spiritual Warfare* (1992), *Catechumen* (2000), and *Timothy and Titus* (2007), all three have the pleasant consistency of centering upon Holy Spirit based weapons which convert humans, destroy demons, and pacify animals. *Catechumen* even includes a possible citation of Proverbs 12:10 in that the Sword of the Spirit will pacify attacking lions, but if one tries to use it on a pen of peaceful pigs they will not be harmed at all as they suddenly turn to attack the player. It is worth noting for future reference that *Catechumen*'s animal-human hybrids such as Minotaurs and werewolves are not protected by any similar disincentive to combat, and dissolve

into flames exactly as do demonic opponents.

Human Enemies

Human enemies are found in *Attack of the Sunday School Zombies* (2009), *Bible Run!* (2013), *Brought 2 Life* (2012), *Captain Saint* (2005), *Catechumen, David and Goliath Bible Story, David vs. Goliath, Escape from Punch Bully Ranch* (2008), *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho, Gideon Wars* (2011), *Left Behind: Eternal Forces, Light Rangers: Mending the Maniac Madness, Moses: the Freedom Fighter, Quest of the Apostles, Soldier of God* (2006), *Spiritual Warfare* and *Timothy and Titus*.

Humans can be evasive. Consider *Death Race* (1976), both a contender for first video game to be protested for "violence," and perhaps the first to include crosses, though it did not seem to be courting Christian players: the only action is running over monochromatic humanoids eight pixels tall which the developers called "gremlins," stating clearly in an interview, "We were quite careful not to call these figures people."[viii] Because humanity can be obscured in this way through name selection, or through any of the other decisions designers make, like making skin green rather than tan, or including only one eye, the presence of humans in games should always be regarded as optional and thus intentional.

Readers of an article on games and violence will understandably wonder which games offer no alternative to killing humans. With one exception, this only occurred within my sample in adaptations of stories from the Hebrew Bible wherein God's favored character was a killer, specifically, *Joshua & the Battle of Jericho*, *Gideon Wars* (2011), *Moses the Freedom Fighter,* and both *David and Goliath* games. While we may ask why developers chose to adapt these stories, to omit combat would have

rendered the biblical text behind the game illegible. In each case, the killing was bloodless and left no body, technically accurate without including established markers of problematic violence, PG-13 at worst.

The single exception is *Soldier of God* (2006). Not only within my sample, but across the more than 1,600 religious games I have indexed, this seems to be the only game that revels in killing humans or shows them shedding blood. The second level, for instance, opens with "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18), then introduces swarms of cackling witches to kill with bullets and grenades. The other levels, in which the player kills LGBTQ people and idolaters, likewise, open with explanatory biblical citation. Created with an early version of Game Maker, *Soldier of God*'s graphics are spare, and the MIDI loop of "Welcome to the Jungle" in the background is short. The game's one morbid extravagance is the inclusion of a squashing sound effect whenever the player walks over a corpse.

To judge by the indignant news stories at the time of its release, we might suspect that *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* [LB:EF] is exactly the same. The Center for American Islamic Relations, for instance, requested that Wal-Mart stop selling the game on the grounds that "(t)he game reportedly rewards players for either converting or killing people of other faiths" (CAIR 2006). It was, in fact, a war strategy game about a militia of armed Christians in a near-future New York City, but it did not actually allow for the killing of any Muslims or Atheists (to name only two groups who protested the game). *LB:EF* specifically envisions a war between Christian forces and those loyal to the Antichrist, and while they can shoot one another, anyone committed to neither side or transitioning between them is totally impervious from harm. While tanks, turrets, and rifles are an unavoidable feature of play, the game is also a ministerial tug of war, each side trying to turn enemies neutral and neutrals into allies, perhaps

carrying single characters back and forth multiple times. This focus on conversion is noteworthy because Tim LaHaye, who co-wrote the Left Behind novels, and heartily endorsed this adaptation, states consistently that "We can never lose our salvation," but his explicit theology was ignored to create a game in which humans could be repeatedly saved, unsaved, and resaved (LaHaye 2013).

This focus on conversion seems, in fact, to be the dominant theme in Christian games featuring human enemies. In *Quest of the Apostles* (2001) and *Light Rangers,* this is the relatively conventional work of non-lethal capture of criminals. The fascinating difference is that in *Quest of the Apostles*, the player is Saul, "Your quest is to find Christians and arrest them; but you MUST make sure the person(s) you're speaking with are Christian before you make the arrest. If you arrest a good, Jewish citizen you will have to answer to the magistrate and will lose self-confidence" (New Mercies Ministries 2001).

In *Spiritual Warfare, Catechumen, Timothy and Titus,* and *Captain Saint* (2005) the player fires spiritual energy with the power to turn marauding non-believers into peaceful Christians. The Seventh Day Adventist game, *Escape from Punch Bully Ranch,* presents a combination of the arrest and transformation models of conversion. The player manages a crowd of nice kids and bullies with the apparent outcome that the bullies also turn nice if the player can move them all into a single group while preventing any outbreak of bullying.

I classified both *Attack of the Sunday School Zombies* (2009) and *Brought 2 Life* (2012) as games with human enemies here, but they carry the ideal of human conversion to such an extreme that it locates another edge of humanity: potential humans. In both cases, the player transforms zombie-like shambling humanoids into full humans. If

these had been classified as games with quasi-human enemies, our final category, they would have been the only quasi-humans offered any kind of mercy.

Quasi-Human Enemies

Quasi-Human enemies are found in *Bible Run!, Bible Venture: Beginning* (2015), *Blood Oath* (2014), *Captain Saint, Catechumen, Christian: the Video Game, GLOW: Guardian Light of the World* (2012), *Left Behind Eternal Forces, Light Rangers, Monsters from Hell* (2002), *Music Machine* (1983), *Quest of the Apostles, Soldier of God, Timothy and Titus* and *The War in Heaven* (1999).

David Chidester persuasively defines religion as "discourses and practices that negotiate what it is to be a human person both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman" (Chidester 2005, 18). Building upon this understanding, I initially stratified humanoid enemies, sandwiching proper humans below angels and above demons. However, I quickly realized that since there is no canonical answer to "Are elves better or worse than us?" I could not sort the super- from the sub- without obscuring the popular theology I hoped to document. When we do not presume to know its secret hierarchies, the quasi-human reveals itself as a nebula into which humanity overflows on all sides. Angels and demons, mutants and werewolves: to replace a few human body parts and tweak disposition slightly produces any number of our mysterious neighbors. This swarm includes allies, of course, but from *Minecraft*'s (2011-present) creepers to *Super Mario*'s bipedal turtles, one cannot play family-friendly games for long without encountering dangerous quasi-humans.

Music Machine (1983), the oldest game in our current sample, and perhaps the third religious game to be designed with enemies of any kind, starred two children who

had to catch symbolic representations of virtues, such as the stop sign of self-control, while avoiding humanoid Pudgeons. Though the manual calls Pudgeons "people," it also shows that they have snouted heads like aardvarks rather than noses like the human heroes and villain (Sparrow 1983). It is also, notably, the only game examined that includes quasi-human enemies which must be avoided rather than destroyed. With this one exception, every quasi-human enemy I encountered in these fifty games had to be destroyed. No quasi-humans could be recruited as allies, and none were invincible; anything nearly but not quite human (including the humanoid vices and robots above) was engaged in an unqualified life-or-death struggle with the player.

Demons, of course, are the quasi-humans one expects to battle in Christian games, and the present sample did not disappoint. Of the fifteen games with near human enemies, all but four depicted some of them with horns. Both *Timothy and Titus* and *Soldier of God* feature demons only as final bosses, while *Catechumen* and *Spiritual Warfare* include minor demons as trivial enemies and enormous demons ambiguously identified as Satan himself at the game's end.

Of all games featuring quasi-human enemies, *The War in Heaven* (1999) is a strange outlier because it allowed the player to either become a demon who fights angels, or an angel fighting demons. For the developers, this was necessary in order to make player choice morally significant ("we really can't teach much about making a good choice if there isn't any choice"), but many Christians found this an irresponsible use of in-game freedom ("Our biggest hurdle there is that many Christian stores are loathe to carry a title that has a demon on the cover, or that allows the player to choose the evil path") (ChristianGaming.com 2000). This ability to play as a demon is the only show of empathy for any quasi-human in my sample (except, again, for

those two games where the quasi-humans were actually disguised humans), though the demonic path is a homiletic trudge where one must gather a series of items like "The Breastplate of Sin," and ending with a larger demon betraying and killing the antihero.

Analysis and Conclusion

Are these games just the same as the games made by non-Christians? Is the hypocrisy of these family-friendly games greater than that of *Spyro the Dragon* (1998) or *Super Mario*? Until there emerges some reliable research on the field of games-in-general, I can only say that the enemies in Christian games seem in many ways familiar alongside the hundreds of non-religious games, I have played across the same period, and that it was easy to pick among well-known blockbuster games to find examples for each of these sections. Nothing about stomping angry plants with faces or protecting one animal from another will seem strange to a regular player of video games. If there was a systematic difference, it was in the treatment of humans. Though I have certainly played many games wherein one can entice human enemies to the player's side, the proportion here seems generous. I have never had the impression nor heard anyone else generalize that when one sees a human in a video game they can probably be redeemed. Because in five cases this redemption was conversion by way of projectile evangelism, there seems to be a specifically theological reimagining of what the gamer might do to its enemy.

We can find much more objective data not by comparing Christian to their worldly counterparts, but in comparing types of enemies across our present sample of Christian games. Through this lens, the most obvious feature is the sharp difference between the tendency to convert human enemies and these games' mercilessness in

their treatment of quasi-humans. When animals least resemble humans they can be pacified, when nature least resembles humans it is indestructible, and when concepts least resemble humans they cannot be fought. However, when any of these classes of enemy shades into quasi-humanity, they become marked total destruction. I began this research expecting that demons would be treated more cruelly than any other type of enemy, and was shocked to find that horns seemed not to matter at all. A cyclops or a virus with a human-like face was just as ineligible for mercy as a red skinned demon. This seems consistent with the reading of video game (non-)violence through Agamben and Bataille above, in that the nearly human is emblematic of bare life. I suspect a thorough investigation would find a similar hostility to quasi-humans across games-in-general, but I am certain there exist non-religious games where hostile elves and mutants can be turned into friends, so it seems impossible that the divide between humans and near-humans could possibly be as steep as it is in Christian games. As Mary Douglas reminds us,

> "(t)here are several ways of treating anomalies. Negatively, we can ignore, just not perceive them, or perceiving we can condemn. Positively we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place." (Douglas 1966, 39)

That is to say, the drive to eliminate ambiguous cases is unevenly distributed, and I propose that it is especially prominent in Christian games, and other family-friendly media: they clearly mark the line between human and near-human with a dramatic shift in permissible force. I suspect that a deep dive into the serious games designed to teach civics and biology, or those other micro genres most invested in their non-violence, we would find a similar situation.

That artificial enemies, software and spaceships alike, were destroyed in every case,

perhaps even shown less mercy than quasi-humans were, is something of a mystery to me. It would be easy to assert that a certain sublimated loathing for computers runs through Christian gaming culture, that there is a kind of death drive within the gamer/enemy dyad, that Bataille's theory of the tool proves that the computer is always a quasi-human, or any number of other theoretical speculations. However, none of these strike me as demonstrable quite yet, so I offer this enigma as an enticement to future scholars of enmity in games: A tiny, but somehow representative continuation of the contemporary state, like a single arm of a great fractal, the gamer's sovereignty is the power to decide who lives and who dies within the destructive economy of games. Christian gamers moderate this violence with an impulse to save humans, but this missionizing generosity seems to be built up through additional cruelty for the near human. Why would Christian games surround this tension with fantasies of destroying technology as well? Do, perhaps, secular games make machines more redeemable and the human more disposable?

I propose that questions like this will never be answerable until we begin to understand the field of video-games-in-general, turning the focus of our research away from the dozen blockbusters and handful of indie favorites released each year to consider the far greater swarm of forgotten games around them. The practice games of amateur programmers, pornographic games, clone ware, trash games, troll games, and the little games made for religious players, these are the faceless victims of conventional games scholarship, the hordes that are reduced to nothing as books and articles elevate the very few games they deign to mention into positions of cultural heroism (and villainy). Perhaps the strange hostility to robots in Christian games can serve as a reminder for video game researchers, directing our attention to the arcane subgenres, which we must cease to trample mindlessly if a science of games is ever to emerge.

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Primary Sample of 50 Christian Video Games

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Bible Basher, 1999. [video game] (web browser) Creation Tips.

Bible Run!, 2013. [video game](Android) Scott Ware.

Bible Venture: Beginning, 2015. [video game] (Android, iOS) Integrity Bit.

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Brought 2 Life, 2012. [video game](web browser, Linux, Windows) TeamBIO, www.christiandevs.com.

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GLOW: Guardian Light of the World, 2012. [video game](Android, iOS) Morpheous, The Sanet Group.

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[i] The desensitization camp is well encapsulated in the American Psychological Association's public statements on the topic (Calvert et al. 2017). For a two exemplary monographs by boosters, consider McGonigal (2012) or Markey and Ferguson (2017).
[ii] The index currently contains 839 denominationally unspecified Christian games, 81 biblical games, which would be playable by Jewish as well as Christian players, and 148 games created for specific Christian denominations.
[iii] For a representative sample, see the 1412 pages detailing rules for hundreds of pastimes in these two Victorian game books: (Hoffman 1894) and (Champlin and Bostwick 1899).
[iv] The primary source for this history were the 296 manuals included in Westgate (2002).
[v] Describing the situation in the 1940s, though it "While surveys suggested that females read comic books only slightly less often than males did, there were few titles aimed principally at girls and young women" (Wright 2001, 128).
[vi] The praise Bataille heaps upon Kojève's introduction to Hegel is impressive, "it is the only way to view the various aspects of human life – the political aspects in particular – differently from the way a child views the actions of adults" (1973, 123-124).
[vii] For a lively storefront, consider (Christian Games Now! 2018); for two software companies, consider (Sunday Software 2018) and (Wisdom Tree Games 2016); for two large lists of games consider (ChristianColleges.com 2018), and the capacious arcade at Christian Games (Ijmker 2018).
[viii] "Sick, Sick, Sick," *Newsweek,* January 10, 1977, 54.