Craig Detweiler, ed. *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010. 224 pages. $19.95.

This volume is written by those involved both as academics *and* in the creation, development, and playing of video games. I would love to attend one of their conferences: scholarly papers in the morning and afternoons with late nights devoted to cutthroat competition on the latest beta versions of a new *Guitar Hero*. My first thought, prior to actually reading this book, was that it would likely be a too cool, shallow justification for the time, money and energy some devote to video games. My mistake. While the book's several authors take video games seriously – *very* seriously – it is not simply an overzealous insiders' justification for the latest (and often passing) fad in the digital world. Although the last video game I played was about twenty years ago when my six-year old nephew mercilessly walloped me, and I have not the slightest interest in making up for lost time and opportunity, I found the authors' credibility, passion, and insight engaging, even infectious.

Twelve chapters by fifteen authors are divided into three sections, along with a conclusion and an introduction by Detweiler. There is also a clever appendix entitled "Beyond 'Turn that Thing Off!' Elevating the Gaming Conversation between Parents & Kids." The appendix is written by two directors at the Fuller Youth Institute who provide four guidelines for engaging game players in conversation rather than condemnation. Chapters in Section 1, "Playing Games with God," describe various methodologies for examining and understanding the games and their appeal. While there are numerous methodologies available, their appeal, two meta-theories seem to have emerged: narratology and ludology, that is, what story is being told and how the game is played.

Section 2, "Halos" examines the history and development of gaming: Christian resistance, Muslim adoption, Wii, virtual selves, and more. (*Halo* is a popular game, but you probably knew that.) While many games employ theological and philosophical concepts, the games that directly employ Christian theology seem not to be great games, suffering on both narratology and ludology measures. Too obvious, too preachy, no fun.

Section 3 is "Avatars." (Keep in mind that this book is largely pre-*Avatar*, James Cameron's blockbuster, record-setting, award-winning 3D movie). Here we encounter the ideas of games and "role playing and virtual selves inherent in interactive entertainment" (14). *Second Life* is one example, but only one among an increasing catalog. Virtual communities form around these games. Theological issues of communion, eschatology, salvation, and identity motivate many of these games.

Detweiler observes in the introduction that "Games make us miraculously free from everyday concerns. They are a consolation, a respite, an escape" (2). It is equally true, of course, that games prepare us for reality by rehearsing skills, strategies, and attitudes that will be necessary for survival as adults. Perhaps this has never been truer than with video games. A case in point, not mentioned in the book, is a video game, developed initially by the U.S. Army to train soldiers, has become its most successful recruiting tool. Detweiler then wonders if "the finest video games can help us reacquire a playful, childlike faith" (2). The goal of the book, "[r]ather than focusing on religion within games…will focus on the theological implications of both stories being told and the structures of the games" (5).

While preachers may or may not be gamers, we do need to be alert to the increasingly numerous and diverse ways in which people define, re-define, even re-create themselves. The

games, for some players may be more real than reality. At least, we might consider the claim that "movies are being unseated by games as our primary cultural metanarrative." (190) If this seems extreme, consider that, for example on *Second Life*, among other places, people spend considerable real money (at least what we generally think of as real money, which is actually largely a fiction) on virtual objects. Games, as they become more real, have more input with more control and likely more fun than "real" life. It will become harder and harder to determine what is real and what is not. Where does God fit into all of this? These authors would claim, right in the middle of it all.

Rick Stern
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
Saint Meinrad, IN