

**A Christian Pastoral Response to the Spiritual Impact  
of Digital Gaming on Christian Adolescents at  
Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg**

By

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The opinions expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessary reflect the views of the South African Theological Seminary or the supervisor (s) of the research.

I hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted to any academic institution of degree purposes.

Signed: Elizma Zaayman

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## **Abstract**

The Bible was written long before the internet and digital gaming. There is therefore nothing specific in Scripture that addresses this form of game playing or this fantasy world that humans engage in as a form of entertainment. The youth of Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg (CFH) church have become engulfed in this phenomenon of gaming and Christian parents are asking whether this could possibly negatively affect their adolescents and their faith. Clearly the church needed to determine a valid response to this question. The primary objective of this study is to formulate a theologically informed strategic plan where the playing of role playing fantasy digital games remains faithful to God and relevant to the ministry context and also the goals of CFH. This study begins with an interpretation of the operative theology of the church with reference to the gaming practices of its adolescents, then determines and defends what it believes is a faithful praxis in this area, and ends with a presentation of a communicative strategic plan for CFH in relation to its youth and members to achieve this praxis.

Qualitative research was performed on three of the teenagers of CFH. These case studies were used in order to help determine whether gaming can influence the Christian adolescent's faith, principles, values and morals and thus his/her spiritual life, growth and Christian identity. Certain Biblical principles and their use as a guideline to Christian behaviour regarding gaming are discussed. Information on digital games is provided to throw more light on the phenomenon and its potential impact on Christian teenagers.

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# CHAPTER 1:

## Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Digital gaming has come to be a significant component of modern culture in the developed world, especially among children and teenagers. Digital Games are played in a virtual world that is commonly known as virtual reality. *Virtual reality (VR)* is sometimes referred to as *immersive multimedia*. It is a computer-simulated environment that can simulate the real world or imagined worlds. Virtual reality recreates sensory experiences, such as virtual sight, smell, taste, touch and sound. The simulated environment can create life-like experiences (for example, simulations for pilot or combat training) or it can also differ significantly from reality, such as in VR games. Virtual space has thus become an environment that can replicate much that happens in the real world, especially free will and decision-making. But it also provides for a much wider range of activities, especially with reference to human achievement. There are cyber shops, churches, cafes, communities and religion (Kim 2012:3.) Kim's book is focused on the virtual world of digital gaming. Where the word 'gaming' alone appears in my thesis it refers to digital gaming unless stated otherwise.

In Kim's thesis (2012:3,4), she explains that online games present a virtual world that allows the player to partake in diverse activities, missions, quests and communication with other players throughout the world. Offline digital games can be enjoyed where the characters can be manipulated by the player and the software programming. Online games though can also be enjoyed where you have *Non Player Characters (NPC)* and *Player Characters (PC)*. NPC are characters within the game that the player meets up with and are not controlled by the player. PC is a player who can control characters within the game. Players can play with others in this world where communication takes

place through chat channels and a comments text box. Players encounter various virtual experiences while being exposed to and interacting with the images, symbols, virtual characters and other items. The players represented by virtual characters can perform movements and behaviour that are hostile or kind. Stealing from someone represents “violent and immoral attitudes” whereas to apply a beneficial spell on a character (in other words “to buff”), represents kindness and help. (Kim 2012:3, 4.)

The player’s ability to read maps, images and symbolic images is important and this skill therefore needs to be learned. In addition, the game world provides themes and concepts. Some of these games, with their themes and symbolic images, are discussed later in the thesis.

In the virtual world we can find real-world content related to philosophical and religious ideas. Through virtual characters and their lives, diverse kinds of religious symbolism can be observed (Kim 2012:5).

This is concerning since Kim states that it is through these symbols and experiences that the virtual world is related to the real world. This allows children, still in the phases of identity, values and moral development to be affected with gaming philosophies, religion and value principles. Many of the popular games use a religious narrative (including symbolism and characters) as the major theme. Games often have historical and cultural settings and a religious and political storyline.

This world of digital gaming became of concern to me when I noticed that many professing Christian teenagers appeared to be spending excessive time in gaming and the content of these games had not been extensively dealt with by the churches. My interest ultimately lay with the way children are unknowingly being introduced and drawn into the secular, occultic and supernatural realms (including the hidden symbols and messages) by the game designers, as well as the addictive playing that I observed in many instances. My concern was also with the parents and their lack of knowledge and thus lack of discipline in their leadership and guidance of their children with reference to digital gaming. I was confronted with the possibility that gaming, at least excessive gaming,

might exercise a negative impact on these young teenagers, especially in their moral development due to the fact that in some genres of the digital games, the player is exposed to questionable ethics, excessive violence and explicit sexuality. My concerns were with, firstly, the allowing of inappropriate, over age restricted digital games (young teenagers playing +18 years games) and secondly, lax time management with the amount of time allowed for gaming. This issue is one that Christian parents would need guidance in order to raise their children according to the commandments given by God and the teaching and experience of the Gospel. This study was therefore born in my heart to attempt to understand the necessity of Christian teenagers being true worshippers and servants of God and how this can be influenced, sometimes unknowingly and negatively, by society and its traditions and technological and cultural innovations.

The study required an empirical dimension. For this I chose all the Christian digital playing teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship. Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg (from here on referred to as CFH) is a bible-based, free evangelical movement where the Bible is seen as the only foundation for faith. All other extra-biblical revelations are rejected. The church believes that it is through the Bible that God reveals Himself. Further, that it is in knowing the Bible that we learn to know God and the answers he gives to important questions in our lives. The church believes that Jesus shows us in a very practical way how to live in the world and how one can be happy and blessed. This includes following the message in John 8:31-32 of abiding in his Word. The church agrees with the German Alliance of Protestant Churches' statement of faith. This Alliance is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which is made up of national and regional Evangelical Alliances or Fellowships which exist in 123 countries in the world. This is estimated to embrace some three million local churches and 380 million Christians. (World Council of Churches: 2015.)

CFH is within a student city in Germany and is filled with students and community members not only from Germany and Europe but also from other countries throughout the world. On Sundays, after the service, these same teenagers can be seen huddled together or separately over a mobile phone or sitting alone playing games on their digital devices. They are physically

together, yet not fully engaged with each other, but rather connected through the games being played.

The following questions regarding digital gaming arose in my mind (and other parents at CFH): Should I allow my child to play fantasy role-model digital games? Are these games and their hold on so many teenagers going to influence my child negatively and pull him away from the values and truths in Jesus' teachings and other Christian teachings? Are these games undermining my child's spiritual purity and growth? Since many of these games mock Christianity and involve aggressive shooting, can they be expected to gradually corrode his respect for and value of God's commandments, the Gospel and the church? Is my teenager able to honour his Christian commitments to aim to "be like Christ" in his sanctification journey during this fragile period of adolescence? By playing these games with their supernatural beings, is my child exposing himself to the possibility of the worship of other gods, thus a form of idolatry so strongly forbidden in the Bible?

This study was born as a result of this new and growing phenomenon of digital gaming and the need to assess what would be an informed Christian approach to it at CFH.

## **1.2 Objectives**

### **1.2.1 Primary Objective**

The primary objective of this study is to formulate and communicate a critically and theologically informed strategic plan to ensure that the teenagers' digital gaming praxis at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg (CFH) is faithful to God and optimally relevant to the church's foundational beliefs, goals and its situational context.

### **1.2.2 Secondary Objectives**

The primary objective is achieved by dividing it into three secondary objectives. The achievement of the three secondary objectives thus enables the primary objective to be attained. One chapter in the thesis is devoted to each secondary one. The three secondary objectives are:

1. Interpret the operative theology of CFH with respect to its Christian teenagers' involvement in gaming.
2. Determine and defend what faithful Christian praxis with respect to digital gaming among CFH's teenagers ought to look like.
3. Develop a strategic plan to ensure a faithful Christian praxis of digital gaming among the Christian adolescents at CFH.

## **1.3 Research plan**

### **1.3.1 Design**

The research design for this mini-thesis is Don Browning's four-step approach to strategic practical theology (1991, chap. 3). In Browning's vision of theology, as in Smith's (2013) approach to integrative theology, strategic practical theology is the climactic final movement. Browning's model of strategic practical theology follows an in-depth descriptive, theological and historical analysis of a selected praxis in a church context and provides a framework or model for research that leads to improving the praxis. Browning (1991:55–56) proposes four steps for this task:

1. How do we understand the concrete situation in which we must act?
2. What should be our praxis in this concrete situation?
3. How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?
4. What means, strategies and rhetoric should we use in this concrete situation?

This mini-thesis follows this four-step approach, but treats the second and third steps together, resulting in three content chapters. This yields the following structure for the thesis:

#### *Chapter 1: Introduction*

This chapter introduces the research by providing its background, objectives, research design, methods and structure.

*Chapter 2: Digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg in the light of this church's foundational beliefs*

This chapter covers Browning's first question, namely interpreting the present praxis. In this thesis the present praxis is digital gaming among the teenagers of CFH and whether it reflects the church's foundational beliefs.

*Chapter 3: An approach to digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg that is faithful to this church's foundational beliefs*

This chapter covers Browning's second and third questions, namely developing and defending a vision of the ideal praxis. Here the praxis is in respect of digital gaming practices of the teenagers at CFH that harmonises with the church's foundational beliefs.

*Chapter 4: A communicative strategic plan for achieving the new praxis for digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg*

This chapter covers Browning's fourth question, namely what means, strategies, and rhetoric should we use to achieve the new preferred praxis? In this study, it concerns developing a strategic and communicative plan to achieve the approach to digital gaming among the teenagers at CFH that is most faithful to the church's foundational beliefs.

*Chapter 5: Conclusion*

This Chapter concludes the research by reviewing the objectives, methods and findings of the thesis.

### **1.3.2 Methods**

#### ***Chapter 2***

A qualitative research of a single faith community is conducted. This included three case studies of three gaming teenagers at CFH. By making use of the case study method, I was able to produce a thick (detailed) practical and theoretic description that enabled me to explore the possible impact that digital gaming had on the three Christian adolescent's faith, principles, values and morals and thus their spiritual walk with God. The results are analysed paying

attention to general themes and issues. I also used the interview method of research with the pastor of CFH in order to obtain his thoughts, ideas and comments on adolescent gaming. This was also essential to help gain further clarity on CFH's foundational beliefs and what approach to digital gaming among its teenagers was likely to be most faithful to these beliefs. An interview with another teenager outside the church was conducted to obtain a broader perspective on digital gaming and its power to lead to addictive gaming.

### ***Chapter 3***

In chapter 3, three Biblical Principles are presented that provide a biblical perspective by which digital gaming can be evaluated. A brief focus on play, games and recreation in church history is presented to provide additional insights to help critically reflect on digital gaming. The phenomenon of digital gaming receives substantial attention, mostly in appendices for readers unfamiliar with this field of gaming. This includes scholarly research on the effects of digital gaming.

Information from chapter 2 and chapter 3 are correlated in order to arrive at a theory of action for digital gaming among teenagers (and younger children) at CFH to shape and guide the praxis.

### **Chapter 4**

In this chapter I seek to develop a strategic and communicative plan to achieve the desired praxis for gaming at CFH. The communicative aspect draws much on modern electronic communication methods to bring about required changes at CFH and the teenager community with reference to gaming.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

# **Digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg in the light of this church's foundational beliefs**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter covers Browning's first step in his four-step approach to strategic practical theology, which is the model used for this thesis. This entails understanding the concrete situation in which one needs to act. Thus this chapter begins with a discussion and interpretation of the empirical study of digital gaming among adolescents in CFH. This empirical study was performed by making use of the case study approach, a qualitative research process. Denscombe (2003:30) suggests that making use of the case study approach is ideal when the target group is typically represented in a few members. This was the situation at CFH where the teenagers involved in gaming at CFH are few in number. They also seem to typically represent the broader category of teenagers at large in first-world countries, though this would require further research with a much bigger sample group to confirm. Therefore a case study of most of them in this church was possible and pursued.

The case study approach enabled this research to holistically and thoroughly evaluate the teenager's gaming experience and the church's impact, if any, on their involvement in gaming. The procedures for the case studies are presented. The results are also recorded, analysed and interpreted.

It was deemed important to present a section on gaming. This is because not everybody reading this thesis will have the necessary knowledge of gaming to fully appreciate its scope and conclusions. Most parents who would value a work like this one are still getting acquainted with the gaming tsunami.

An interview with the pastor of CFH was conducted. His opinion and that of the CFH movement is crucial to the outcome of the thesis. The results of this interview are discussed in this chapter.

A non-Christian teenager (18 years of age), who is a gaming expert and who stated that he became obsessed with gaming, was interviewed. The results of this research are beneficial in better appreciating some of the results of the case studies. The interview results are discussed and their significance for understanding gaming and its addictive capacity are gauged in this chapter.

The church's dogma is critical to the outcome of the study. This is because this study will consider how the results from the case studies agree with or contradict the church's faith beliefs and traditions, including Biblical guidelines for Christian behaviour (especially with reference to content and challenges in gaming), and whether serious attention to adolescent gaming needs to be introduced by the church. Thus chapter two also presents CFH's pastoral expectations according to its foundational beliefs.

The chapter ends with a reflection on the degree to which CFH's stated and implied dogmas are reflected in the members of the church's teenagers gaming habits in their leisure time.

The results of chapter 2 are correlated with the results of chapter 3 (theological and other perspectives relevant to gaming). In chapter 4 an appropriate pastoral response to the research results is formulated.

## **2.2 Empirical research methodology of data collection procedures**

### **2.2.1 CFH's position on gaming**

An attempt was made to find the CFH's official position and teaching with regards to gaming. Further I wanted to know, if it had such a policy, as to what degree it was being applied. The pastor stated that there was no such official church policy and gaming had not as yet been approached by the church. Despite this being the case, the pastor was very interested in the subject matter and revealed concerns. Due to the fact that there was no official position on gaming in any official document on doctrinal beliefs in the church, I attempt

largely to establish the implied official position on gaming in CFH from the interview with the pastor.

### **2.2.2 Interview with the CFH pastor**

Prior to the interviews with three of CFH's teenagers, the pastor of CFH was approached and by appointment an interview was conducted and recorded. His permission was requested and obtained for the case studies and a 75 minute interview followed in which I sought to obtain in some detail his opinion on adolescent gaming and the spiritual lives of the teenagers within CFH and a possible correlation.

### **2.2.3 Case Studies**

The adolescents at CFH who were chosen for the case studies were those who attended the Friday evening *Teenkries* meetings regularly and who partook in some form of gaming. They were thirteen to sixteen year old adolescents. Three teenagers responded positively when asked if they would be willing to partake in a study on their gaming and its possible effects on their Christian morals and beliefs. Once the teenager indicated a willingness to partake in the interview the parents were approached for permission. The three teenagers were given the go-ahead.

The interviews were conducted in an informal, flexible, private, and relaxed manner allowing the teenager complete freedom to respond fully and honestly. Confidentiality was assured. At the start of the interview the adolescent was first asked to relate his/her experiences and views of gaming without any prompting. Thereafter, the teenager was requested to fill in answers to a questionnaire (see appendix 1). Finally, in the light of the results of the first two stages of the interview, the teenager's experience and thoughts and the possible spiritual implications of gaming were more deeply explored. The interviews were recorded and field notes were written up.

### **2.2.4 Interview with a non-Christian teenager**

The permission of a non-Christian teenager was obtained for an interview to be recorded and any pertinent information yielded from the interview to be used within the study. His comments are used to correlate and compare with the

three case studies. The real purpose of this interview was to possibly throw further light on some of the practices of the CFH teenagers revealed in the case studies. Because this teenager became obsessed with gaming (see section 2.3.5), his story helps understand how gaming can become addictive.

## **2.3 Data results**

### **2.3.1 CFH's position on gaming**

The services at CFH are very simple, without much tradition or liturgy. They attract people who don't come from traditional church backgrounds and who are interested in a spiritual home where a relationship with a living God and other Christians is of prime importance.

CFH is a movement and not a denomination. It is evangelical and all teachings are Bible-based because it is believed that God reveals Himself through the Bible. The church also believes that no true teaching can be given without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as the Bible says of itself that it cannot be properly understood without the Spirit of God.

The church continues to reiterate that it is through knowing the Bible that we will find all the answers to the important questions in our lives. It is through the practical life and teachings of Jesus that we can learn how to live a happy and blessed life. This includes following the message in John 8:31-32 of abiding in His Word and that through this truth being truly free. CFH holds no official position on gaming and it was concluded that the pastor's position did not really add any further perspective. Perhaps in the light of this thesis the church might feel led to add an official document on its approach to gaming, especially among teenagers.

### **2.3.2 The CFH pastor's position on gaming**

The pastor mentioned some pertinent points. These could be seen as some basic ingredients of a policy that would enable CFH to help their teenagers handle gaming appropriately. The pastor believes firmly that if the church does not seriously invest in the teenage group and if they do not give these teenagers an alternative, they will be drawn away from God and his moral and spiritual standards, by the secular world. He mentioned that one of the

questions to ask is: “Are these teenagers able to hear the Holy Spirit in order to determine what they should and shouldn’t do?” He stated that it is up to the Church to inform these teenagers and to formulate a Biblical foundation, a baseline so to speak, for them. This needs to be done in an interesting, highly interactive, non-threatening and secure manner. If the church fulfills this role it is believed that the teenagers will be able to make the right choices regarding gaming.

His greatest concern with gaming is that he believes that it will in a way be “robbing the child of being able to live in the real world” if played excessively. In other words, it steals away his real life. He continued to explain that in the real world the teenager will fail and make mistakes; but as an avatar he can not really make mistakes. Even if he experiences a temporary defeat in a battle or on a certain level of the game, it does not have consequences. His opinion is that games are also constructed in such a way as to keep the player hooked. The character will get another life or become resurrected in some or other way. One will never experience defeat or the consequences that one normally experiences in real life.

The pastor feels that gaming also takes something away from the child’s identity and character and interferes with the formation thereof. In the past, children would look up to their parents or some sports stars and aspire to be like them. When the child starts to realize that their heroes are human and can fall short of the child’s expectations, he/she becomes disappointed and realises that this person is not perfect. He states that, “In virtual reality though, the hero stays perfect and you yourself can be that hero.” He believes that in the real world there are real personal conflicts and other additional life challenges. He feels that in gaming, teenagers do not experience these and thus escape the associated hurts and learning experiences, which can ultimately affect the formation of their personality and identity.

In summary, CFH has no official opinion or comment on adolescent gaming or on any form of gaming. It relies on the Bible and on the biblical preaching and teaching ministry of the church to equip the Christians to serve God faithfully in their lives. It is thought that this is enough to prevent gaming becoming a problem that hinders spiritual growth and Christian living. However, gaming is

clearly becoming amazingly popular and potentially very addictive. Its impact on today's youth will continue to escalate, including Christian youth. This suggests that a specific policy should be developed at CFH to ensure that teenagers handle gaming in a way worthy of the Gospel. This is especially so if the church's current influence on the teenagers is not providing the necessary spiritual foundation to handle gaming in ways that do not result in an unbalanced life-style that undermines spiritual growth and service.

The pastor's comments can be summarized as follows:

- (1) All churches should invest time in their teenagers and provide alternative activities to what the Bible calls worldly activities. If not, they could be drawn away from God and his morals and spiritual standards by the world.
- (2) One needs to ask the question as to whether these children are spiritually mature enough to hear the Holy Spirit and thus be able to determine what they should and should not do. If not, more strict supervision of gaming would be required.
- (3) The church needs to educate the teenagers in Biblical foundations and principles, thereby creating knowledge of a Godly life and how to live within these boundaries as a growing teenager.
- (4) Gaming could isolate children from real life and could steal real life experiences away from the child by giving a perfect virtual reality without opportunities to experience and learn from failure and mistakes as is the case in real life. This is not helpful, as teenagers learn from their mistakes and other negative experiences. In gaming, the child escapes into the perfect gaming world and misses out on life conflicts, losses and challenges and thus the formation of solid character.
- (5) Christian children should be allowed to play action gaming with shooting, killing and revenge games but in a parentally controlled supervised environment.

Therefore, it can be said that the pastor believes that Christian youth should be well taught in the Christian faith and allowed to be involved in controlled gaming through appropriate gaming-informed parental supervision.

### **2.3.3 The gaming world**

This thesis discusses digital games amongst adolescents that are played on a television, computer screen or other electronic systems such as tablet or mobile devices. Popular hardware apparatus used to play these games are Nintendo (DS, 3DX, Wii, Wii U, etc), PlayStation and X Box. These digital games can be played either as an uploaded game on a computer or through the gaming hardware devices mentioned, or online within a community of other online players.

This research is limited to the most popular games with a war/killing/violence element that also have good and evil undertones. Large amounts of violence can be very graphic: vivid depictions of stabbings, slicing, shooting, neck snapping, dismemberment, and rolling heads, and pools of blood and pieces of human flesh hitting the screen. In some instances these occur in slow motion allowing the player to view more intensely what method of torture or killing is being applied and how the recipient is affected. The accompanying sound effects of moans, groans and cries of pain make it all the more realistic. In some of these games, sexuality is portrayed in a subtle suggestive manner with innuendos and woman dressed in suggestive clothing. In other instances, noises, moans, slow motion camera angles, rocking cars and gyrating movements are exhibited in sexual encounters. The appendices 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide information on the most popular of these games that covers definitions, gaming restrictions, gaming awards, and a description of the games played by the interviewees (three teenagers at CFH and one non-Christian teenager).

In these games the player controls an avatar within the game world in first or third person view (see gaming definitions in Appendix 2). Further, in playing these games, the player fights various monsters, aliens or the enemy in some form and completes the prescribed quests and missions while interacting with other characters and players online within a fantasy world. Some challenges are performed alone or with a non player character (NPC) helping the player.

Many of these quests involve gathering resources, gaining the help of non-player characters, finding hidden objects, delivering an item, visiting specific locations or interacting with others and other objects. Throughout the course of the game the avatars fulfil quests and improve their skills and experiences in order to develop their characters. The player can customise his avatar's appearance and select an identity from several races. When the player has trained enough and gained sufficient experience (XP), his/her character can move to the next level (level up).

Below is a tabular summary that provides the reader with knowledge of some of the features and characteristics of the games considered in this study. The table could not fit easily on one page, so the table is in two parts (Table 1 and Table 2). A more in-depth description of these games, their age restrictions, and the scoring system used to rate each game, can be found in Appendices 3–5. It is suggested that the reader reads the games description if unfamiliar with the games and their storyline since some knowledge of the game, its storyline and accompanying themes is beneficial background knowledge to the rest of this mini-thesis. Included in the tabular summary below, are comments from various Christian critics allowing the reader to assess the game from a Christian viewpoint. The ratings of certain elements in the games and the comments come from Christian websites, blogs and their reviews. Websites such as *Christ Centered Gamer*, *Guide to Games*, *Common Sense Media* are not academic or scientifically appropriate for an academic review, but they do help in informing one about the gaming world's ratings and how gamers review and choose their games to play. The games are rated with a score of 1 to 10, with the higher the score being the better the score. For example, a score of 2 out of 10 for language means that the language is extremely bad. 10 out of 10 would mean that no foul language is present. Criteria used, are those that are important to players and to parents.

Graphics, sound and storyline are important aspects of a game. Thus knowing the rating of these in advance, plus the *GameRankings* (a secular ranking body) percentage grading given for each game, helps players determine the quality of the game and whether they would be interested in purchasing the



game. These various scores and ratings have been collected and presented in tabular form and can be seen in Table 2 below. Table 2 includes scores from a gaming website called *GameRankings* (GameRankings, 2014) as well as scores rated by various Christian websites called, *Christiancenteredgamer* (Assassin’s Creed, 2015; Call of Duty, 2015; Grand Theft Auto, 2015; Skyrim, 2015; The last of us, 2015a; World of Warcraft, 2015) and also from the Christian website, *Commonsensemedia* (Star Wars 2014a). It must be noted that the percentage grading awarded from all the sites do not take the player’s age into consideration. Having said this, I feel that the last two columns in Table 2: *GameRankings* and *Christiancenteredgamer*, should only be used as a guide for an adult gamer and not for children or adolescents.

*Table 1: A Christian guide to gaming (a)*

	<b>Graphics</b>	<b>Sound</b>	<b>Story line</b>	<b>Violence</b>	<b>Language</b>
<i>Last of Us</i> (2013) (18VL)	10	10	9,5 - Gripping storyline - Very Realistic	1 - Extremely Graphic - Torture	3 - F**k word used Often
<i>Skyrim</i> (2013) (18V)	9	9	9,5 - Great Story - Fun and Believable	1	7
<i>World of Warcraft</i> (2004) (T)	9 - Very good graphics	8 - Fairly good	9,3 - Very good	2 - Fair amount of fighting - Attacks with blood	6 - The occasional „damn“
<i>Assassin Creed Unity</i> (16V)	7 - Fantastic environments	10 - Excellent Voice acting	7.5 - Stunning attention to detail	2 - gory violence with violent executions	2 - Occasional profanity with S**t and F**k Words
<i>Star Wars: The Old Republic</i> (T)	6 - Noticeable flaws in graphics		6 - Storyline is not that exciting	6 - Game Revolves around combat	7 - Words such as damn and hell - Text chat can get risqué
<i>Grand Theft Auto (1997)</i> (18 LV)	10 - Excellent graphics	10 - Excellent voice and animation	9,5 - Excellent strategy play with tactics - Advanced	2,5	3 - F**k words and C***st words used often
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i> (18V)	8 - Good animations	9 - Good voice acting	9 - Excellent and cohesive story	1 - Explicit violence - Combat, dismemberment	0 - Prevalent use of F**k word, S**t word, and A**hole

Table 2: A Christian guide to gaming (b)

	<b>Sexual Content</b>	<b>Occult/ Super-natural</b>	<b>Morals &amp; Ethics</b>	<b>Game Ranking</b>	<b>Christian Centered Gamer</b>
<i>Last of Us</i> (2013) (18VL)	4,5 - Homosexuality - Sexual assault	10	5	95%	96%
<i>Skyrim</i> (2013) (18V)	2,5	2	7,5	94,43%	86%
<i>World of Warcraft</i> (2004) (T)	5 - Innuendo in speech - Revealing clothes	4 - High level of magic - Summon of demons		97%	
<i>Assassins Creed Unity</i> (16V)	5 - Mostly sexual dialogue	8	7	73,33%	72%
<i>Star Wars: The Old Republic</i> (T)	4 - Sexual innuendos - Gyrate club dancing	4 - The Force - The dark side - Magic	8 - Choice of play on evil or good side	83,87%	72%
<i>Grand Theft Auto</i> (1997) (18 LV)	1,5 - Prostitutes, homosexuals, strip clubs, adult content	10	3	97%	70%
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i> (18V)	9	10	10	78,10%	86%

The above table helps one to sift through the most popular trendy games and note at a glance which games seem acceptable for a Christian adolescent. Making use of the age ratings by non-Christians can definitely aid in the process of evaluation. However, as a Christian there are a few other red flags that we need to take heed of. Secular ratings, although helpful and give an indication of certain content, can also be misleading. A teen-rated game contains many elements that should be deemed unacceptable to a Christian teen. The frequent use of God's name in vain is not thought unacceptable to the secular world, yet for a Christian of any age, this is not acceptable. Spirituality, magic or elements of the supernatural are also not included in the rating system. This is a matter of great importance, since it is one thing for the child to be exposed to acceptable superheroes and fantasy, but quite another to be exposed to other elements of the supernatural not in keeping with the biblical worldview. According to O'Neil (2001:1), there are five types of supernatural beings in the games: animatism, animism, ancestral spirits, gods

or goddesses and minor supernatural beings. Excessive exposure to these could undermine a child and teenager's biblical worldview and even prompt an unhealthy curiosity leading to experimentation with possible spiritually negative consequences. It is suggested that a future study should delve into the designing of a Christian entertainment rating system. Although such a table would be valuable in limiting the young child's exposure to the negative elements noted above, one could feel that it is preferable to provide the child with tools to note and assess this false reality and the anti-values rather than to inhibit the playing of such games. Chapter 4 formulates such a policy that addresses this educating of the child and empowering him/her with such tools.

Many of the above mentioned games are popular due to their captivating and fascinating storyline and excellent graphics. It was disclosed in the case studies (see below) that teenagers are attracted to the games with a good storyline, good graphics and dynamic action. The above games all contain these elements. However, many also contain extremely graphic violence and aggression, explicit sexuality, non-Christian spiritual worldviews and questionable morals.

#### **2.3.4 Case Study results**

The results of the case studies are summarized under different themes below in section 2.3.6.2. The lengthier direct responses in the case studies are included in Appendix 6.

All three teenagers began to play games around the age of eight to ten years of age. All three progressed from simple fantasy child games to more advanced shooting action games. Maria (for the sake of protecting the privacy of the interviewees, they have been given fictitious names) is a sixteen-year-old female, who plays on her brother's X-Box. She is allowed to play whenever she has finished her duties at home, but due to many responsibilities only plays approximately seven to eight hours a week. She experienced hurt as a child and due to this has trust issues. She has always been a loner and does not make friends easily. Despite this, she now has a couple of very close friends.

Markus is a fourteen year old male who plays whenever he is allowed to and does so approximately twenty to twenty five hours a week. He mentions that he

has restrictions placed on his gaming with respect to the type of gaming allowed. Despite this, he is playing games above his age limit such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (18V), *Grand Theft Auto* (18LV) and *Skyrim* (18V). He is a confident, social teenager who makes friends easily. He has a busy social and active life.

Jonas is a thirteen year old male who plays only with his parent's permission in the week and anytime during the weekend. He plays approximately twenty five to thirty five hours a week. He was bullied in his first five years of school and this seems to have slightly affected his self-image and confidence. Presently he is in a different environment and has overcome the bullying experience. He is mostly a loner with few friends and does not make friends easily. He has some friends at school, but no one close and no friends who visit him at home.

### **2.3.5 The results of the interview with the non-Christian teenager**

See Appendix 7 for the full version of the results of the interview with the teenager Darius (not his real name). The value of the results is that they provide evidence that gaming can be addictive resulting in under activity in other relevant areas of life necessary for full development. The interview also indicated there is positive intellectual and skills development through gaming.

Of interest in this interview, is that Darius admits to having been a gaming addict playing up to seventy hours a week. He mentions that this amount of time spent sitting indoors resulted in health consequences with postural deviations, skeletal pain, and vitamin D deficiency due to lack of sunlight and correct nutrition. Darius stated that his latest obsession was with the game called *The Last of Us* (18VL). The full details of this game can be read in Appendix 5. Darius associated with one of the main characters in the game, a young teenager girl called Ellie. Through playing so many hours daily, he developed a deep and intimate connection with this character. At some stage within the game she is threatened with rape. Darius explained how deeply this upset him and how he would find himself in tears while playing the game.

Another aspect mentioned, was how gaming allowed him to escape from experiencing real life emotions and to release pent-up frustration and anger. He saw this as an advantage since he would channel and release his anger or

disappointments into his game life, thus allowing him to be more controlled and less aggressive in real life circumstances.

### **2.3.6 Discussion of the research results**

#### ***2.3.6.1 Introduction***

This section firstly summarises the case studies' data under appropriate headings. For a full presentation of the case study results see Appendix 6. Thereafter this information (capturing the teenagers' gaming experience and Christian profession and spirituality) is interpreted in the light of the Christian tradition reflected in CFH's theological position. This enables a preliminary assessment of whether there is a correlation between the two.

#### ***2.3.6.2 Summary of and reflection on, the data under different headings***

##### *(1) Emotional history and relationships*

Maria and Jonas are loners with a few friends at the school. Maria is starting to overcome her traumatic past and to reach out more. They do not speak about their gaming experiences to their friends, thus keeping this part of their lives separate and isolated from others. While Maria is active and a dancer, Jonas prefers to stay at home and entertain himself with technology. Their emotional past could be a factor in them having few friends, not trusting easily and being more involved with self than others within the same age group.

Despite this, they were very confident and happy with whom they are. They know that God is in their lives and that they were created with a purpose. They know they are loved by family and God which gives them an experience of love and purpose in their lives. Their gaming habits could possibly have contributed to them being loners. Being more inclined to play digital games, read at home and watch television are all activities that keep one separate from other social networking activities within a group or with other individuals and friends. However, Markus does not have any emotional or relationship problems and plays more than Maria and nearly as much as Jonas. So emotional and relationship immaturity might not be attributable to too much gaming.

##### *(2) Faith and Spiritual Growth*

The three teenagers' answers seem to indicate that they have a basic Christian faith that influences their lives. They talk in a religious manner and have all the correct answers, yet with the deeper questions, their answers tend to show a greater need for spiritual growth and more intimacy with God. Could this be normal behaviour of a young professing Christian? The pastor of CFH seemed to think yes as he did question whether the teenagers were mature enough to hear the Holy Spirit in order to determine what they should and should not be doing. This would point to the need for specific guidance, at least in choice of games and gaming hours. There is always the danger when brought up in a Christian home that the child gives the right answers but is not yet converted. In such a case, there would be no guidance by the Spirit. However, if the three teenagers are Christians and have been brought up in evangelical homes and church where they have been well taught, then the rather marked spiritual immaturity could point to gaming interfering with their Christian growth.

### *(3) Gaming patterns and the effects*

The results show that all three subjects began gaming when they were around nine or ten years of age. They had supervision and control and played age restricted games a couple of hours a week. In contrast, Darius began when he was five years of age. It can be seen from the comments of Maria, Markus and Jonas about their gaming that the supervision they presently receive from their parents is lacking. For instance, the actual gaming activities of these teenagers show that they are playing games with large doses of violence, witchcraft and sexuality that are above their age restrictions. They mentioned playing mostly *Call of Duty* (18V), *Grand Theft Auto* (18VL), *Assassin's Creed* (16V), *World of Warcraft* (T), *Skyrim* (18VL) and *Star Wars* (T). A brief description and reviews of these most popular games are described in more detail in appendix 5.

When observing the three CFH teenagers' gaming habits, although parental supervision might not be sufficient with regards to game content in the cases of Maria and Markus, parental supervision with regards to time restriction and management seems to be upheld. Weekly gaming is kept to the minimum and more freedom over weekends is allowed.

It is interesting to take note of the following definitions of an “ordinary player” and an “obsessed player”:

Ordinary players typically spend 20 to 30 hours a week in these worlds, but obsessed players spend every night, every weekend, every vacation-forgoing sleep, food and real human companionship just to experience more time in the virtual world. MMORPG’s [see definitions in Appendix 2] have, in fact acquired such a reputation for addicting players that they’re regularly referred to as “electronic crack” and “heroin ware” (Kelly 2004:13-14).

Clearly the three teenagers interviewed are not obsessive players.

Even ordinary players are spending a significant number of hours per week on gaming. If this is the only recreational activity then one could argue that there is insufficient time over in the week for other important activities, including spiritual ones like Christian service and disciplines geared to enjoying and deepening one’s walk with God and Christian service.

Both male adolescents stated defensively that gaming has had no effect on their spirituality. But clearly from point (2) above, their judgment here seems questionable. The female adolescent suggested that she could be more violent in her life due to the content of the games. Darius states that his gaming has definitely affected him, but in a positive manner. He believes that he could get rid of his anger and aggression by expressing them in the roles he played in the games. He believes he is more sensitive to the issue of female physical abuse and how a woman must feel in the fearful position of a possible rape. He also feels that through his gaming roles, he has learned to multitask, multi-focus and improve his concentration abilities. His language abilities have improved and he has more confidence, faith in himself and increased perseverance.

#### (4) Mental and emotional reactions to gaming

Emotional reactions to gaming range from the subjects feeling “happy and relaxed”, “excited and satisfied” to “I like having fun”. Darius needed his gaming in order to escape from emotional issues of anger, hurt, boredom and even

hunger. It was his “getaway” and “runaway” place. Gaming was “actually like drugs ...” He was so obsessed with it that he “would play it like someone who wanted [was desperate] to have a quick smoke”.

All except Maria state that they all return back to the game within their imagination, playing and replaying maneuvers and situations, trying to overcome the challenges and move through the quests in their imagination in order to reach the next level. They all admitted to getting lost in the game during gaming and being totally involved in the role modelling, but also knowing that this was virtual reality and not real. Darius states that he would go home and play for up to ten hours a day after school activities. He stated that he would get so lost within the gaming concept that during holidays he would play more than twenty four hours at a time. Jonas mentioned that he would recreate the scene and work out how he could assassinate the other character. In other words, their thoughts would be focused on overcoming their opponent.

The issue of constantly returning to the game in one’s thoughts and using the game as a crutch for one’s negative emotions requires comment. These point to a mutually influencing relationship between the two worlds (virtual and real). Not only does the activity of gaming help these teenagers to overcome their negative real life emotions and feelings in not necessarily the normal biblical way, but the thoughts that are generated within the game are now purposely taken into the real world where they are experienced while day-dreaming or during times of thought. This shows that the thoughts that are generated in and around the game can have a great impact on the player’s mind. The physiological effects of this are discussed in chapter 3.

##### (5) Values and Morals

Table 3 below summaries their responses in the questionnaire with regards to morality issues in real and virtual life.



Table 3: Moral responses in virtual reality and real life

Moral value	MARIA		MARKUS		JONAS	
	in virtual reality	in real life	in virtual reality	in real life	in virtual reality	in real life
hurt someone	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Steal	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Lie	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cheat	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
get revenge	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
make a potion	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
cast a spell	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

Within the game and in the protective element of virtual reality, all three interviewees would cheat; get revenge and make a magic potion and most of the other immoral actions would be committed by at least two of the teenagers. Maria differed from Markus and Jonas in the fact that she would not steal, lie or perform a spell within the game. In real life all three would try to get revenge and Markus and Jonas stated that they would also lie. It is interesting to note that all three teenagers in at least three of their responses have different responses in the two worlds (cf. highlighted answers). It thus shows that in the gaming world these Christian teenagers go against Christian morals and values and in a few areas do the same in real life. Interestingly, All three teenagers felt that gaming did not affect their morals and values in real life.

They state that they were aware that they were killing within the game, but only because this was virtual reality and not real life. Sexuality in games is recognised, but is not of crucial importance to the game content. Maria and Markus state that they are not affected by the sexuality. Jonas enjoys it but it is

noted that he was only exposed to one questionable game, namely *Star Wars* (T). Since it has a teen age restriction (13), the level of sexuality, violence and aggression is not blatant or excessive. Acts of magic, spells and other elements of the supernatural are not limited, since age restrictions within gaming only apply to the level of sexuality, violence and language and not to the supernatural. Of concern, though, are the games and their content played by Maria and Markus due to the fact that they have played and are still playing over age-restricted games that are excessively violent and aggressive.

There is a possibility that the values and moral elements of the games could flow over into real life if repeated use of them in gaming works to the player's advantage. It is not impossible that this could be the case with revenge which all three individuals seem to view as a normal part of life, i.e. if someone is wronged; there is a need to get some form of compensation by revenge. Forgiveness is a Christian principle that must override all else. God is our avenger and the appropriate authorities that God has raised up in society through government. We are not to fulfil this role as Christians.

#### *(6) Loss of training for real life*

The pastor who was interviewed stated that there is value in playing games that contain elements of "good old fashioned shooting and action". This is because children are exposed to evil in real life and need to learn to combat it, which is what happens in many digital games. All of this though needs to be contained within a balanced life. If gaming becomes an unbalanced priority, the child loses out significantly on how to live in the real world with its painful experiences and its demanding challenges. From the interviewees' responses given, some signs of not solving emotional tensions in the real world but rather in the virtual world were detected. These can be seen as withdrawal from real life developmental experiences (as noted by the pastor).

#### *(7) Benefits of Gaming*

It would be amiss of me not to mention the positive aspects of gaming mentioned by Darius. These would also pertain to the other three interviewees. The benefits mentioned were that gaming helps to get rid of rage and anger directed towards society and other people. When feeling angry, Darius would

go to his gaming console and shoot, hit and kill the enemy draining himself of his excess anger and violent tendencies. All three of the subjects stated that they experienced emotions of satisfaction, release of stress and anger and relaxation when playing games. It is however questionable that Christians should resort to virtual therapy, especially if it entails active revenge.

The Pastor of CFH sees this in a different light when gaming is excessive. He tends to feel that if we allow children and teenagers to release their thoughts and feelings within the virtual and gaming environment, we are in fact stealing real life experience from them. In life we need to accept defeat, conflict, challenges and pain. We learn to forgive and adapt and overcome these life events and eventually grow through these experiences. We learn to run to God, to love and forgive and not to shoot and kill in order to get rid of our rage. The pastor's concerns fall away, when gaming is controlled and played within healthy limits, such as under parental control and observing age restrictions.

Darius also mentioned other benefits of gaming. Gaming helped him develop the ability to multifocus, multitask and work well under stress. In addition, one can easily become proficient in reading, writing and speaking in a foreign language since one is motivated to communicate with those in your team who speak another language through the reading and answering via the text boxes.

A further benefit comes from the social aspect of gaming. Jonas is a loner and has no friends to keep him occupied in his free time. He uses gaming as his means of communication with others who are likewise interested in his *Star Wars* fantasy world. Gaming for the introverted or physically or mentally challenged person is an excellent way of achieving interaction, communication and friends that would not normally be possible. Friendship and camaraderie can be found within the walls of the individual's room and gaming can in fact promote socialisation and create occasions for social interaction (Orleans and Laney 1997:190). Kim mentions that the player's desire for social activity can be fulfilled by the possibility of interactivity and simultaneous playing with other players (2012:78).

The obvious benefits of gaming needs to be taken into account when seeking to formulate a strategy for gaming at CFH.

### **2.3.6.3 CFH's teenagers' gaming in the light of CFH's Biblical foundations and mission**

When conducting a situational analysis, the Heitink model suggests that one needs to “interpret the situation and actions in light of the Christian tradition” (Smith 2013:92). The situation with regards to gaming among CFH's teenagers needs now to be evaluated in the light of CFH's theological foundation and traditions. This requires answers to the following questions:

- (1) Are the gaming activities of the Christian adolescents at CFH faithful to CFH theological foundations, traditions and missional purpose?
- (2) Are these adolescents in actual fact retaining their Christian identity (their faith) while gaming, i.e. is it negatively affecting their faith?
- (3) In the light of the history and theology of CFH, what ought to be the correct course of action in the field of gaming?

As already noted, CFH professes that the Bible is seen as the only foundation for faith. The church believes that it is in knowing the Bible that we learn to know God and find the answers it gives to important questions about how we are to live and grow as God's children. Also, that how Christians are to walk, talk, play and portray themselves in all facets of their human lives is covered in the Bible.

When comparing the Bible's description of the Christian life, and in particular Jesus' teachings on forgiveness, non-retaliation, love, generosity, loving our neighbour, resisting materialism, refraining from harbouring sexual thoughts, humility and gentleness, can we truly state that the teachings of CFH are congruent with the gaming practices of its teenagers? Is *Assassin's Creed* or *Call of Duty* something that the Bible would condone? Are excessive hours spent in gaming in keeping with the biblical emphasis on setting one's mind on things above and not on the earth (Col 3:2) and taking an interest in and serving others (Phi 2:4; 1 Thess. 5:11; Gal 5:13; Rom 14:13)?

One argument could be that “this is not real life and it is just a game; it's only virtual reality”. Despite the fact that gaming takes place in a virtual world, it is a

world within one's imagination, one's mind. Gaming generates thoughts and these thoughts physiologically affect neural pathways, which in turn affects hormonal and chemical reactions within the body. This results in decisions and actions which lead to behaviour (Leaf 2013:23-35). What we occupy our thoughts with, is what determines our lifestyle and identity. From the limited list above of the qualities expected of Christians and in the light of the many unbiblical themes and activities in many digital games, much gaming, especially addictive gaming, will work against the teenager's spiritual growth and identity in Christ (Leaf 2013, Kim 2012, Ducheneaut et al. 2006).

It can be concluded that the gaming activities of CFH's teenagers challenges Biblical morals and ethics and therefore could undermine spiritual growth and a sound Christian identity. The gaming trends of the teenagers at CFH do not harmonise with the theological foundations and purpose of CFH. Chapter 3 provides further exploration of certain biblical teaching in order to ascertain from additional perspectives whether the current gaming activities of CFH's teenagers could possibly be endangering their spiritual growth and dishonouring of God. The next chapter will conclude with a gaming praxis at CFH that reflects the biblical foundations and beliefs of the church. The approach to gaming that will be recommended for CFH will take into account the positive aspects of gaming noted in parts of chapter 2.

The results of the case studies of the three teenagers at CFH revealed a lack of understanding of the Christian truths believed, preached and taught at CFH. Further, their relationship with God seemed rather superficial and serious reflection on certain possible negative aspects of their gaming practice, at least excessive gaming, was absent. If it is assumed that the ministry at CFH and home religious instruction would have informed the teenagers of the foundations of the Christian faith, then it can be tentatively concluded that their gaming activities have undermined this influence and need careful evaluation and modification. This thesis attempts to provide an approach that is more in harmony with CFH's Christian tradition.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter covered the empirical study that was performed by making use of the qualitative research process. This study focused directly on CFH adolescents that appear to be typical of the teenager population group in a highly technological and affluent society. It explored their gaming practices and other issues of their Christian walk and life and raised the question as to whether the former could negatively affect the latter.

Additional interviews were conducted with the pastor of CFH and a non-Christian gaming addict. The former was helpful in gauging CFH's implied position on gaming as it was discovered that the church has no official position. The latter revealed the potential of gaming to become addictive. It also showed that there are some positive features to gaming.

This chapter has put the searchlight on the teenagers at CFH with special reference to their spiritual level and involvement in digital gaming. It has revealed a relatively new world that the Christian community needs to better understand. Gaming is a phenomenon that is raging in the teenager world that offers experiences on a scale and intensity never before possible. It has been noted that most of the games do not reflect a Christian worldview and might therefore be expected to undermine the Christian teenager's spiritual growth and Christian identity. It does not seem surprising in the light of the content of most of the games and the addictive nature of this modern gaming, that the three CFH teenagers studied are far from spiritually mature; their spiritual outlook seems noticeably immature for their ages. It would seem that their gaming activities could take some of the blame.

It is apparent from this chapter that the empirical research into only three teenagers at CFH does not permit a confident conclusion about any correlation between gaming and Christian development and service. Firstly, the sample group was far too small and secondly, not enough probing into the genuineness of the three teenager's claim to be Christians was conducted. If they were not truly converted to Christ, their lack of spirituality and reasonable Christian maturity could be attributable to this rather than the games and their gaming habits. Due to this being a mini-thesis that had to be based on all the steps of Browning's model only three teenager case studies could be conducted. In

spite of the sample being too small for clear conclusions, it does reveal the very real gaming world in which teenagers around the world are engrossed. The empirical study has shown that a closer look at possibly relevant biblical passages and other perspectives on gaming would be necessary before any correlation between gaming habits and the spiritual growth of Christian teenagers can be claimed in this mini-thesis. The material on the games in this chapter and the related appendices and the case studies certainly point to the need for the church to take a deeper look at this issue and critically evaluate the gaming industry from both the biblical-theological perspective, the normative perspective for Christians, and its dialogue with perspectives gleaned from other disciplines and relevant research. Since this thesis is a mini-thesis, it cannot hope but introduce a practical theology approach to this issue. Further research to bring greater clarity on how the church should pastorally approach this matter will be needed. This mini-thesis is a start to a process that needs much attention and greater depth.

The next chapter provides some of these additional perspectives on digital gaming, particularly excessive gaming, which provide the basis for a preliminary praxis on gaming for the Christian teenagers at CFH that will help facilitate them being better equipped to approach digital gaming so that they glean the many advantages, avoid any disadvantages, and grow spiritually and more confident in their Christian identity. In the best tradition of practical theology, the tentative results flowing from this mini-thesis with its limited scope due to word restraints need to be relooked at so that the practical theology cycle captured by the likes of Browning, Zerfass and Osmer can be reapplied to bring a clearer understanding and more appropriate praxis.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

# **An approach to digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg that is faithful to this church's foundational beliefs**

### **3.1 Introduction**

As stated in chapter 1, the design for this thesis is Browning's four steps in his strategic practical theology that involve providing answers to four questions. This chapter deals with the second two questions: *What should be our praxis in this concrete situation? How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?* The praxis that this chapter seeks to determine is an approach to gaming among the teenagers at CFH that reflects this church's biblical and doctrinal position and that is a faithful Christian praxis in the societal context of CFH. CFH's implied beliefs regarding gaming were noted in the previous chapter. This chapter in the light of the CFH's normative texts and the digital gaming world and relevant research, seeks to develop and defend a theory of action for the teenagers at CFH with reference to digital gaming.

As the Bible was written before the internet or digital gaming was even a thought, there is nothing specific in it that addresses this form of game playing or this fantasy world that humans can engage in as a form of entertainment. Christians have always held that in such situations biblical principles will be able to be found to guide the Christian's behaviour. The need for rest and recreation and mental activity is soundly biblical. This chapter attempts to discover guidelines for gaming in its modern highly complex, dynamic and technologically structured format.



Firstly, there is a consideration of the first two of the Ten Commandments and what it means to be imitators of Christ. It is shown how these two commandments and the exhortation to follow Christ's example provide guidelines for assessing gaming and seeking a biblical approach to it. The first two commandments stress the priority of God in having his rightful, exclusive, supreme place in the Christian's life, including the Christian teenager's young life. Any form of idolatry (polytheism) is clearly and consistently prohibited throughout Scripture. The following question must then be asked and an answer attempted: Can the gaming industry, which incorporates wide-ranging themes and actions and worldviews, undermine, sometimes unintentionally, the truth of God's sovereignty, holiness, power and his saving and lordship role in the teenager's life?

Secondly, there is a brief look at play, games and recreation in church history. Digital gaming has come to be a significant component of modern culture worldwide. Due to the contemporary nature of the digital age, there is therefore no church history prior to about 1980 that one can research in order to seek advice on this issue. However, showing how the church responded to similar or parallel scenarios in the past provides some insight as to how the church applied the Word of God in compatible or related contexts. This historical perspective should play a role in approaching digital gaming in a manner that is consistent with clear biblical teaching.

Thirdly, the chapter deals with the phenomenon and role of games in society. This is supplemented by some consideration of recent research on digital gaming that gauges the psychological, behavioural and physiological impact of gaming; it also picks up on the benefits that can be derived from this pastime. This section in the chapter provides an academic appraisal of the phenomenon and its findings are noted for additional principles in how to negotiate this whiz technology.

Fourthly, the chapter correlates and synthesises the previous sections in the chapter and chapter 2 resulting in the formulation of an approach to gaming at CFH that attempts to honour God, his word and the foundational beliefs of CFH. This praxis is also defended.

## **3.2 The relevance of specific Biblical principles to digital gaming**

### **3.2.1 There is only One True God who is to be loved, obeyed, served and exclusively honoured and worshiped**

In Exodus 20:2 God identified Himself in all his glory to the descendants of Jacob in the following ways: “I am the LORD (Yahweh) [the Eternal One] your God, who brought you out of Egypt [your redeemer]” (Ex. 20:2) (Smith 1993: chap. 13; Willoughby 1977:80) (unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the New International Version: NIV). In Exodus 20:1 the Hebrew Old Testament, *Tanach*, uses *Elohim*, meaning God, whereas the LXX uses a variant of *Yahweh*. The predominant usage of *Elohim* is to refer to the one true and living God and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Mouce 2006:296.) Thus, before the giving of the Ten Commandments, (Exodus 20:3-17) God identifies himself in ways that reveal his eternity, his deity, his special choice of Israel as a nation and his power to redeem.

The Ten Commandments follow God’s reminder of who he is. In his commentary, Durham is of the opinion that God spoke all this in an “audible voice” so that it was clear to the Israelites that he existed, was their God and was establishing his covenant with them (1987:278). Exodus 20:1 also notes that God spoke the Ten Commandments (Words) directly to the Hebrew nation and not via Moses as on all other previous occasions (Stuart 2006:445). It certainly seems from Exodus 20:1-23 (especially vv.1,19-23) that God spoke audibly to the people on this rare occasion. If it is correct that in the giving of the Ten Commandments God spoke audibly to all the people giving not only these commands but also when revealing and defining his identity, this then indicates to us how serious God was about making himself known to Israel and the importance of mutual loyalty from his chosen people in the light of the instituting of a covenant relationship. There is no proof as to whether God spoke audibly or otherwise, but we do know that further, strict consequences of blessings or curses were assured if his people obeyed or digressed respectively from the covenant stipulations (Exodus 20:5-6). Clearly Israel was

to be loyal to God and committed to his standards of righteousness (Stuart 2006:445; Smith 1993: chap 13).

This covenant narrative continues throughout the Old Testament showing the importance of a relationship between God and his people centred on intimacy and loyalty between both partners (Willoughby 1977:85). God's commitment to the salvation of his people continues through the New Testament where God reveals himself in Jesus Christ as the saviour of his people, the church.

God reveals himself in the Bible as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the people of Israel, but he is also incomparable, sovereign and unique (Wright 2006:70, 76). The Old Testament is clear that there are no other true gods and that Yahweh has proved himself superior to "all the gods of Egypt" (Ex 12:12) (Wright 2006:77; Willoughby 1977:80). Israel is clearly not to be tempted to replace the only true eternal God with lesser gods (Ex 20:3). Throughout the Old Testament we are told that God is the one true God (Gen 18:25; Ex 6:7, 15:11; Deut. 4:35, 39; 10:14; 1 Kings 8:60; 2 Kings 19:15; Jer. 32:27; Is. 45: 5, 14, 21, 22; 46:9; 54:5; Ps 47:7; Joel 22:27) (Jansen 2011:19).

The revelation of God as the one and only true God and his covenant relationship with his people with its requirements of correct worship of him and righteous living and service, clearly threads throughout the Old and New Testament. The good news of the New Testament is that God has revealed himself through the incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ (Smith 1993: chap 13). It is important to note this development in biblical history and the altering of worship of an almighty invisible God to include the worship of Jesus Christ, a visible human being, through the empowerment of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The coming of Jesus and his redemptive work applied by the Holy Spirit has made possible a deeper level of fellowship with and obedience to God. The whole purpose of the covenant relationship with God, the great pervasive theme of Scripture, is that through his grace, mercy and forgiveness our relationship with God should be the primary focus in our lives. (Matera 2005:21.)

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is a foundational text in the Old Testament for the nature of our covenantal relationship with God (Willoughby 1977:85). It tells God's people

to love the Lord with all our heart, soul and strength. This verse is echoed in Deuteronomy 30:6. It is also found in Deuteronomy 10:12, 11:13 and 13:3-4. These passages link this love for God with the service of God in appropriate worship and in living one's whole life for His glory. This call to love and serve God with every ounce of our being flows throughout the Old and New Testaments (cf. Jos. 22:5; Zech. 8:17; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chron. 6:14; Matt. 22:37; Luke 10:27 and Mark 12:30). The covenant call to love God with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves, entails fulfilling all the Ten Commandments. To achieve this God has written his law on the hearts of all believers so that they might love, obey and worship in God's strength (Heb. 8:10-12). (Jansen 2011:20.)

The entire Bible then is a narrative about God through his grace and redemptive work transforming sinful, rebellious, ungrateful and God-rejecting individuals into people who increasingly reflect the image of Christ and are devoted to passionately loving, worshiping and serving God and their neighbour. This process includes the seeking and enjoyment of the deepest fellowship with the almighty God.

We read in the Bible how gods (and their idols) were depended upon from the very beginning of time and how this polluted Israel and challenged the New Testament church. Today polytheism continues in the western world largely through people looking to materialism, worldly pleasure, success, wealth and fame to meet their deepest needs for fulfilment, meaning and safety. These have become the new gods of our time and are served with great devotion. In Africa and other parts of the world communication with the dead, magic, reincarnation, veneration/worship (with sacrifices) of the forefathers, and bringing sacrifices to them are practiced. These traditions that are not advocated in the Bible (Light 2012:144-151,175-176;187-206; Mhlophe 2013; Babila-Boer 2013:108-139). This is because they detract from worshiping, serving and trusting the one true God. We live in a world where toleration of all religions is the popular, accepted approach.

Our God is covenanted to us and vice versa. He calls himself a "jealous" God (Ex. 20:5), but yet also merciful showing love to a thousand generations (20:6).

This word “jealous” can also mean *zealous* (Brown Driver and Briggs, 1906; Strong’s Hebrew and Green Dictionary, 1980). Ashby (1998:89) explains that the Hebrew word does not have the “petty, insecure overtones” of the English word “jealous”. It rather describes a close, passionate, exclusive relationship God desired with Israel, the essence of his covenant relationship with his people. This word “jealous” is used numerous times throughout the Canon (Ex. 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 32:21; Num. 25:13; I Kings 19:10,14; Jos. 24:19; Na. 1:2; Ezek. 39:25; 2 Cor. 11:2). This word describes our relationship with God as an exclusive, intimate and loving bond as in the covenant of marriage. The marriage metaphor is thus frequently used of God’s covenant relationship with Israel where God expects faithfulness on Israel’s part (Ashby 1998:89). Therefore, worshipping any other god or idol with love and dedication would be seen as not only idolatry but also adultery (Fretheim 1991:227; Janzen 2011:18). Israel was meant to be faithful to her one husband, her God, the only true and living God.

It has already been noted that this concept of Israel’s God being the only God is spread throughout the Bible where it is connected with the call to love God with all one’s heart, soul and strength (see also Jos. 22:5, 1 Kings 8:23 and 2 Chron. 6:14). The call to love God fully is also in the New Testament (Luke 10:27; Mark 12:30; Matt. 22:37). This relationship between God and humans is rooted in grace and love where we are loved by God and are to love him in return. This love is not to be shared with any other so-called god. It is to be like a faithful marriage. God is “jealous” in the sense that he is passionate about his love for us, is totally faithful in this marriage and desires an exclusive faithful love from us (Fretheim 1991:227; Janzen 2011:18). Since there is only one God and other gods are not real, worshiping or following these other gods can be seen as committing spiritual adultery. God will not share his divine role in the New Covenant with gods who don’t really exist (1 Cor. 10:19-22). It is called spiritual adultery when Israel and now members of the Church, rebel against and reject a true, meaningful relationship with God and find solace and comfort with another source. It is the giving of exclusive love that belongs only to God and sharing it with another god or some idol is unpardonable. (Melancthon 2002:517.) Is this not what is happening in modern society where the devotion

of which only God is worthy is directed to, or shared with, the idols of materialism, sports idols, celebrities, sexual promiscuity and now excessive gaming? Is not an intimate relationship being pursued with these idols rather than God?

Are our young children being reared with acceptance of alien religions to such an extent that the boundaries and differences are no longer noticeable? Much in digital gaming is fanning such a development. Will the Christian community's traditions become so infiltrated with other religions and traditions that we will no longer recognise what is Biblically true and what is not? The first of the Ten Commandments is being widely threatened today and clearly needs to be intentionally and strongly defended and promoted among the teenagers at CFH. This commandment implies loving, serving and worshiping with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength the one true and living God revealed in the Creation and in the Bible. The second of the Ten Commandments deals with the right kind of worship. It also indirectly condemns having other gods as noted in the first commandment.

This section has demonstrated the principle that there is only one true God who is to be loved, obeyed, served and exclusively honoured and worshiped. Clearly if gaming or excessive gaming undermines the teenagers at CFH fulfilling this mandate, then appropriate measures would need to be taken.

### **3.2.2 The worship and service of all forms of polytheism and their representations will lead to God's judgment**

The Second Commandment (Ex. 20:4-6) deals largely with the form of worship of God. Though the God of Sinai was invisible, he was not to be worshipped by bowing down to any type of representation of him – there was to be no image whatsoever. Firstly, the worship of God must not be displaced from the realm of the spirit to that of the senses (Fretheim 1991:224; Smith 1992: chap.13). Secondly, the idolatry prohibited in this commandment also includes the fact that worship of an alien deity in the form of an image, statue or representative is not allowed. Both concepts are regarded in this study as idol worship (Melancthon 2002: 517; Wright 2006:138-139). The second commandment

goes on to declare that any form of idolatry, where linked to Yahweh or other gods will incur God's awful judgment affecting generations to come (20:5-6).

The people of the Old Testament were frequently enslaved by foreign religions where worship of the sun, moon, stars and idols made of wood or stone were common practice (2 Kings 17:16; Jer. 10:1-5; Zeph. 1:5; Ezek 8:16). Astral worship was rife in Israel and is evident as early as the eighth century BC as seen from Amos 5:26 (Wright 2006:143). Pharaohs and Kings were seen as gods themselves and had to be bowed down to and this was enforced (Rumscheidt 1999:101). The nature of idolatry in these times is usually misunderstood in our modern culture. Idolatry is not simply worshiping a statue or image, but rather an intricate religious system and lifestyle. The statue of a god was believed to be spiritually transformed into the embodiment of a god's presence. Specific ritual incantations allowed the god to enter into it making the image or statue holy. Spells, incantations and magical acts could get the deity to do what the individual desired from it. The deity could appear to interact with and communicate with its worshipers. (Stuart 2006:451.)

Idol worship was the main form of covenant breaking in the Old Testament. It was therefore the greatest threat to Israel's relationship to God (Janzen 2011:15). Throughout the Bible we find evidence of idol worship and repeated calls for the exclusive worship of God and the rejection of any other form of idols (Babila-Boer 2013:120; Wright 2006:96). The Old Testament narrates Israel's journey and her struggle against idol worship beginning with the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32). There was the repetitive pattern of idolatry, judgment and repentance (Jud. 3:7-11). Dodds (cited in Osborne 2004:46) calls this the "cause and effect" process whereby God's wrath is replaced by His love and mercy towards the repentant (cf. Moo 2000:64).

Many examples of this can be seen from the moment that God made His covenant with the Hebrew nation (Ex. 20) right through until after the Babylonian exile. Only forty days after Israel makes the covenant they search for a different god or want to worship Yahweh through an idol (cf. Ex 32:4) leading to the effective worship of an idol and not Yahweh. Moses was for so long on the mountain that the people told Aaron, "Come, make us gods who will

go before us.” This resulted in the bull of gold (Ex. 32; Deut. 9:7-21) and the subsequent anger of Moses and the judgment of God. This breaking of the covenant by the people is symbolised by the breaking of the two stone tablets that Moses threw down (Ex. 32:19) on his return from the mountain. (Janzen 2011:20.)

Once again Moses warns the Israelites of the consequences of abandoning God and worshipping other gods in Deuteronomy 29. This warning is given to the next generation of Israelites just prior to handing the leadership over to Joshua. The people were told of how the Lord would bless them with life if they love him with all their heart and soul (Deut. 30:6). From Judges (2:12; 3:7-11) onwards we start to read how the people “...followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them.” The Israelites reject God and the pattern of idolatry, judgment and repentance progresses throughout the narratives of 1 and 2 Kings. Here the decline of Solomon is related and as he grew old, “his wives turned his heart after other gods”. 1 Kings 12 indicates a parallel between the golden calf in Exodus 32:4-5 with two golden calves Jeroboam made which led directly to the loss of the northern kingdom, showing this pattern in its truest and most severe form. We read that “...because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam” (1 Kings 14:10) “...He will uproot Israel from this good land that he gave to their forefathers ... because they provoked the Lord to anger by making Asherah poles” (4:15). (Jacobson 2013:136.)

Jeroboam’s involvement in idolatry and evil practices influenced his successors: Omri and Israel “...provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger by their worthless idols” (1 Kings 16:26). The narrative of Elijah follows with the contest on Mount Carmel against the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18). More kings of Israel are mentioned and we read repeatedly the words, “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord” followed by records of idol worship and God’s judgment on the people. The writer of 2 Kings states that because Israel through its history rejected God’s decrees and covenant and worshiped Baal and sacrificed their sons and daughters, “...the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence” (17:18). Israel and Judah are defeated and deported by the Assyrians and Babylonians respectively and this is recorded as a result of their history of idolatry. (Janzen 2011:16.)



In Romans 1:20-25 Paul speaks about how people have exchanged the one true God for a lie. They neither "...glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him..." (1:21). Hendricksen (1981:77) calls this a "tragic result" and notes how such foolish practices resulted in spiritual, sinful blindness ("...their foolish hearts were darkened", 1:21, and they practiced idolatry, 1:23). Osborne brings a historical perspective into context by noting that the people of Corinth, especially the Greeks, had developed to a high philosophical level of "wisdom", but this wisdom had rejected divine truth and holy wisdom. They exchanged "...the glory of the immortal God for images ..." (Rom 1:25) (Osborne 2004:49) (see also Psalm 106:20 and Jeremiah 2:11 that mention how Israel's glory was exchanged for idols). Schreiner (1998:81) remarks on the fact that the idolatry present among the Jews (cf. also Psalm 106:20) also applied to the Gentiles.

Hendricksen (1981:78) highlights the close connection between idolatry (Rom. 1:23) and immorality (1:24). Corinth was a city well known for its idolatry and sexual immorality and moral degradation. Of interest is the fact that in Romans 1:24, 26 and 28 Paul writes that "...God gave them over". Boice (1991:178) explains these words as meaning they were "abandoned by God". Osborne (2004:50) from his research states the verb means *to deliver* them for their punishment and cites Cranfield that this is a judicial act on God's part. Moo (2000:61) sees this as punishment from God for their idolatry by allowing them to experience the "full consequences of their actions". This is in a similar vein to the Old Testament's wording of "...removed them from his presence" (2 Kings 17:23). God stated many times that he will punish the people of Israel when they failed to live according to his laws and not recognise God as their covenant partner (Wright 2006:96) (Amos 3:2). Within the context of Romans 1 it is made clear though that God revealed himself to sinful humanity so that that they would repent and return back to Him, failing which they would experience his wrath.

Scripture is thus clear that any form of idolatry arouses God wrath and brings his judgment. But his judgment is meant to lead to repentance. This means that the Christian should strive to avoid all forms of polytheism and idolatry as they will bring punishment and the withholding of God's covenant blessings.

One permeating theme is that God is the only God and his people are to love, serve, obey and worship him alone with all their hearts, minds, souls and strength. Nothing, including so-called gods, can compare with him (Melanchthon 2002:517; Wright 2006:140-143). From this it logically follows that no other so-called god or its representation or anything else in all creation is to be granted this relationship, which is to be exclusively reserved for God. No other god is to be permitted in the Christian's life; no idol is to be loved and served. Clearly every effort needs to be made to ensure that no rival deity is allowed in the believer's life. It also makes perfect sense that the supremacy of God in his creation, and especially the church, leads to his judgment when idolatry is practised. The relevance for the teenagers at CFH is that if gaming or excessive gaming undermines the teenagers at CFH fulfilling this mandate, then appropriate measures would need to be taken firstly by the teenagers. Where they lacked the spirituality to ensure gaming never rivals God in their worship and daily lives, it would be helpful and important and pastorally wise for the church to prepare some policy and plan to guide the teenagers so that God is honoured even in their gaming.

### **3.2.3 To be imitators of Jesus**

Another biblical strand that is relevant to critically critiquing gaming is that Christians are to be imitators of God and our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:22). Some of the characteristics of such a life are spelt out in Galatians 5:22: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Leaf (2013:25), a neuroscientist, suggests that we are designed to (i) recognise and choose the right things to think about and (ii) follow God in an intimate relationship marked by obedience to him (Jos. 24:15; Ecc. 7:29; and Is. 30:1-2). This would be confirming the Biblical statement that Adam was created by God and for God, i.e. in His image (Gen. 1:27). Leaf (2013:25) continues to state that we are designed for deep intellectual thought (Ps. 139:14). Specifically we are to have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

Believers are called to be holy (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 1 Pet. 1: 14-16). Holiness means to be set apart by God for His purposes and to live righteously. God expects us to turn away from sin and serve him in righteousness in the totality of our lives. The worldly traditions and expectations around us should not

prevent us from worshipping the one and only true and holy God (Babila-Boer 2013:113). The Holy Spirit invites our will, desires and hopes to be moulded by his working in our lives to ensure holiness. With his leading we will want to choose to sanctify our character, behaviour, thoughts, our conversation, our recreation, and play time. He teaches us how to make holiness a way of life rather than see it as an unreachable level of enlightenment. God has placed us where we work and live in order that through us the characteristics, values and mission of Jesus Christ might be revealed and influence others in our life context. The Christian life is to ever be one of spiritual progression in holiness, service and witness.

The doctrine of sanctification is defined as a work of God, involving our cooperation and is progressive. Its goal is to lead us to increasing levels of victory over sin and become more Christ-like in our personal and daily lives. Clement of Alexandria noted the following characteristic traits of mature believers: “discreet laughter, calmness and composure, simplicity and thriftiness, reverence and thankfulness, edifying and chaste conversation, self discipline, wise servanthood, forgiveness and Christ-centeredness”. Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century emphasised that loving God is of crucial importance to progress in sanctification. This imitation of Jesus should enter our hearts and infect our spirit and our daily conduct if true Christlikeness is to be achieved. (Allison 2011:521.)

Throughout time the church has taught Christians to imitate Christ and aspire to lead daily lives dedicated to his glory and honour. The church fathers, as well as Luther, Calvin and Wesley imparted from their wisdom guidelines on how to live our lives with values, morals and principles displayed in Christ’s life. Christians should aim to portray high levels of integrity, discreteness, calm composure, reverence and thankfulness (Allison 2011:521-531). Calvin suggested that we pattern our lives around Jesus since we have been adopted as his sons and daughters. Wesley supported the cause of holiness and spurred believers to aspire to it. He encouraged us to love God with all one’s heart, mind and soul and strength; this would lead to controlling one’s temper and having one’s thoughts actions and words governed by pure love (Allison 2011:523).

Clearly the teenagers at CFH need to be helped to imitate Christ through the appropriate teaching and example of others in the church. Obstacles should be wisely eliminated so that greater progress in sanctification takes place. CFH will need to evaluate gaming in the light of the moral and spiritual contents and addictive nature of different games and the critical comments by Christian young people who have played extensively (see Appendix 5).

### **3.3 Church history and play, games and recreation**

There have been numerous attempts to define the biological function of play. For some, the fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of “superabundant vital energy”; for others, as the satisfaction of some “imitative instinct” or a need for relaxation (Huizinga 1949:2). Huizinga continues to explain that play existed before culture itself existed and has been present from the very beginnings of civilization right up to the present time of modern living (1949:2). He describes play as a type of pretend combat and as the source of culture itself. He disagrees with Immanuel Kant’s evolutionary views and states that rather than “survival of the fittest, man plays for the sheer joy of it”. He explains that poetry stems from riddling competitions and mythology from “dramatic dance with mimic enactments of conflicts”. He proposes that it is these riddling and poetry competitions that were the start of human sacred rituals and cultural achievement. (as cited in Murphy 2013:41.) Huizinga (1949:19) quotes from Plato’s *Laws*, saying that

Plato thinks that man plays because we were made to so do by the gods and that we are playthings of the divine and that playing is the fulfilment of our human nature.

The focus on play and games in research is relatively new terrain. It has frequently been overlooked with a few exceptions materialising mostly from anthropology and ritual studies (Bornet 2012:15; Bornet and Burger 2012:8). Bornet and Burger continue to explain the difficulty in research due to the fact that ludic practices (games and play in Latin) are cross-cultural making it difficult to find equivalents to classical religious terminologies (such as *sacred*, *religion*, *church*) in non-Christian contexts (2012:8). An additional stumbling

block is the modernisation and movement of games and play towards virtual worlds and digital games.

Mention of games in Roman civilisation seems to refer to games and play that were infused with much religious and political significance. Christian theologians seemed to focus on the paganism of this time. Augustine (354-430) criticises the sporting “games” as well as the theatrical plays in which classical mythological stories about gods were being retold. The poets not only taught the worship of these gods, but in a manner exhorted these gods. His arguments focus on the immorality within the plays (Jupiter being portrayed as an adulterer) as well as it being displayed in public rituals (Bornet 2012:16) and that the masses might choose to follow this example in their own lives. This seems to be the “first ideological Crusade” from the Church Fathers against ludic practices. Bornet (2012:17) reminds us though that this criticism stemmed from elite theological standpoints and does not necessarily give us information as to the actual practices among popular groups. In addition, not all types of ludic practices were equally problematic. Positive aspects were to be found in Greek comedies and tragedies and were seen in the context of a liberal education for the younger generations.

The theatrical shows and gambling were not supported by the church because they were seen to be immoral. Gambling seems to have been denounced and disapproved by most of the Church Fathers with Saint Cyprian seeing it as a “creation from the devil” and Augustine viewing it as “criminal pleasures” (Bornet 2012:17). In 1130 (the council of Clermont d’ Auvergne) gambling tournaments were prohibited by Pope Innocent II. Gambling was still a problem in the thirteenth century in Medieval Spain.

Schadler reports on the Green for Gain law implemented by Alfonso X. It was forbidden to organise gambling with dice or other games. Games that were not considered constructive or did not contribute to one’s individual development were deemed as lower class. Games that used rational skills, such as chess, were encouraged. Games involving luck or chance as well as the use of dice were seen as a problem. The church fathers spoke out against such games and condemned the values they portrayed. It was believed that these types of

games advocated immorality, lying, cheating, blasphemy, and even murder. (Schadler 2012:23.)

With the Protestant Reformation the ludic dimension was once again targeted and a similar “Second Crusade” began against play and games. Calvin banned gambling from Geneva and compared these games to a magical incantation. He added that all ceremonies are corrupt and harmful unless through the playing or performing of them a man is led to Christ. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is reported to have had a more philosophical defence of games. He argues that gaming is a necessary activity since it allows the soul to rest and recover. He does mention, though, that care should be taken to not play in excess. Calvin also encouraged games with rational skills. (Bornet 2012:19.)

The nineteenth Century was a time where games were evaluated on the basis of their usefulness. If the game did not contribute to one’s individual development, or was unacceptable socially, it was seen as a useless game. This tended to be applied to board games and other similar games (Bornet 2012:20). This period was seen as the beginning of sports throughout Europe and USA. In Collins’ review of William Baker’s book *Playing with God: Religion and modern sport* he explains how sports were born after 1840 and how this movement grew from London to Boston by 1851 with the YMCA bringing it to 25 000 members by 1860 (Collins 2013:239). Sport was seen as a way to improve ones physical condition and received strong Christian theological support. He describe how Anglicans used religion to “Christianize” bowling alleys, billiard rooms and dance halls during the American recessions from 1873-1896. Around the time of World War 1 sport moved from the churches into the community centres, parks and also playgrounds (Collins 2013:240). This was called the sporting movement. It can be seen that in the nineteenth century, the church advocated and became involved with the sports movement throughout the USA and Europe deeming sports to have a positive influence on the individual.

Ludic games therefore suffered in the wake of the movement of muscular Christianity and this period can be seen as a “third Crusade” against certain ludic games. Specific types of games were devalued and seen as morally

inferior or considered as a game for a lower social layer of society. Games involving chance were placed on the lowest level and considered a mark of antiquity and a lower level of evolution. (Bornet 2012:21.)

One can clearly deduce from this survey through the ages that the church had a very definite stand against games and recreation that were deemed immoral, corrupt, harmful to the soul, and that lead people away from biblical standards. Games that involved pagan gods or various forms of magic or the supernatural were shunned by the church and its leaders. It can be seen that the church of the past believed that one should occupy oneself with activities that are edifying and worthy of the image of Christ. Games played should stretch our minds and test our skills and should not rely on chance or forms of magic in order to beat one's opponent. Throughout time the church has taught Christians to imitate Christ and aspire to lead daily lives that are dedicated to His glory and honour. This too involves play, be it in the form of games, recreation or sport. Christians should aim to portray high levels of integrity, discreteness, calm composure, reverence, thankfulness, self discipline, forgiveness and Christ-centeredness. We need to keep ourselves occupied with actions that are in harmony with what God has commanded and in respect to his glorious creation. As a Christian, we are to be led by the Holy Spirit – to let Him impart wisdom as to what is permissible and what is not. Biblical truth and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are to provide guidance for daily living.

The way that the church in its history has reflected on games provides the church today with a precedent of evaluating them in terms of their benefit or not to sanctification. This approach harmonises with the tenor of section 3.2. CFH would therefore be well advised to use the process and aims of sanctification and the leading of the Holy Spirit as two of the measuring rods of the gaming phenomenon.

### **3.4 A closer look at the digital gaming phenomenon**

#### **3.4.1 Play and the formation of self**

It is at the beginning of our life that play becomes a method by which the child negotiates, explores and discovers the world. Porter describes playing as a process by which the surrounding environment is experienced through all five

senses. He states that throughout childhood, play develops and adult feedback is interpreted. Smiling, encouragement and discouragement, clapping of hands and similar facial and bodily gestures are all social interactions that the child is exposed to which in turn advance the child's communication and social development. Play is not just a game where children waste time using their imagination and using make-believe objects in role playing; rather it is crucial to physiological development because the child is engaged with his/her whole will and being. Play influences the type of person a child will become and how he/she will eventually view the world and himself/herself. Play is the gateway to experiencing positive reinforcement, life skills and perceptions as it leads to experimentation, discovery and development of the self. (Porter 1998:49.)

In other words, play is an important part of identity formation and development. Erik Erikson (cited by Root 2010:2) who has been the most influential author on identity over the past two decades, suggested that adolescence is somewhere between the ages of thirteen to twenty and is the time of identity formation. Marcia (1980:159) describes identity as an ever developing process – a “dynamic structure, not static”. Elements are continuously being added and taken away. Of importance though is that adolescence is seen to be the most developmental transitional stage for moral identity development (1980:160).

It is at this cultural period of life that teenagers determine who and what they are, what they are good at, and what they enjoy. It is also at this stage that they determine what they believe, what their interests are who they love, what social groupings they prefer, and what occupation they would like to follow. (Root 2010:2.) A person's personal and social identity is formed by family, friends, social networks, work, institutions and so forth (Herman et al 2006:188). What is of interest, is Wittle's comment that this tradition has changed and how the teenager's identity is now formed through “network sociality” and information technology (2001:51).

Kline, Dyner-Witthford and de Peuter (in Vlisides 2003) suggest that the nature of play has changed from Fordism to post-Fordism and children's play has become a commodity. The word Fordism is named after the infamous Henry Ford and is used as a term for the modern economic and social system based



on industrialisation and mass production. Children's play has moved from material to digital: from toys, board games and outdoor play equipment to digital type games. The child is now seen as a mini-consumer and an audience.

Kim's study (2012) mentions social networking in cyberspace. The borders between the virtual world and the real world have become blurred. More people are meeting online through the format of online cafes, *Facebook*, *Youtube*, blogs and gaming. People making use of these mediums share their interests, hobbies, ideas and information with others in cyberspace. They engage in chat with others leading to the formation of friendships and thus forming a cyber-culture. This new culture influences current popular culture. (2012:66-68.)

According to statistics supplied by Gartner Inc. (2013), gaming revenue for 2012 was reported to be \$92 282 billion; and it was projected that by 2015 the total video game market revenue would reach the amount of \$111 057 billion. The marketplace sales include online, mobile and computer games as well as video game console hardware and software (Gartner Inc., 2013). The games software alone in 2013 brought in a total of \$21 530 billion revenues in the USA. 59% of USA households play video games with most families owning two consoles within the home. The average age of gamers is 31 years of age. The top sellers of video games in USA for 2013 were *Grand Theft Auto 5* (18) and *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (18). Top computer games were *Starcraft 2: Heart of the swarm* expansion pack (All) and *Sim City 2013* (T). (Entertainment Software Association, 2009.)

It is clear that digital gaming as a form of entertainment is here to stay. The concept of "play" has taken on a new form and it is safe to state that this modern phenomenon has taken the world by storm and will continue to be offered as a highly digitalised form of play and entertainment. Having said this, I suggest that the church and Christian parents educate themselves with solid knowledge of these games in order to help guide the Christian community in this area so that the teenagers' Christian faith and appropriate godly lifestyle are not undermined. By arming ourselves with knowledge of the gaming community and gaming experience, the Christian community and church can apply the necessary

measures of discipline and strict guidelines for their children, growing teenagers and members of the church community. This is discussed later in chapter 4.

### **3.4.2 Gaming and identity**

In Kim's research (2012:78-79) she explains the process of character maturation in the game and the length of time it takes for this to happen. If the player spends approximately twenty to thirty hours a week on the game, the avatar can take more than a year to develop from birth to a mature adult. Gender, age, facial features and clothes are all chosen by the player. The player in fact has created and designed his/her avatar. Some research has shown that the majority of players chose the more attractive races that appear to represent good rather than the evil-looking monsters. This could suggest that players identify with more attractive, taller and sexier characters (Ducheneaut et al. 2006).

During this period of play not only does the avatar grow, but the player also develops by becoming more apt and skilled through the virtual experiences. Through spending time in and with the game, the player connects with his avatar and shares an intimacy that results in a profound connection. In some cases the avatar can be seen as a reflection of the player himself, making it hard to split player from character. These games can take anything from a couple of weeks up to a year to play to the end, depending on the amount of daily time spent playing the game. In this case the avatar and his experiences should not be seen as only a virtual event. Players identify with their character and have feelings for their character that portrays pride, remorse and sadness. (Barnett and Coulson 2010:170.) We can see an example of this taking place in the life of Darius. In his gaming experience with the game *The Last of Us*, he explains how Ellie, the young girl character, is about to get raped and how he was tremendously affected by this incident and cried deeply about it while playing the game.

While the player experiences a virtual life with his/her avatar, the player is exposed to multiple religious concepts, symbols and ideas which have permeated the avatar's life and story narrative. The avatar's experience and skills increase through interaction with spiritual spells, prayer, witchcraft or

magical events. Virtual ethics and religious concepts are learnt and identified with by the player. Kim (2012:80) mentions that it is through these gaming experiences that players can naturally learn how to live a moral life in the virtual world. One could change this statement to also include “immoral life” in the case of *Grand Theft Auto* where criminal and illegal acts are committed in order to earn “XP” (experience, which equates to points) or to “level up”.

It is from this perspective that theology needs to address not only the religious implications portrayed through images, symbols and concepts within the storyline, but also the deeper ethical concepts that the player engages with. Digital games are heavily coded with religious undertones. There is a dire need for researchers to address the intersection between religion and digital games. There are a number of possible reasons for this oversight, for example, gaming is often viewed merely as a form of entertainment with unreal and artificial elements and is seen as just childish fun (Campbell and Grieve 2014:52). From the viewpoint of this study, however, I would propose that virtual reality identity and ethics could have an influence on the player’s real life identity and ethics. It was mentioned above how intimate and profound the connection becomes between player and avatar; that in some cases the avatar is seen as a reflection of the player himself, making it difficult for the player to distinguish his/her own identity from that of the avatar. Therefore, not only are there some physical skills and possible experiences that are conveyed over into real life. It seems that skills and religious influences from other worlds – non-Christian religions, sorcery, witchcraft and questionable ethics – can also be carried over. Symbolism is infused within the narrative and storyline communicating a message and conveying an idea through the medium of visual literacy. Gee explains that the player is exposed to and flooded with images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, artifacts and many other symbols which the player learns to read and internalise so that they mould the storyline (in Kim 2012:81).

Being able to see and read the image, understand the message behind the image, and apply this knowledge effectively, are necessary to play the game. The player must internalise these multiple images that expose the inner person to them. Exploration between the intersection of religion and contemporary culture needs further study since it has been contended that as films have

depicted the religions of the twentieth century, so digital games depict the twenty-first century religions. (Campbell and Grieve 2014:52.)

In my opinion, this is a dangerous activity for the Christian child due to the religious and spiritual implications behind such symbols. Exposing the Christian child to the knowledge of different religions is necessary and part of the learning process. This helps children to value other cultures and understand other religions and teaches them empathy and tolerance towards others who are different to them and their tradition and culture. However, to repetitively expose the child to images of deities and symbolic religious spiritual images that convey deep spiritual meanings and messages and allow the Christian child to internalise this within his spirit and actively participate, should surely be critically approached, especially from a theological perspective.

The Christian teenager is therefore exposed to a multitude of elements not previously encountered by the parents or leadership of the church. To role-play acts of life through the creative form of play is acceptable, but to play a game with elements of symbolic and religious images that strongly contradict or appear to complement our Christian faith is something the parent and Christian world needs to be aware of and reflect on carefully. Can the elements of such games affect our children's thoughts, actions and behaviour not only in the game, but ultimately in real life? This is further discussed in 3.4.3 and 3.4.4.

Clearly the formation of a sound Christian identity in Christian children and teenagers is a challenge every Christian parents faces. This section suggests that such parents should contemplate if this vital spiritual development in their children can be undermined by certain digital games, especially if excessively played.

### **3.4.3 Gaming and aggression**

Ellison's article (2012:517) makes mention of a pivotal research study undertaken by psychologist Leonard Eron. The study was initially designed to measure the relationship between school aggressive behaviour and parental child-rearing practices. In order to prevent the questionnaire from having leading questions, Eron and his colleagues included filler questions such as

“What are your child’s three favourite TV programmes?” It was with surprise that the filler questions about media preference showed significant correlation between the aggressiveness of the boys studied and the boys’ favourite TV programmes. These studies led to a lifelong study where the effects of media violence on children were conducted over a period of forty years. The results of this longitudinal study found that no matter how aggressive the third grade children were in real life, those who watched more violent TV in the third grade were reliably more aggressive in their adult years.

It is due to these compelling and conclusive studies that Eron and his colleagues have been regarded as the authorities on the topic. National debates and the USA Congress have drawn on the results of these studies on numerous occasions. In the mid 1990’s Dill and her supervisor Anderson found that exposure in the laboratory to graphic violent digital games increases aggressive thoughts and behaviours. Dill’s work soon became one of the most cited studies in the area of aggression and violent gaming (Ellison 2012:518). She is still writing articles on this correlation between exposure to violence in gaming in the child and increased aggression in the adulthood (Dill 2007; Dill 2009).

Since the early 1970’s when computer games joined television as an activity preferred for childhood leisure, one of the major concerns has been aggression within the game and its cause of increased aggression in the child (Anderson 2004; Dill 2007; Ellison 2012, Harris 2001). It has been stated by these researchers that exposure to violent video games generally increases hostility, revenge motivation, aggression and aggressive thoughts; and that this link remained significant even after taking into account contributing variables such as gender, personality and family environment. Of interest was the increase of motivation for revenge as noted by Anderson et al. Revenge is seen as one of the traits of aggression and this has also increased within violent gaming. In chapter 2 of this study, it was found that in all three of the case studies, the teenagers had mentioned that they would seek revenge in real life, giving some credibility to the thought that this need for revenge is carried over from the gaming themes and repetitive playing (2004:242).

Not every researcher has agreed that violence and aggression in computer games provide a trigger for aggressive behaviour in real life. Ferguson et al feels that there are many other influences in life that affect aggressive behaviour and therefore he could not agree with the correlation between real life violence and video game violence. They mention other influencing psychological and sociological factors. Physical and verbal abuse as a child and exposure to family violence affects the developing child and can tend to create a more aggressive personality. (Ferguson et al 2008:18.)

It was in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century that scientists started to reconsider the methodology of previous research. They criticised the results obtained due to serious errors, exaggeration, and poor matching of games to experimental conditions where variables were not properly controlled. Many one-sided articles based on faulty methodology have been the basis for many researchers' findings, thus corrupting a large amount of the available research that argues for the negative effects of aggression, violence and sexuality in gaming and the social isolation it leads to (Ferguson et al 2011:1; Harris 2001:3-5). Numerous studies from a leader in the field, Ferguson (Ferguson et al 2008:19; Ferguson et al 2014:765), could find no probable correlation between violence in video games and real life violence.

An excellent article produced by Ellison (2012) and cited in various paragraphs above, gives a conflicting viewpoint. He states that many people deny the impact of media on their thinking and behaviour. He calls it the "third person effect" because these people believe that others can be affected by exposure to media but not them. He finds a flaw in this thinking with which I concur. He states that when one's mind is busy and dwelling repeatedly on certain images and actions, as in the gaming process, that something has to be learned or gained from this experience. Leaf (2013) confirms this from her neuroscience background and studies and this is mentioned in detail under the section on gaming and physiology.

Ellison continues (2012) by citing Cooper (1913) and Berkowitz (1965). Cooper makes mention of Aristotle and how captivating drama allows the spectator to "uniquely identify" with the image portrayed, somewhat like in the fantasy world

of gaming. This dramatisation draws the spectator to empathise with what is being portrayed, arousing in him/her feelings of pity, fear, anger, etc. This in turn evokes a cathartic moment, where there is a purging of such emotions. Berkowitz and some later research have debated whether exposure to violent gaming helps purge the player of his/her hostile thoughts or rather sets the platform for future real life acts of aggression and come out in favour of the former. Most research, though, seems to have found this theory of Berkowitz inconclusive as well as the claimed evidence that violent fantasizing (in our case gaming) reduces the amount of actual aggressive and violent behaviour (Anderson 2004, Anderson et al. 2004; Dill 2007, Dill 2009; Ellison 2012:520). The story of Darius in chapter 2 explained how he felt through his game playing that he could release pent up emotions, frustrations and anger and how this made him more controlled and less aggressive in real life. While this cathartic theory has been found inconclusive, I too question the effects of the power of gaming to trigger a reaction of emotions and then be safely released from them within the confines of game playing. It would be difficult to justify this process from the Bible, which rather exhorts us to deal with anger in the real world through spiritual and self-control means and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This section has found that although there is a wealth of research on the link between violence and aggression from entertainment such as television and film, there is a lack of resources and scholarly materials available on gaming. Newer research has started to expound in this area of gaming and aggressive behaviour, but I feel that there is still much to be researched on how gaming can affect a child's thought-life and influence morals, ethics and behaviour. I would also suggest that more research and debate around online gaming and the religious influence of these digital games be undertaken and that theologians attempt to increase their focus on this modern phenomenon of digital gaming and how it can influence Christian children.

Despite the disagreement between researchers on whether violent and aggressive entertainment can affect the child's real life thoughts and actions, I do concur with Ellison (2012). He states that while being entertained, or in this case while gaming and performing gaming manoeuvres, something has to be

learned or gained from this experience that could or would be applied in real life (see next section).

#### **3.4.4. Gaming and physiology**

Research performed gives us insight into the physiological processes, involvement of the brain, and thought patterns during play (Jenson 2005; Leaf 2013). How we react to daily surrounding events and circumstances impacts our mental and physical health. What people think every moment of every day becomes a physical reality in their bodies and brains, ultimately affecting their health, both mentally and physically and spiritually. These thoughts form one's state of mind, which in turn affects one's attitude and behaviour. One's quality of life is severely affected by one's attitude. Leaf explains the term *epigenetics* as the state of the mind being:

...a real, physical, electromagnetic, quantum and chemical flow in the brain that switches groups of genes on or off in a positive or negative direction based on your choices and subsequent reactions (2013:12).

Therefore the brain responds to the thoughts by sending the neurological signals throughout the body, which means that one's thoughts and emotions are transformed into physiological and spiritual responses; and then physiological experiences are transformed into mental and emotional states (2013:12-14). This is confirmed by Jensen (2005:5-15).

Matthew 5: 27-28 says the following,

You have heard that it was said do not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (NIV)

This verse seems to imply that actual adultery is preceded in the mind. This shows the importance of the mind in behaviour. Proverbs 23:7 states, "As he thinks in his heart, so is he" (NKJV). In other words, our thoughts are reflected in our actions. This is not the platform to seek deeper answers to this matter. It would, however, be an interesting study to delve further biblically and



theologically into this issue and correlate it with all that the sciences contribute to this topic. Impure thoughts from a Biblical perspective are definitely seen as a gateway to our spiritual and soul dimensions and actual behavior (cf. Rom 12:2). Leaf seems to capture something of this position when she states that,

Science is hovering on a precipice as we recognize the responsibility and impact of our thinking and the resultant choices we make, which have ramifications right down to the ways in which the genes of our bodies express themselves (2013:23).

Everything we think will determine what we say and what we do.

There are other physiological aspects to gaming. Health complications, such as poor posture and weight gain, follow from sitting and remaining inactive for periods of long duration. This causes muscle weakness and imbalances that result in illnesses, injuries and other health issues. Recommended screen time is less than two hours per day. Children's screen time increases with age and it is shown that there are clear correlations between BMI (Body Mass Index, which is a quick screening guide to one's weight status) and increased screen time (Hesketh, Wake, Graham and Waters 2007:60). Of interest is the research that shows that playing dancing video games or Wii Sports games can help children increase their energy expenditure and lose weight (Epstein et al: 2007:134; Graf et al 2009; Segal and Dietz 1991). Inactivity, incorrect nutritional patterns, and lack of sunlight cause additional complications such as vitamin D deficiency. They in turn can result in physiological complications.

Vitamin D is essential to the body as it helps the body absorb calcium from the diet. This in turn builds strong bones and aids our muscles in contracting and relaxing which allows the body to move effectively. Vitamin D deficiency causes weak bones, postural deficiencies and muscular contraction problems. Additionally, low levels of vitamin D in the body means teenagers are more inclined to mood swings and depression (Gracious et al 2012:38). Darius, one of the case studies described in chapter 2, mentioned such complications due to his gaming addiction and large quantity of hours spent gaming indoors without giving any attention to his nutritional or physical daily requirements.

When applying the scientific principles and relevant biblical perspectives and principles mentioned in this section to gaming, adolescents who surround themselves with thoughts of violence, aggression, sexuality and other occultic influences in games will experience physiological adaptations within the brain and the physical body. These adaptations could affect their mental and physical health, which, as mentioned above, could affect their identity. In summary, it would seem that thoughts need to be filtered and certain ones accepted and others rejected. Without this discipline of the mind over our thoughts, our thoughts can cause havoc to our total being (spirit, soul and body as understood by Christians) and affect our behaviour. A thought pattern that is evil and contrary to sound morals and ethics can harm one and can cause one to commit harmful deeds both to oneself and others. Good and positive thoughts can result in love and beauty and can create peace and joy. Thoughts therefore are important. Self talk can build up or break one down, which in turn forms a crucial part of one's self-image, character and identity.

This section needs to be taken into account by CFH if an approach to gaming among their children and teenagers is to be considered.

#### **3.4.5 Benefits of Gaming**

In a counter argument, it should be noted that not all digital games involve violent actions of shooting, revenge and war. So too, many fantasy games do not involve new age concepts or occultic signs and symbols. Many games contain elements of strategy and deep thought. Other games contain educational components and develop sport and other skills that have a definite carry over effect in the player's performance in real life. These games can be of great benefit to the developing child.

The different genres of digital games challenge the players in different manners: strategy games require skills of observation and tactical planning; adventure games require skills of observation, memory and reasoning; high levels of motor skills and reaction time is needed in action and sports games and in role playing games; and capabilities of spatial orientation and avatar identification is necessary (Steffen 2012:249).

Barnet and Coulson mention that research on gaming shows that it can positively influence the development of other characteristics such as leadership and team work. This is due to the fact that gaming requires a large amount of communication and organization between the leader and his team. Assessing and assigning tasks, like overcoming the enemy, needs planning and communicating of ideas all the time as well as motivating the other players to use their skills and to work in unity. These qualities are easily transferrable to the real world where communication, leadership and team work are necessary. (2010:174.) It has also been suggested that games like *World of Warfare* also cultivate key skills such as critical higher order thinking skills that are applicable to all areas of life. Skills such as recruiting new members to a group, managing disputes and planning group strategies are all skills required in the workplace (Green and Hannon 2007). *World of Warfare* is also mentioned for its cognitive benefits such as critical reasoning, problem solving and decision making (Martin 2010:344). There are many educational games that can be used in the classroom and at home such as the game *Civilization*, which is a strategy-based game where the player must make decisions regarding a civilization and societal development. Players choose a historical civilization and try to develop it in a sustainable way. Through this process players can gain skills of advanced terminology and geography principles as well as knowledge of ancient civilisations (Klopfers, Osterweil, Groff and Haas 2009:4-5).

A case study performed by Deutch et al. (2008:1205) showed numerous benefits in an adolescent after eleven sessions on a Wii gaming console. Improvements were measured and found in postural control, visual-perception processing, walking and functional mobility. Since walking and functional mobility were greatly improved it was surmised that there could have been a transfer from the virtual world to the real world. Both visual-perceptual processing and postural control training along with endurance may explain this transfer. It was mentioned that this transfer has been noted in post-stroke patients who also have shown improvements in walking in the real world.

This section has further confirmed that there are positive aspects of gaming. CFH would be well advised to choose games with more acceptable content so that these benefits can be harnessed without compromising thinking processes

with material and actions that could undermine Christian faith, behaviour and growth.

### **3.4.6 Conclusion**

It has been shown that play is a crucial aspect in facilitating a child's development. The formation of the child's character, personality traits, self-image and the way the child interacts with the surrounding environment and people are all critically influenced by play. Play shapes the child's identity and the adolescent years are especially important in finalizing the formation of one's self-identity. It is in these years that interaction with others helps solidify the concepts of who one is as a person in the world, how one sees the world, and how the world sees one.

Digital gaming is a form of playing in which the player identifies with an avatar, who is in a way an extension of the player. The avatar goes through numerous experiences and the player journeys with the avatar. Through this journey the player experiences thoughts associated with the game play. These thoughts in turn affect the player in the three areas of life: (i) physiologically with physical chemical reactions in the body through hormonal influences and this can cause health problems; (ii) in the soul through one's thoughts and activity within the mind, that could ultimately affect, or determine our actions, behaviour and will; and (iii) spiritually, as many games contain non-Christian spiritual symbols, concepts and occultic dimensions.

It should therefore be a concern to the CFH leadership that their teenagers are exposed to certain forms of digital play which possibly can have a wide range of influences, including the undermining of their identity, especially their Christian identity – their link to Christ, their biblical beliefs and values, morals and ethics.

There are many benefits to playing digital games. But a dedicated Christian parent needs to realize that one needs thorough information about the games and gaming and godly wisdom to exercise critical reflection as to what games and time-involvement are suitable for a Christian. Gaming is clearly not an evil that should be avoided at all costs. There are many benefits that can truly help a developing child to reach his/her full potential as an adult. But the type of

game and the length of time spent playing the game is what should be of ultimate concern. This is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

### **3.5 The new praxis on digital gaming at CFH**

This study has so far investigated and tested the theory that fantasy digital gaming can influence the Christian adolescent's faith, principle values, morals and ethics and therefore his/her identity in Christ and sanctification. It has been determined that there was incongruence between CFH's beliefs and mission and their adolescents' spiritual condition. The investigation of digital gaming revealed the potential for indiscriminate and excessive playing to undermine the teenager's Christian morals, virtues, ethics and physical and mental health. It can therefore be concluded that the CFH's teenagers' rather immature faith revealed in the case studies could have had something to do with their gaming habits. This was especially noted from a biblical perspective where what fills the mind determines behaviour. Clearly a new modified praxis is recommended with reference to gaming among CFH's.

In the light of chapters 2 and 3 it is clear that certain elements are rather obvious. The church needs to be educated on gaming (game types, key themes, addictive potential, research) and the relevant scriptural perspectives so that the gaming practices honour the church's foundational beliefs and their vision for the healthy physical, mental and spiritual development of their children and teenagers. The relevant sections in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis would provide the basis for educating the church on digital gaming. The first two of the Ten Commandments, the Christian's identity, and the doctrine of, and need for, Christlikeness/sanctification would supply the relevant scriptural perspectives that are part of CFH's doctrinal position. Every parent would need to be asked to reflect on this knowledge and appropriate it with their children in a way that they feel best honours a praxis intended to honour God and the Christian faith. In other words, the policy on gaming at CFH would not be specific on how the policy is to be applied in every family situation. It would be hoped that if the new praxis is well presented and motivated at CFH the church members will embrace it and seek to apply it in a way that honours God.

Because this mini-thesis was not able to explore the areas covered so far in greater depth, it is accepted that any praxis recommended on the basis of this mini-thesis is merely a starting point for CFH in their journey – a journey that seeks an approach to gaming that will ensure that it does not hinder the spiritual, mental, psychological, social, and physical growth of its children and teenagers. The praxis-theory-praxis paradigm of practical theology means that any recommended praxis for gaming at CFH will need after some time to be put through the cycle again. So the praxis flowing from this mini-thesis will be provisional. By that time further scholarly and theological research relevant to gaming will be able to provide additional perspectives to deepen the research. Further, any problems with the praxis and communicative strategy/plan recommended in my mini-thesis can be factored into the practical theology process to arrive at a new praxis for CFH. Since the gaming phenomenon is relatively new and thus awaits further research into its short and long term impact on children and teenagers and because it is growing so fast and has addictive potential as displayed in the interview with Darius and because its major themes and underlying or overt philosophies in mainstream gaming cannot be harmonised with Christian sanctification, a start needs to be made by the leaders at CFH as interpreter guides of the congregation on how to interpret this new cyber gaming and guide the members in these largely uncharted waters.

One area that is not tackled sufficiently in this thesis is how to bring about a balance between gaming in which war or supernatural powers not within the biblical worldview play a key role and the Christian values and morals of the Christian life and the Christian worldview. Just as many fairy tales, clearly not based on reality or biblical metaphysics, in moderation have not been deemed harmful to children, so the comparable situation with reference to gaming needs to be worked out based on critical reflection and sound argumentation. Each church may well differ slightly on the end result. This mini-thesis is a start for one congregation towards a Christian theological approach to digital gaming.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This purpose of this chapter was to work out and defend a praxis of digital gaming for the teenagers at CFH that is faithful to the church's Biblical foundations and vision and its societal context. The chapter first presented and analysed certain Biblical principles that were considered relevant, and therefore helpful, to deciding such a praxis. The first two principles flowed from a consideration of the preamble to and the first two of the Ten Commandments. It was noted how crucial it is that God is afforded his rightful supreme place in the Christian's life and that idolatry should be abhorred, countered and not practised in any form (including idols of the heart, e.g. materialistic wealth, pleasure, education, fame, and power). The consequences of idolatry in both Testaments (unfaithfulness to God and his judgment) were clearly noted showing the importance of rejecting and resisting it. The third principle was that the Christian's life, including the thought realm, morals and behaviour, should increasingly resemble Christ's life of exclusive devotion and loyalty to God and of holiness, knowledge, love and sacrificial service.

Then the chapter looked briefly at the history of games and recreation and how the church responded to similar situations in the past. This was done because I believe that wisdom can be gleaned from how Christians in previous ages handled these or comparable activities and situations.

The role of games and gaming within society was also discussed with a perusal of recent scientific research on the possible impact of gaming on the adolescent child: educational, physiological, psychological and behavioural. Benefits of gaming were mentioned. Some of the research though has argued for a negative influence as well.

The final conclusion was that if digital gaming is permitted in a way that does not undermine the keeping of the first two of the Ten Commandments (and of course the other ones) and does not prevent the full spiritual development of the Christian teenager or wholistic development of the child and teenager, it should be allowed. This conclusion was influenced as well by the advantages that include educational, leadership, psychological and social development and an opportunity for sport and relaxation.

Through the ages the church took a very definite stand against games and recreation that were deemed immoral and corrupt and therefore harmful to the soul by leading people away from biblical standards. We have their work in this field to draw on, but need to face the many differences between their situation and the modern digital gaming one. Careful wise thought guided by the Holy Spirit is necessary to appraise the relevance of the biblical sections of this chapter for gaming. An important verse to remember in regards to entertainment and gaming is Colossians 3:17: “And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” When we are engaged in fun activities, we should therefore always make sure they are pleasing to God and that we are representing Christ in our gaming.

Chapter 4 gives a strategic and communicative plan of how CFH can achieve this praxis with which chapter 3 climaxes.



## **Chapter 4:**

# **A communicative strategic plan for achieving the new praxis for digital gaming among the teenagers at Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter deals with the effective “communication and implementation of an action plan” to achieve the new praxis (Smith 2014:19). This is the last step in Browning’s strategic practical theology being followed in this thesis. It presents a communicative plan to realise the new praxis concerning gaming at CFH. This plan comes with the acknowledgement that the research on which it is based in this mini-thesis needs to be broadened; further that this plan and the underlying praxis it seeks to implement need to be re-evaluated in a year or so. Further research in the field of gaming and on possible additional biblical perspectives will be necessary to improve the new praxis developed in this mini-thesis. This mini-thesis thus culminates in a preliminary plan that takes seriously the powerful gaming world in cyberspace and that CFH (and other churches) need to reflect critically and theologically on this phenomenon so that it serves and does not detrimentally dominate its youth. This mini-thesis is the first major step in the life of CFH in seeking the will of God in how to relate to digital gaming, especially with the growing development of powerful graphics and sophistication of the games. It is my effort at a prospective approach rather than a retrospective approach. The stakes might be too high to delay.

### **4.2 An overview of the communicative plan**

Once permission and support of the pastor and the other leaders at CFH has been obtained, the strategy presented in this chapter will be activated and

hopefully bring about a new praxis in gaming at CFH. It embraces various communication methodologies to persuade the church to successfully implement the plan to facilitate the new praxis. These communication techniques are framed in a communication action plan designed to firstly inform the leaders of the church and thereafter the parents, young adults, teenagers, and pre-teens through the use of effective dialogue of the need for and details of the new praxis on gaming that has emerged in this mini-thesis. The format of such dialogue pays careful attention to (i) the facts of the gaming world, (ii) the relevant biblical and other norms that shape the new praxis, and (iii) the feelings of all at CFH as suggested by Habermas in order to reach each group effectively and achieve the desired change through the willing cooperation of all parties (Bolton 2005; Smith 2014:19).

The communication medium of the new praxis recognises that each group has different dynamics and therefore adapting the communication medium to each group is crucial if successful communication and a change in praxis are to be achieved. This means that attention is given to integrating this communication into an effective technological methodology whereby all levels of technological aptitude are utilised to increase the likelihood of persuasion to change.

Addressing the different groups within the church is a complex process, especially when one considers the generation gap between teenagers and their parents and the other older people in the church. In CFH a large majority of the leaders and members are below the age of thirty five years, thus making it a relatively young population group. In this technically saturated sector of the church most methods of modern media and technological approaches will be included. Making strategic use and manipulation of the presentation language allows the speaker to convey his message more effectively resulting in a greater likelihood of its acceptance (Bolton 2005:15). The very nature of digital gaming requires a range of media to accurately communicate the gaming phenomenon such as video testimonials, PowerPoint presentations, snippets and screen shots of various games, and shots of the actual action play to effectively inform the viewers of the dynamics of the games played. Presentations will include the symbolism used as well as the themes employed such as death and resurrection second lives and so forth. In this way the

dynamics of the game, the moves used to manoeuvre an avatar, and the story line can be realistically viewed and assessed. The presentation lessons to present and motivate the acceptance of the new praxis are referred to later in section 4.6. This could be developed to the format of tutorials with online access.

It is my belief that with the adolescent group, communication through their favourite medium is likely to be most effective. Interacting actively with them, while having the game played on a large overhead screen with constant evaluation checks, is an effective educative tool. This viewing with them and interactive discussion of the different actions with their created avatar will teach and train the children and teenagers to more closely observe and become fully aware of all elements, themes and symbolism portrayed within the game. The presenter can stop and discuss various situations from a biblical and other mentioned viewpoints noted in this mini-thesis, which can facilitate their direct application of biblical theory and research on the digital gaming practice. This process could also engage the teenagers and the leaders in a dialogue on what can be described as the gaming equivalent of acceptable fairy tales for small children. This methodology not only passes on information, facts and Christian norms and other relevant information, but also actively trains players to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not for Christian children and teenagers. This would encourage the adolescent to consciously make his/her own choices and decisions since they will be better informed.

In addition to educating and partaking in games simultaneously, an analysis of Christian games on the market will be included. Using the above method involving the teenagers will create an awareness and interest in the development of Christian hi-tec gaming and determining whether our norms are accurately presented.

The strategy developed in this chapter has short term, medium term and long term goals. Various programmes are crafted to facilitate reaching the goals. The tactics, namely actual lesson plans and activities, the finer details of the programmes, are also presented.

The following plan is my recommended approach for CFH on how to implement a new praxis on gaming at CFH. In order to bring about change within the CFH community, change should not be forced onto any person, adult or youth. I agree with Habermas's theory of communicative action where he suggests using dialogue and respect to bring about desired change. By using two way communicative presentations, participants will be respectfully educated and informed as to the ethical and biblical principles around gaming with opportunities for open debate. This process has a higher chance of winning the support of the whole church for the new praxis than just announcing the new plan to facilitate the new praxis decided by the pastor and leaders. Habermas's approach focuses on the individuals' own decisions rather than on the community. Hopefully this method of communicative strategy will provoke church members to deeply internalise the information and appreciate the need for change and to provisionally accept the new praxis (Rogers 2005:13; 36.) pending a new practical theology cycle to improve the praxis based on further research.

The plan, to which the pastor and leaders have agreed, aims to achieve the following goals:

- (1) To inform all church attendees what the Church's provisional position is with regards to gaming.
- (2) To inform all attendees what biblical norms and principles with respect to digital gaming are currently thought to be.
- (3) To educate all leaders, adult and parent groups, and adolescents about the gaming world, including the possible spiritual, psychological and physical impact and other relevant research insights, via the process of digital interactive lessons.
- (4) To fulfil objective (3) via the means of the communicative action plan developed in this chapter. This plan will include the appointment and formation of a responsible mature gaming committee at CFH to apply the plan with its appropriate strategy and lesson plans. This body will be responsible for the following: key priorities; who fulfils what roles and

responsibilities; short, medium and long term goal planning; financial costs and financial planning; and yearly evaluation; and any necessary future development in the praxis and communicative plan that the church leadership might require (flowing from suitable study of recent research into gaming and additional relevant exegetical, biblical and systematic theology perspectives by someone or a few qualified members for this task, i.e. the second practical theology project on gaming, etc).

At CFH every year the pastor and leaders of the church meet in order to evaluate the past year's activities and plan for the following year. Within the agenda of such an annual meeting, it would be suggested that the pastoral leadership and the gaming committee address the praxis and the action plan and if necessary fine-tune it for the next twelve months taking the church's resources, time and finances into consideration. The decision to inaugurate a full re-run of the practical theology cycle would be decided on at this annual meeting.

In order to be successful, the action plan must be realistic and workable, especially from the standpoint of leadership, resources and communication. It needs to be supported with much enthusiasm by not only the pastor, but also by other leaders within the church, staff members and enthusiastically embraced by the church attendees.

### **4.3 Overall Strategy**

The overall strategy is to fulfil the above mentioned goals within the periods set out in the short, medium and long term goals via an interactive, informal technological communication format.

#### **4.3.1 Short term goals**

The aim would be to achieve the short term goals within a period of about one year. These goals are to elect the gaming committee and produce the educational material designed to lead the teenagers and pre-teens (9-12 years) into the gaming praxis developed in this mini-thesis. There are three goals:

(1) To identify the gaming committee within CFH that will manage the plan.

(2) The preparation of a Sunday school gaming syllabus comprising five lesson plans to be incorporated into the yearly planning for the pre-teens.

(3) The preparation of a syllabus on gaming for the teenagers that covers five lessons to be conducted at the *Teenkries* Friday meetings (this would be the same as in (2) but at a more advanced level).

#### **4.3.2 Medium term goals**

These goals would be implemented once the short term goals have been attained. Firstly, this requires that the gaming committee plan suitable annual dates for presenting sections of the syllabi to the church leadership and the adults, especially the parents of pre-teens and teenagers. Secondly, it includes teaching the full syllabus to the pre-teens and teenagers but at different appropriate levels. Ideally these dates should become fixed at the same time every year so they become part of the church's annual programme. This could be organised in the following way:

- A weekend workshop for church leaders, Sunday school teachers and teenagers' ministry workers
- One evening per week for three consecutive weeks for the adult church attendees
- Three consecutive Sunday school classes for the pre-teens
- As part of five consecutive Friday evening *Teenkries* meetings.

#### **4.3.3 Long term goals**

Plans to achieve these goals are to be implemented after the medium goals have been achieved. These goals are intended to broaden the focus and audience of the short term goals in order to enrich the ministry to pre-teens and teenagers in CFH with reference to handling gaming according to the new praxis. This could be applied two years after the medium term goals have been achieved.

##### ***4.3.3.1 In the faith community of CFH***

(1) Education of counsellors in order for them to:

- Identify pre-teen and teenage gaming problems and provide relevant counselling to prevent them from developing into unhealthy gaming crises
- Counsel teenagers who are caught up in gaming addiction and related parental conflict
- Form adolescent mentor groups where the adolescents with gaming related questions can come together once a month to discuss the questions and queries with others in the group.

(2) Development of a Sport and Games lesson plan to be incorporated into the Friday *Teenkreis* to supplement the syllabus referred to above. This will allow the teenagers to be further educated through the medium of fun and games. It will include teaching the following: correct computer and table setup, sitting and standing posture, strengthening exercises in order to prevent back pain and postural defects, correct nutritional intake, and grooming habits to promote positive self image.

(3) To make the lesson plans for adults obtainable via podcasts on the CFH website.

#### ***4.3.3.2 In the wider faith community (leaders, parents and teen groups in the surrounding churches)***

(1) To share this communication action plan with the wider faith community by opening up the training and education to their leaders, parents, pre-teens and teenagers.

(2) Organise pre-teen and teenager summer camps where gaming competitions in a Christian healthy environment can take place and where the teenagers can be exposed to other options of strategic and Christian games. Web designing and other creative programmes could be included.

## **4.4 Programmes**

The training programme is discussed here in more detail. It covers how the training will be provided, namely lessons and the three main elements of the

lessons. These elements deal with issues relating to “facts, norms and feeling” through the educational medium appropriate to the group addressed.

#### **4.4.1 Norms and Facts**

Biblical norms of adult leadership and Christian ethical duty to raise our children as promised before God (at the baby blessing in the church in front of witnesses) will be discussed. The following will be discussed: ways to observe the promises to raise our children in God’s ways according to biblical standards and principles; adult leadership, supervision, choice of games, and time management throughout the child’s life of “play” and leisure time. This will cover gaming and any other forms of recreational play, thus equipping the parents by presenting them with criteria to make correct judgment choices with regards to the content of games available on the market.

The following themes will be covered to provide a solid basis for making decisions in the area of games in general and digital gaming in particular:

- Honouring, worshipping and loving only the one Almighty God
- Idolatry, what it is and how to avoid it
- Christian identity
- Sanctification
- Facts about how gaming affects the thoughts and behavioural patterns as well as the physiological and physical effects on our body. What scientific research has to contribute to understanding gaming is also to be discussed. Here the benefits and disadvantages of gaming are to be covered.
- CFH’s current (always provisional until further relevant research is available) official position and stance on digital gaming.

#### **4.4.2 Feelings**

Part of the communicative action plan is to take the participants’ feelings into consideration. The communicative plan must include dialogue thereby



increasing the chances for positive social change. In order to bring the message across with the accompanying positive emotion to ensure its successful acceptance, various video testimonies from past addicted gamers and their parents and other persuasive video clips should be shown.

#### **4.5 Tactics**

The tactics used are the actual lesson plans and activities which will be offered in order to equip the various groups at CFH and the wider Christian community. Five lesson plans that can be used by the church are included in Appendix 8.

The first three lessons are sufficient to be used for educating the adults and parents. The first three plus the last two lessons (five in total) are for the pre-teens and teenagers, but at appropriate levels.

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a strategic and communicative action plan to launch the new praxis relevant to gaming at CFH. It is structured to make use of the most effective media of communication. It takes into account the relevant information presented in chapters 2 and 3, covering content of games, challenges, and positive and negative aspects. It offers a comprehensive strategy to educate the church on the reasons for and details of the praxis including the relevant scriptural perspectives and that the new praxis seeks to honour the church's beliefs and their vision for the spiritual development of their youth.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **Conclusion**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

The goal of this thesis was to design a communicative strategy to ensure that the adolescents of Cornerstone Fellowship Heidelberg remain faithful to their Christian faith and the ministry and teachings of the church in the area of digital gaming.

The need for this research became apparent when, as a parent of a gaming teenager son, I realised that there were many unanswered questions as to how this pastime would affect his Christian faith and spirituality. I was searching for answers to his questions as to why he was not allowed to play certain games that his friends at school were playing. It was during this time of questioning, that I realised that the church could not supply me with a satisfactory answer. I also observed that there were no programmes, in my church or any other churches in my community, being offered to help parents with deciding what they should allow their teenagers to play and more importantly, the biblical reasons for such decisions. I realised that other Christian parents had similar questions and decided that a deeper investigation was necessary to get greater clarity on issues surrounding digital gaming and an appropriate Christian approach to this popular and time-consuming sport or action activity cyber space.

This final chapter briefly reviews the objectives of this study, traces the argument of the thesis and summarises the findings as well as their significance.

#### **5.2 A review of the objectives**

The primary objective of this study was to formulate a critically and theologically informed strategic plan to ensure that the praxis of the CFH with respect to Christian adolescents and gaming is faithful to God and optimally relevant to CFH's ministry context and goals. Admittedly, it was not going to be easy as the gaming world was birthed so long after the completion of the New Testament, the normative spiritual document for the evangelical. The relatively young digital gaming phenomenon is yet to produce enough research to accurately gauge the spiritual long term impact on Christian teenagers, especially where gaming takes place dozens of hours a week.

The secondary objectives were, firstly, to interpret the operative theology of CFH with respect to its Christian teenagers' involvement in gaming. Again this was not going to be easy. The second secondary objective was to determine and defend what a faithful Christian praxis (CFH) with respect to digital gaming would look like, also a challenging task for a mini-thesis. The third secondary objective was to develop a communicative strategic plan to ensure a faithful Christian praxis of digital gaming among the adolescents of CFH. Achieving the last objective was perhaps not as difficult as the other two. But again, the success of this step hinged on the other two secondary objectives being achieved with a sense of confidence not possible in a mini-thesis.

These above objectives through the thesis design and methods employed were accomplished only in a limited way and require significant further research to be achieved with confidence. The next section explains how these objectives were attempted.

### **5.3 The argument of the thesis**

In order to try to achieve the objectives of this thesis, the research design made use of Browning's model of strategic practical theology. In one of its master's programmes, the South African Theological Seminary teaches its students to make use of this model and methodology under the heading of *Integrated Theology*. Browning's approach includes an empirical, biblical, systematic and historical theological analysis of a selected praxis in a church context and provides a framework or model for research that leads to improving the praxis. Browning (1991:55–56) proposes four steps for this task:

1. How do we understand the concrete situation in which we must act?
2. What should be our praxis in this concrete situation?
3. How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?
4. What means, strategies, and rhetoric should we use in this concrete situation?

To answer Browning's first question, qualitative research was performed by means of three case studies of three Christian adolescents at CFH who seem to typically represent the teenager population group in a highly technological and affluent society. It probed two areas: (i) the teenagers' general spiritual beliefs, values and progress in sanctification, and (ii) their digital gaming practices. Additional interviews were conducted with the pastor of the church and also a non-Christian previous gaming addict that highlighted the real possibility of gaming addiction, which helped shed some light on the associated disadvantages and benefits of this gaming.

The empirical research tried to probe whether there might be any correlation between (i) the teenagers' gaming practices, and (ii) their level of spirituality and depth of Christian identity with reference to CFH's biblical foundations and mission.

The empirical research helped provide a clearer understanding of the actual and potential challenges facing the CFH with reference to the physical, spiritual, moral and ethical dangers associated with the digital gaming involvement of their teenagers. It cannot be stated, though, that the first question in Browning's approach to practical theology, "*How do we understand the concrete situation in which we must act?*" was answered with completeness. The questionnaire needed to probe more deeply the reasons why the three teenagers and Darius were so drawn to gaming other than just fun entertainment. Further research on the impact of digital gaming is also required. However, a sufficient understanding of the nature and content of this gaming was achieved and the possible impact where excessive playing is involved.

The next part of the thesis attempted to answer the second and third questions in Browning's model for conducting practical theology: "*What should our praxis be in this concrete situation?*" and "*How do we critically defend the norms of our praxis in this concrete situation?*" The normative text of Christians is the Bible. Besides biblical studies, Browning also includes church history (including history of Christian thought) and systematic theology (the fusion of the visions implicit in contemporary practices and related systematic theology) as areas for consultation to arrive at a normative praxis in the concrete situation in which the church must act. The application of practical wisdom also plays a crucial part in Browning's practical theology model. The South African Theological Seminary places a greater emphasis on exegesis and biblical theology and wisdom derived from Scripture and the Holy Spirit than does Browning.

Naturally there is no reference to digital gaming in the Bible. However, certain texts were selected because they were considered to have indirect relevance to this phenomenon. This biblical perspective highlighted three theological principles that could be considered and used as guidelines for deciding Christian behaviour within the contemporary gaming world. The first two principles were gleaned from a brief study of Exodus 20:1-6. Here it was noted that there is only one God, who is creator of, sovereign over, and saviour of, the world. This means he alone is to be worshipped, served, loved and obeyed and that therefore any form of polytheism/idolatry (including idols of the heart), constituting unfaithfulness to God, is strictly prohibited and severely punished if not repented of. The third principle found to have relevance to providing spiritual direction in approaching gaming came from a brief consideration of Christian sanctification, especially the process of being conformed to the image of Christ, e.g. the attributes such as forgiveness, gentleness, non-vengeance, love and peace. These were compared to the morals and ethics portrayed in gaming. Furthermore, the approach to games and recreation in church history was noted providing additional support for avoiding games that undermine the honour of God and the morals and ethics of Christianity.

Attention was also given to how certain gaming can affect the teenagers' thought processes, thereby influencing their beliefs, actions and behaviour. This provided further motivation for Christian teenagers needing to weigh their

choices of recreational activities, including gaming habits, in order to ensure that their devotion to God and elements of their Christian faith and service, are not undermined, such as their spiritual growth and identity.

The conclusions from the normative consideration on gaming was clearly limited due to the nature of the thesis being a mini-one needing to accommodate all the steps in Browning's strategic practical theology. Further, the scientific research on gaming, still in its infancy, provided contradictory conclusions on the effects of gaming. However, the overall conclusion from the normative considerations called for a cautious and critical approach. Certainly a more clear and confident and defensible normative perspective needs to be worked out in the future. However, the biblical principles considered are relevant to gaming, as to every other area of the Christian teenager's life, and so a practical theology praxis on gaming at CFH is appropriate. This mini-thesis is the first phase or application of the praxis-theory-praxis process of practical theology relevant to gaming among teenagers at CFH, that would need repeats of this practical theology cycle in the future when further research on the effects of gaming is available as well as time for more extensive biblical and theological research.

The last question in Browning's model is: "*What means, strategies and rhetorics should we use in the concrete situation?*" To answer this question a plan was drawn up to help achieve the tentative and provisional praxis built on the research in chapters 2 and 3. This praxis and the recommended communicative plan to achieve this praxis are intended to create a start to the process of seeking a faithful Christian praxis in digital gaming among the teenagers at CFH with the understanding that further research is necessary to arrive at a praxis that can be more solidly defended. The strategic plan included an effective communicative system to achieve the highest possible acceptance by all the church members of the praxis proposed in this mini-thesis

## **5.4 Summary of the findings**

The main finding of the thesis was that certain fantasy games did not align with Biblical morals and ethics. They did not reflect the teachings of Jesus on forgiveness, non-retaliation, love your neighbour, materialism, refraining from

harbouring sexual thoughts, humility, gentleness and peacefulness. Being absorbed in this cyber world would mean living in an atmosphere that is not aligned with God's worldview and his covenant relationship with his people demanding exclusive worship, obedience, love, service and loyalty. It appears that the gaming world could compromise the teenagers' covenant relationship with God and undermine spiritual growth and a sound Christian identity. The most obvious concern is that gaming can absorb an inordinate amount of the teenager's time making significant development in other important life areas impossible and, more seriously, can be addictive.

It was noted that the games have been assessed and graded according to the frequency and nature of violence, filthy language, sexual content, occultic and supernatural occurrences and other underlying morals and ethics portrayed within the games. It was found that the three teenagers were playing games with ratings that should have excluded their playing of them. Thus the gaming activities of the CFH's teenagers seemed to clash with Christian morals and ethics and the foundational beliefs of CFH. Further, it was found that these games could have provided at least one reason why the teenagers manifested poor spirituality and therefore a weak Christian identity. It was concluded that the gaming trends, especially certain games played and excessive playing in the case of two of the teenagers, do not harmonise with the theological foundations and purpose of this church.

Also noted was one of the adolescent's apparent use of gaming to avoid learning to handle painful experiences and demanding challenges in real life. In the fantasy cyber world these skills are not learnt or really needed. It is also much easier to withdraw from the challenging real world into a world where there is distractive excitement, action and knocking out of one's enemies, a world one can control and where attacks on one and recovery are painless.

Of importance in the findings was the connection between the mind and brain. Through thoughts and thinking, chemical and hormonal reactions are triggered and one's actions and behaviour can be affected. This means that allowing the adolescent to surround himself with thoughts and acts of violence, aggression, sexuality and other occultic influences, such as is present in the popular games

like *WoW*, *The Last of Us*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Grand Theft Auto*, can result in physiological adaptations within the brain and resultant adaptations in the physical body. These adaptations can affect the adolescents' mental and physical health. Thus it was concluded that the filtering of thoughts, correct influences and parental supervision are a necessity with the youth. This would mean them abstaining from excessive preoccupation with playing certain digital games.

The study revealed that gaming amongst teenagers is becoming a hugely popular and time-consuming pastime and can be very addictive. It is thought most probable that Christian youth can be gravely affected and their lives impacted by the theology of the game designers. Also certain health problems can result from huge numbers of hours per week of gaming. Clearly the matter needed to be addressed by CFH, even if this study can only justify somewhat tentative conclusions requiring further practical theology research on gaming in the future.

Another finding of the study was that there are some positive results from gaming. There are, for example, mental aptitudes and the virtue of endurance that are developed. Thus it was concluded that a total ban on all digital games is not required. In fact, the design of games based on Christian values, but portraying the real world, is important. Clearly monitoring the kind and frequency of gaming by parents is necessary.

This study therefore concluded with not only the need for a definite viewpoint on gaming from CFH, even if preliminary at this stage, but also the need of a biblical policy and a plan to promote and apply the policy. The study provided a communicative strategic plan for CFH that attempts to help teenagers handle gaming in a manner worthy of the Gospel. The chance of getting wide support for the policy was increased by proposing the use of a most effective medium of communication of the praxis and maintaining it, implicating not only the teenagers and younger children, but also the parents.

## **5.5 Conclusion**



In this modern time, computers and gaming have become a phenomenon that will flow ever stronger through the youth of the future. The developments in information technology and digital media have greatly affected contemporary society and are set to change, if not already, the way that children play and experience the world. Due to this prognosis, is it not prudent for the church to acknowledge this reality and the potential negative consequences and plan an approach that will ensure that the children and teenagers in our churches are faithful to God in the New Covenant and in a secular world?

The call is for the church to wisely intervene with a praxis that helps our Christian youth handle digital gaming in a way that will not draw them away from God and his principles recorded in Scripture. This praxis must include dynamic education of the dangers for Christian children and teenagers of undiscerning and undisciplined engagement in digital gaming. This mini-thesis is a start that hopefully will be improved where necessary in the future through further practical theology research. Appendix 9 gives my exploratory thoughts about more extensive research into digital gaming with the goal of arriving at a more solid understanding of the effects of gaming on children and teenagers and a truly defensible and effective praxis for evangelical churches like CFH.

## **APPENDIX 1: Interview questions**

*Everything mentioned here in this interview is completely private and will not be mentioned to your parents, family, friends or anyone else. I will be making use of your information for my research, but there will be no mention of your name. May I have your permission to record the session?*

*Prior to answering this questionnaire, please could you tell your interviewer what are your present experiences and views on gaming.*

### **A. Game history:**

1. At what age did you start to play any form of digital games?
2. Tell me what type of digital games you have played as a child?
3. What have been your gaming habits in the past?

### **B. Relationships with others in past:**

1. What is your relationship like with your parents?  
Bad/Fair/Average/Good/Very Good/Excellent
2. In the past, have you make friends easily with other children?
3. In the past, did you have lots of friends coming to your house and playing with you, or were you quite lonely with few or no friends coming over?

### **C. Emotional history:**

1. Can you clearly still remember anything that caused you a lot of pain, or heartache or anger? Do you think it has changed you in any way?
2. In the past up until now, were you sad a lot of the time?
3. Up until now, did you have a good childhood or many problems, especially emotional ones?

### **D. Past Faith:**

1. Can you remember when you became a Christian?

2. Did you and your parents go to Church on Sundays?
3. Do you have a special memory of the church as a young child? Name one if you do.
4. Give me some idea of your past spiritual journey.

**E. Inner Feelings:**

1. Are you happy with your life at the moment? Why?
2. Do you like yourself? Why?
3. What are your strong and weak points? In other words, what do you like about yourself and what don't you like about yourself?
4. Are you lonely in the present time?

**F. Faith and Spiritual growth**

1. Do you think God sees and hears all you do and say?
2. Do you pray at all?
3. If you pray, to whom do you pray? God or Jesus or no-one?
4. Do you think he hears you when you pray to him?
5. What do you think it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ?
6. Is your family religious?
7. Does your family go to church?
8. How often in a month do you go to church?
9. What do you think it means to be a Christian?
10. Do you think your gaming has in any way affected your spiritual growth? If yes how?

### **G. Forgiveness:**

1. When someone really hurts your feelings, how easily can you forgive them?  
Put an X next to the one that you feel is right for you.

- I cannot forgive them.
- I find it very hard to forgive them but after a very long time I will forgive them.
- I will forgive them, but I need to think about it for some time.
- I can forgive them after a short moment of anger and hurt.
- I can forgive them almost immediately.

2. Is there someone at the moment that has hurt you so much that you can't forgive them?

3. How do you feel about that? If you answered no above then leave this open.

4. What do you want to change about yourself?

### **H. Self-Concept:**

1. Do you think God created you? If yes why?

2. What do you think is your purpose here on earth, i.e. why are you here?

3. What is your biggest dream in life or what do you think you are capable of?

4. Do you suffer from regular nightmares?

5. When you have a nightmare, do you have a repeated one? If so what is it about?

### **I. Gaming:**

1. What do you normally play on? Circle your answer. Cell phone / iPad/ computer /X-Box /Wii/ PSP/ other?

2. When and how often do you play digital games?

3. How many different types of games do you play? Name the brand/s.
4. How does it make you feel when you play a digital game?
5. Do you get “lost” and totally involved in a game?
6. Do you think about the game throughout the day?
7. Do you feel you become the character of your favourite game? If so, who?
8. In your games, are you usually the good guy or the bad guy? In your favourite game, what’s your best part?
9. Who buys your games for you?
10. Are you allowed to play whenever you are at home or must you first ask permission?
11. Are you allowed to play anything, or do your parents have restrictions on your games?
12. If you are you not allowed to play certain games, why do you think this is so?

**J. Friendships:**

1. Do your friends also play games? What games do they play regularly?
2. Do you get angry easily with yourself or/and with others?
3. What do you do when you are angry?
4. Do you have friends?
5. Do you like to be with your friends?
6. What do you normally talk about with your friends?
7. What do you like more: Digital games or going out with your friends?

**K. Values and Morals:**

1. Where do you feel something is wrong in your school class?

2. Where do you feel that your friends are doing wrong things?
3. Where do you feel you are being drawn away from good and right by something?
4. Where do you feel that your friends' standards have been influenced negatively by gaming?
5. Are there areas in your life that you are not happy with because it goes against God's will?
6. Are you trying to fix them or getting help in fixing them?
7. Where do you feel that your behavior towards your parents/brothers/sister/teacher needs changing?
8. What would you need to do or stop doing to make yourself a better person?
9. If you were allowed to play any games, would you play them? Which games are they?
10. What do you think about the really evil games? Would you play them or do you already play them?
11. What draws you to such games? What makes the games attractive for you?
12. What do you think about the woman in these games?
13. Would it make a difference in the game if the woman was not so well built?
14. Do you think what she wears and how she looks is important to the game?
15. Is it important to you?
16. What do you do when you are very angry?
17. What do you do when you are very scared?
18. When you have hurt someone's feelings, or said something wrong to a person, what do you do?

19. If your avatar/character had to do something in the game that you normally would not do in real life, would you go ahead in the game and do it? Answer by marking Yes or No below.

	REAL LIFE	VIRTUAL LIFE
Kill	Yes/No	Yes/No
Attack	Yes/No	Yes/No
Hurt the other opponent	Yes/No	Yes/No
Steal something	Yes/No	Yes/No
Lie about something	Yes/No	Yes/No
Get revenge	Yes/No	Yes/No
Cheat	Yes/No	Yes/No
Make a potion	Yes/No	Yes/No
Perform a spell	Yes/No	Yes/No
Curse the other person/avatar	Yes/No	Yes/No
Sacrifice a person	Yes/No	Yes/No
Pay honour to another god	Yes/No	Yes/No

20. Are you allowed to play games not recommended for your age? If so, which games are these and do you play them?

**L. Health:**

1. Do you play a sport or/and take part in some other activity? If so, what, and how often?
2. Do you have any health problems? If so, what?
3. How do you get to school?

## **FUTURE**

1. What do you want to be when you are out of school?
2. Do you think that your gaming will affect your life in the future at all, e.g. take so much time that it will undermine your training for a future career?
3. Would you ever allow your kids to play computer games? YES/NO
4. Are there any games that you wouldn't allow them to play? If so, which games?
5. How do you think the games have affected your character to date and if you continue gaming in the same way how might it affect your character in the future?

MANY THANKS FOR TAKING THE TIME TO ANSWER THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.



## APPENDIX 2: Gaming Definitions

I have elected to define the main terms in order to enable a better understanding of the literature on gaming.

Digital Games: This term means that this is a combination of games and computer software. An interface allows for a two way interaction and feedback which consists of multimedia presentations of images, video clips, sounds, music, speech and texts (Steffen 2012:249).

First Person Shooter (FPS): A general term for 3D action games seen from a first person perspective. This is where the game is seen from the perspective of the person in the game operated by the player; it usually involves the player through the role he/she plays firing a weapon from some vantage point (Dictionary of video game theory, 2005).

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG): A multiplayer game where players control a character that develops skills over time. The word 'massively' refers to the fact that millions of people play this game online; 'multiplayer' means individuals play simultaneously within the same world and 'online' shows that the game needs to be played with an internet connection. The word 'role-playing' refers to players who interact with each other within the fantasy world through a fantasy character called an "avatar" (Barnet and Coulson 2010:168).

Non player character (NPC): A computer controlled character.

Player verses player (PvP): Where players compete against each other. There can be more than two opponents such as in a multiplayer interactive conflict. Here there would be two or more live participants partaking in a mission or quest.

Player versus environment (PvE): A term used in online role-playing games to refer to fighting computer controlled enemies. The term is used in massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG) to describe combat or quests in which you fight monsters or other computer controlled non player characters (NPC) (Urban dictionary, 2014).

Role Playing (RP): Where the player participates in the game by playing a role or a character.

Third Person Shooter (TPS): Where you can see the person performing his actions from behind him (Urban dictionary, 2014)

X-Box: A gaming console developed by Microsoft. It was introduced in USA in 2001.

Wii: The Wii is a home video game console that is attached to the television screen. The company Nintendo released it in 2006.

## APPENDIX 3: Gaming restrictions

In the table below, the genre of game is specified. Popular games within this category have been presented along with their age restrictions. In some instances the restrictions have additional symbols indicating violence (V), sexuality (S) or bad Language (L). PG is Parental Guidance, T is for Teen (13 years and older) and A is for All ages.

*Table 4: Gaming genres and their respective age restrictions*

<i>Fighting</i>	Dragonball Z (13V), Fantastic Four (13V), Ben 10 Alien Force (12), Mortal Combat (16V), G-Force, Ku Fu Panda, Tron (12), Transformers (12), Tekken, Street Fighter, X-Men Origins (16V)
<i>Role Playing</i>	Borderlands (18V), Dark Souls, Empires and Dragons (13V), Fable (16), Final Fantasy, Skyrim (18V)*, World of Warcraft (T)*
<i>1<sup>st</sup> Person Shooter</i>	Battlefield (18V), Call of Duty (18V)*, Far Cry (18LV), Halo (16V)*, Just Cause (18V), Resistance (18V)
<i>Action Adventure</i>	Assassin's Creed (16V)*, Batman (16V), Bakugan (A), Book of Spells (PG), Darkside (18), Lord of the Rings (13V), Mario (PG)*, Grand Theft Auto (18VL)*, Pirates of the Caribbean (PG), Resident Evil (18V), Star Wars (16)*
<i>Construction Management Simulation</i>	Age of Empires (13V), Dangerous Hunts (16V), Sim City (13)*, Zoo Tycoon (A), Minecraft
<i>Strategy</i>	Civilization, Fallout (18V), Star Craft, X Com (18V)

<i>Music Games</i>	Dance Central (13), Dance Star (13), Guitar Hero, Just Dancing (A), Lego Rock Band, Rock Band, Sing Star (13)
<i>Vehicles</i>	Microsoft flight simulator (A), Forza (PG), Need for Speed, World Rally Champion
<i>Sport</i>	FIFA (PG), Hockey League (A), Madden Series, NBA live, Pes (PG), Rugby League (A), Tiger Woods (A)
<i>Puzzle Games</i>	Bejeweled, Chess, Rumikub, Solitaire, Tetris

\* These games are mentioned in the interviews.

## APPENDIX 4: Gaming awards

In order to assess the game and its standard, the website *GameRankings* (2014) is helpful as it collects review scores from both offline and online sources in America and Europe. The website states that it indexes over 315,000 articles relating to more than 14,500 games. The site calculates a percentage grade from all the reviews in order to calculate an average. Due to the different scoring systems across the different websites, *GameRankings* changes all the scores first into a percentage and then calculates the average score (GameRankings, 2014). The highest score ever obtained from *GameRankings* was in 2007 for *Super Mario Galaxy* of 97.64%.

A second scoring system is obtained by reading the critiques of the games. The gaming community has come up with a scoring system from various gaming bodies whereby the critiques are assimilated into a scoring system out of 10 or out of stars and this is called the “review scores”. There are various magazines with scoring systems, of which the most recognised are *Activision*, *Joystiq*, *Edge*, *Polygon*, *Destructoid*, *IGN* and the *Official PlayStation Magazine* (GameRankings, 2014). The scores are clarified as follows:

1 – disastrous; 2 – appalling; 3 - severely flawed; 4 – disappointing; 5 – average; 6 – competent; 7 – distinguished; 8 – excellent; 9 – astounding; 10 - revolutionary

Good graphics, good music, storyline and action seem to be high on the list of criteria when choosing to purchase and play a game. Some critiques want to do away with the scoring system explaining that the system is distorted. Online gamers award a score within the 10 point scale, but tend to lean towards the higher end of their scales – a value of seven or eight rather than an average of five. This has something to do with the natural inclination of people to rather review higher than what they actually believe the score should be. Thus, an average game will have a score of seven or eight and might be purchased with the idea that it is an excellent game. It is therefore suggested that the online magazines should continue to test and review the game but rather refrain from using the online gamers scoring system. By rejecting the scoring system, one

can rather rely on the actual critique to determine the value of the game. (Lecher 2013.)

In addition to a scoring system, the gaming community also has an award system. This is based mostly on scores obtained by votes from the online gaming public. *Computer and Video Games* (CVG) is a British based magazine that annually hosts the *Golden Joystick Awards*. This is the longest running gaming ceremony in the world and it helps the prospective player to determine the quality of a game. There are many other awards from numerous other online gaming magazines (Golden Joystick Awards, 2014; this was sourced from Wikipedia – due to the fast growing nature of these games it seems that Wikipedia needs to be consulted in order to get current information about the games).

A description of some of the most popular games, the production company and date of production, now follows. Various scores and awards have been included, in order to help the reader of this study to assess the game. Also included are comments from various Christian critics.

## **APPENDIX 5: Descriptions of games**

World of Warcraft (T) (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004)

This is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). It is the fourth game set in the fantasy series of Warcraft. As of November 2014, WoW had over 10 million subscribers and has grossed over 10 billion dollars as of July 2012. This game received a 97% in 2008 from *GameRankings* and 10/10 from *Edge Online Magazine*. (GameRankings, 2014.)

The player controls an avatar within the game world in first or third person view. They play the plot presented to them while fighting various monsters and completing the prescribed quests while interacting with other characters and players online. Within the storyline of Warcraft, various characters are chosen within opposing factions of the Alliance or the Horde. The player selects the character's race (Orcs, Trolls, Humans, Night Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Tauren, or the Undead) and class (Druid, Hunter, Mages, Paladin, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock, Warriors, and Priests). Your character can select a profession (tailoring, blacksmithing, smiting, leather working, engineering, mining etc.) and can learn additional skills (archeology, cooking, fishing and first aid). The player continues through the game completing quests, tasks and missions which reward the player with points, items and game money. It is through these quests that the storyline of the game is told by means of scripted text of the characters. (World of Warcraft, 2015.)

Most challenges are designed in a way that one can only successfully complete the quest while in a group thus allowing your character to assume a specific role while in the group. These quests involve the killing of monsters or creatures, gathering resources, gaining the help of other non player characters (NPC), finding hidden objects, delivering an item, visiting specific locations or interacting with others and other objects. When a character dies it becomes a ghost, or a "wisp" at a nearby graveyard. Other players can resurrect a character or one can self-resurrect by returning back to the place where they died. Making use of NPC "spirit healer" for resurrection is possible and also resurrection by another player through special items and spells is possible. There is a lot of magic from auras to ice novas, resurrection spells, etc. Settings

are varied and many with battlefields and dungeons among them. Once you have completed a quest, you receive your rewards and gain experience. As soon as your experience bar (XP) goes up to 100% you can move to the next level (there are more than 60 levels). (World of Warcraft, 2014.)

The Christian Centered Gamer website rates the game as very good with excellent graphics. It mentions that there is a high content of magic. Divine magic is called upon for healing and also the summoning of demons. Sexuality and language are rated as high (World of Warcraft, 2015).

#### Assassin's Creed (16V) (Ubisoft, 2007-2014)

This is the seventh major installment in the Assassin's Creed series. This game is a historical action adventure game. It was released in November 2014 for Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. In Nov 2014, *GameRankings* gave it a score of 73.33% and *Destructoid* awarded a score of 7/10. (Assassin's Creed, 2014.)

The original story plot is about a secret order that has a quest to find objects of unnatural power. In order to do this it uses a machine to trace ancestral memories through the DNA. Desmond Miles is a man who has been raised in the assassin order whose leader left and he is captured by a company that the Templars use as a front. They use a machine called the animus, by which they can trace the lives of Desmond's ancestors in order to find the pieces of Eden, artefacts that have so much power that they can give world domination. These artefacts of Eden have been created by the different deities of Eden. Eventually Desmond is rescued by the assassins and continues his journeys in a different animus. As the game progresses Desmond experiences the lives of his different ancestors. Doomsday finally is approaching, but Desmond saves the day. (Assassin's Creed, 2014.)

The 2014 release is the seventh in the series of Assassin Creed. It is titled *Assassin Creed Unity*. It follows a different plot with the main character Arno Dorian, and is set in Paris during the French revolution. Arno is a Frenchman who was born in Versailles to an Assassin father. His father is killed in one of the previous series and Arno is adopted. His new father is the Templar Grandmaster from the Templar Order. His adopted father is murdered and Arno



begins a quest of redemption due to his guilt about his step father's death that brings him into the brotherhood of assassins. He slowly rises through the ranks of this brotherhood much like the other hero's in the previous series. Arno's loves a Templar called Elise, who so happens to be his step sister. She is investigating her father's death which could cause changes to occur within the Templar Order that could threaten its core values. (Assassin's Creed, 2014.)

There is a large amount of violence which is vividly depicted in stabbings, slicing, shooting, neck snapping and bombs exploding. Your character uses his sword to stab in various places like the face, arms, legs, chest, eyes, neck with blood spurting out or with the character being impaled being lifted off the ground. One can hear bones cracking and loud cries of pain (Assassin's Creed, 2008).

Despite the extreme violence displayed through the *Assassin Creed* series, the Christian website *Guide 2 Games* states that the game is well worth playing and a "visual masterpiece" if one is over the age of seventeen years and does not mind the multiple scenes of violence and gore (Birch, 2008). The Christ Centred gamer website rates the graphics, sound and game play high but states that the level of morality is shocking, with violence and language graded at 2/10 and sexual content at 5/10 (the lower the grading the higher the level of foul language and sexual content) (Assassin's Creed, 2015).

#### Call of Duty: Black Ops (18V) (Activision Blizzard, 2010)

This is a first person shooter game where the player controls US soldiers who are ordered to stop a threatening terrorist attack. This can be played in single player or in multiplayer mode. This version of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* is the seventh installment in the series. This installment is the first to be set in the period of the cold war. It is the third within the *World at War* series, which are all set within the World War 2 time period. Six weeks after the release of *Activision* (Call of Duty, 2014b) reported sales were over one billion dollars and on August 3, 2011, *Activision* confirmed that the game had sold over twenty five million copies worldwide, making it one of the best-selling games in the US, UK and Europe. (Call of Duty, 2014b.) *GameRankings* have awarded the game a poor 78.10% on the computer, with complaints of frustrating problems, but on the X-

Box the game received a higher rating of 87.56%. *Edge* gave it a 7/10 score. (Call of Duty, 2014b.) In the first level of the game the player is in the setting of the invasion in the historical Bay of Pigs invasion that builds up and ends with an attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro, the president of Cuba. Some negative criticism appears in an interesting online gaming magazine article stating the following:

“What the United States couldn't accomplish in more than 50 years, they are now trying to do virtually,” said an article posted on *Cubadebate*, a state-run news website. “This new video game is doubly perverse. On the one hand, it glorifies the illegal assassination attempts the United States government planned against the Cuban leader ... and on the other; it stimulates sociopathic attitudes in North American children and adolescents” (Johnson, 2010).

Players have to play through military missions played through the time periods of the Cold War and also in modern day international locations such as USA, Haiti and Afghanistan. Pistols, machine guns, sniper rifles, explosives are used to attack and kill enemy soldiers. These conflict situations of warfare are accompanied with sounds of realistic gunfire, screams of pain and large quantities of blood from injured characters. Some of the weapons can cause decapitation or dismembered limbs and other violent acts include a hostage having his throat slit by a villain, a bound and interrogated man being shot in the kneecaps, a soldier being burned alive in a vehicle and a man being shot at close range in the head. Use of Cocaine and the manufacturing of drugs are depicted in one of the missions and sexuality is obvious with players going into a night club and seeing female pole dancers gyrate provocatively. Swear words such as “f\*\*k”, “s\*\*t”, and “a\*hole” are part of the dialogue. (Call of Duty, 2014a.)

The following comments on this game by Christian parents provide a rather negative critique of the game:

Cara Reyes: I found my kid playing these games behind my back. Now he suffers from depression and anger issues. I have taught him that the word of God says do not kill, do not shed blood, and be

merciful and kind. These games teach them the opposite of what the word of God says. Please don't let your kids play this. Even better don't buy them video games at all. I wish I would have never bought my kid his X-Box. We are now in a battle for his life, even more for his soul (Call of Duty, 2014a).

Joshua: I don't understand how people can justify playing these kinds of video games. War is not a game, and it cannot be turned into one. It is a scary thing and should not be viewed as such. Real men on battlefield should have respect for what they do for a living. They sacrifice their lives for us, watch their friends die by their side, and then come back scarred. Shooter games DO NOT edify us and help us better serve God with our lives. They are a waste of time, an addiction, and I have seen too many of my peers apostate, myself included in the past, and my brother even to this day. Please don't play them guys; listen to your God-given conscience and learn to hate your sinful desires. Flee from temptation (Call of Duty, 2014a).

Despite these words from Christian parents, the Christcenteredgamer (Call of Duty, 2015) calls the game a blockbuster and it is highly recommended, but only to those old enough to play the game. It does give a word of caution though to those individuals who find such content disagreeable to rather not play the game. I tend to disagree with these comments and reviews, since many of these games contain occultic themes, images, symbols and it is my opinion that no matter what age or level of maturity one is, dabbling with the occult and playing these games is a choice that a Christian should have to carefully consider. In defence of this though, if it wasn't for these fellow Christians analysing and playing the games, we ourselves would not have enough information in order to make any choice for or against such a game.

Grand Theft Auto (18VL) (Capcom, Take-Two interactive and Rockstar Games, 1997)

This game is an open world online multiplayer game which was released in Oct 2013 for the PlayStation and Xbox. The Microsoft Windows version was planned for January 2015. This game is the most expensive game ever created

grossing about \$265 million. *GameRankings* rated *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) at 97% with *Edge* giving it a solid 10/10. (Grand Theft Auto, 2014b.)

GTA takes place within the fictional state of San Andreas in Southern California. The game allows up to thirty online players to interact in competitive or cooperative matches. *GTA4* is the story of a Bosnian war veteran, Niko Bellic. He is an illegal Serbian immigrant who comes to Liberty City. His cousin Roman has told him about how good America is and so Niko has come to start a new life and live the American dream. Roman though is a liar who is unsuccessful with his taxi service, lives in a dump, and is in debt to the Russian mafia. In order to help his cousin, Niko takes on unsavoury jobs to make some money to help pay off Roman's debts. (Grand Theft Auto, 2015.)

The Christian guide to games site advocates strong caution to any Christian player wanting to know the content of such a game prior to playing it. Crime is a continual focal point. The game involves a large amount of violence with excellent graphics depicting all the sinful action into brutal detail. There is the use of cocaine and marijuana and the site states that "every profanity in the book is used constantly by nearly every character in the game." Lawless acts are flagrantly committed and players can only progress through the game by committing illegal and destructive acts. Players can kill whoever they choose by making use of baseball bats, knives, guns and explosives. If that is not sufficient, you can simply run them over in a car. Players can proposition girlfriends and prostitutes, with strip clubs and dancers provocatively entertaining their customers. The player takes on the role of a villain and has to help the onscreen protagonist get to the top of the crime syndicate within a fictional metropolis. Various missions involve working in gangs, fulfilling deeds of crime and earning cash. All the work and missions involve committing some sort of atrocious crime for profit. As you become more successful, the city becomes larger. (Grand Theft Auto, 2014a.)

The 3D images are realistic with hundreds of additional side details such as hundreds of cars and pedestrians walking the streets within the city. Day turns into night and even the weather changes randomly. There is a strong element of sexual content with camera shots outside of "...apartment windows and

rocking cars as suggestive moans are heard". In addition sexual innuendos are present throughout the dialogue. (Grand Theft Auto, 2015.)

*Guide to Games* (Grand Theft Auto, 2014a) does not rate this game highly. It states that the game is very offensive to Christianity giving it a score of 1/5 with extreme violence and strong adult content with again a score of 1/5. It rates the game play higher with a 4/10 score.

Skylrim (18V) (Bethesda Game Studios, 2013)

*Skylrim* is seen to be "one of the greatest games of all time" with over 20 million copies sold since its release in June 2013. *Skylrim* is an action role playing game in the first or third person. *GameRankings* have awarded 94.43% for *Skylrim* on the computer. *IGN* has awarded it a 9.5/10 score. In 2011 *The Elder Scrolls V Skylrim* the first game of the two, also received awards from various gaming sites and publications. The *Skylrim* website reports that the game received "PC Game of the Year" award from the online magazines *IGN* and *GameSpot*. (Skylrim, 2014b.)

The main story takes place in the fictional province of *Skylrim* and revolves around the player's avatar trying to defeat the world eater dragon, Alduin. The player's avatar can also absorb the souls of the slain dragons allowing him to make use of powerful spells and magic called "dragon shouts". Throughout the course of the game, the avatars fulfill quests and improve their skills and experiences in order to develop their characters. A continual objective for the player is to try and develop their character. He can customize his appearance and can select from several races such as human, elves or a fantasy creature. The player also improves his/her character skills as the game progresses. There are eighteen skills which are divided into three areas of combat, magic and stealth. When the player has trained enough and gained enough experience (XP) their character can level up. There is combat with humans, animals and fantasy creatures with all types of weapons. Sword users can see decapitations and public beheadings and heads can be seen on pikes in dungeons. Within the game there are a pantheon of gods and goddesses with a fantasy religious element. The *Nine Divines* have Christian virtues while the *Daedra* tend to be a mixture of demons and Greek gods. Mages use their

magic to heal, resurrect the dead and summon creatures from other realms or even to perform acts such as casting fireballs, frost and lightning. Thievery, assassination and murder are options. Drug use, cannibalism, becoming a vampire or a serial killer are all possibilities for the player to choose from. The violence is bloody and drawn out in slow motion. Marriage to any species and gender is possible. Magic, assassins and thieves partake in these dark acts. (Skyrim, 2015.) The game is in the “open-world” tradition which allows the avatar to travel anywhere in the game at any time thus postponing the main storyline indefinitely (Skyrim, 2014b).

Some quotes from the online site *Guide to Games*:

Stephen: The thing about Skyrim that continues to impress me is how quickly the hours fly by while I’m playing it. I just finished a Thieves’ Guild quest where I had to steal some documents out of a crook’s house. It’s a minor mission, but swimming across the lake to his island home, sneaking past his guards, getting onto his property, pick pocketing the key, and grabbing the goods took me an hour and a half. Like I said, it’s a minor quest, but I was so absorbed in it and enjoying myself so much that if I hadn’t happened to look up at the clock I would have missed an appointment in real life. It was then that I realized I’m going to have to set a timer when I play this game because I can get so absorbed in *Skyrim* that I forget about God, family, and work. *Skyrim* is a huge time sink, with hundreds of hours of available game play, and it’s such a realistic and detailed world that Christian gamers need to know how easy it is to get lost in it. It could easily become a second life (*Skyrim*, 2014a).

Cameron: I consider myself a pretty avid gamer. I spend the majority of my days either playing games or thinking about them while I do other things. I sometimes have marathon sessions where I’ll play a game for five or ten hours straight, but most of the time I play in little bursts, for anywhere between half an hour to two hours. That’s what’s common for me. However, when *Skyrim* came out, something about it struck me differently than other games. I didn’t want to stop playing; I had no reason to, I was having so much fun. Usually I get a

little scatterbrained after playing a game for a certain amount of time and have to do something else. That never happened with *Skyrim*; I literally couldn't stop playing. When the game launched, I ended up playing for nearly 35 hours in a 48 hour time span. I've never done something like that before. That, alone, I think says wonders about how amazing *Skyrim* is (Skyrim, 2014a).

#### Star Wars: The Old Republic (T) (BioWare, Electronic Arts, 2011)

This is a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). *GameRankings* scores it at 83.87% and *IGN* 9/10. In 2011 it received the "Game of the Year" award from *Gamespy 2011 video awards*. Of interest was that in 2012, the *AbleGamers Foundation* awarded *Star Wars* as the "Mainstream Game" for 2011 for being able to accommodate special needs gamers. (Star Wars, 2014b.)

The narrative takes place within the fictional universe from the *Star Wars* films where there is a weak peace treaty between the Sith Empire and the Galactic Republic more than 3500 years before the events in the *Star Wars* films. The Jedi order and the Galactic Republic are fighting the Sith who are attempting to overcome them in order to establish a new Empire. The conflict takes place across many planets where there are also civil wars and political struggles. Players follow missions and quests, interact with non-playable characters (NPC) and aliens and can also have PvP combat that uses weapons and magic (The Force). The player can chose between being a good and noble Jedi or play as a Sith. The Sith has an arrogant, bullying attitude and can be cruel and induce fear. Companion characters allow the player to approach difficult and many different situations. The player can choose to have support from other player characters in order to move to the next level ("level up"). Every character, both NPC and player's, has full voice dialogue which helps to enhance game play. The text chat between players is uncensored and can be uncouth. (Star Wars, 2014a.)

#### The Last of Us (18VL) (Sony Computer, 2013)

This game has received much praise for its writing, graphics, music and art direction. Not only has the game received acclaim, but the soundtrack has also

become popular. The game has been considered by many critics as one of the greatest video games of all time and received over 200 “*Game of the Year*” awards and is the most awarded game in all of history. (Nelva 2014.) It was launched in 2013 and within one week sold over 1.3 million units. By August 2014 the game had sold over 8 million units (Renolds 2014). *GameRankings* scored it at 96% and *Edge* and *IGN* gave it a 10/10. (The Last of us, 2014c.)

The player controls the role character of Joel, who escorts a young girl called Ellie through a post apocalyptic USA. It is from a third person perspective. Ellie and other characters are controlled by the computer. The player uses firearms, bows and improvised weapons in order to defend Ellie and himself against hostiles and zombies who are infected by a mutated strain of the *Cordyceps Fungus*. The periods without combat are filled with conversation between Joel and Ellie or the solving of various puzzles. (The Last of us, 2014c.)

*KVR Gaming* (The last of us, 2014b), a Christian website, has warned its readers that *The Last of Us* has extreme violence and “contains very realistic and brutal depictions of violence towards humans”. The author of the site states that the fighting scenes are really intense where they have to fight the infected.

They are genuinely scary to fight, forcing you to adapt, and to adapt quickly. The encounters with the infected are the most tense in any game I've played. It's really, really intense, and that's what makes it so good (The last of us, 2014b).

Descriptions of violence are gruesome with graphic clarity of spraying blood, rolling heads, pools of blood and pieces of human flesh hitting the screen accompanied with sound effects of screaming, splashing of blood and moans of pain. One can be burned alive with charred body parts as he flails around screaming in pain. One can be bitten in the neck by the infected zombie with blood spurting out and then the zombie pulls your jugular out. One can be beaten to death where your nose is torn off and blood all over your head and you can be grabbed from behind and have your neck broken, where a crack can be heard and the head is twisted around. Torture, cannibalism and homosexuality are displayed within the game. Sexuality is present with a



grading of heavy sexuality. The author of the site suggests that despite the extreme violence and foul language, with the f\*\*k word being repeated repetitively, one should decide whether to play the excellent game or not, stating that it is one of the best that he has ever played. (The last of us, 2014b.) So too says the author from the Christian review gaming website called *Christ CenteredGamer* with the following words:

Despite all of the moral failings of this game, I can't help but feel that it was one of the most immersive and thought provoking games that I have ever played. The entire story, especially the ending, is well worth the monetary admission price, but I can only recommend this game to those who can accept the extremely graphic and offensive moral content of this game (The last of us, 2015a).

## **APPENDIX 6: Interview responses in the case studies**

### *A. Gaming introduction*

All three began to play games around the age of eight to ten years. The games played prior to their teenage years were simple child games such as *Super Mario*, *Pacman*, *Kim Possible*, Lego games, cartoon network games, *Puss in Boots*, *Megamind*, *Sims 2*, *Men-in-black*, *Kurby*, *Pokémon*. The digital apparatus used were Nintendo, Computer and Wii, and Gameboy. All three individuals progressed from simple fantasy child games to more advanced shooting, action games. Those games played at present are mentioned below. During their childhood years the interviewees only played a couple of hours per week, mostly on the weekend.

### *B. Relationships with others in the past*

Maria had an emotional trauma that has affected her right up till the present. She says the following,

...I was very shy and I didn't trust anyone. I had a problem with trusting people and I still do. But it's not so bad anymore. Before I wouldn't let anyone into my life and I didn't trust them.

She didn't have many friends and didn't have anyone coming over to play at home. She did befriend some friends at school, but only due to necessity and not because she trusted them.

Markus says: "I make friends easily". He always made friends easily and there were many different friends who would visit him at home.

Jonas feels that because he wasn't liked much as a child he didn't make friends easily and this seems to still affect him and his self-confidence. He says,

I didn't have in the beginning a good school life because I was bullied a lot. I was basically a nerd. Now I'm much happier and no longer a nerd.

### *C. Emotional History*

Maria was hurt by someone in the past and even though she has forgiven this person, she carries the “mistrust and hardness” within her. She is able to easily cover up any hurt and does not allow others to come too close to her. She will not allow herself to become sad. Despite this, she feels she has a strong personality and had a good childhood. Jonas was bullied in the past. He believed it was wrong, but feels they rightfully bullied him because he was “...a nerd. I was small and fragile ... and I wore glasses”.

### *D. Past Faith*

They have all been born into Christian families and were always Christian. There seems to be good memories of Sunday school classes.

### *E. Inner Feelings*

Maria says,

... I wouldn't allow people to come close to me because I was very strong. I am very good at hiding things. I don't see that as a pro in my personality; I would put that as a con since it's hard to get close to someone who hides things. That block that I put up at five years of age is still there.

Markus mentioned that he is very happy with himself and his life and that he goes “to a good school and lives in a great town with great people”; that he has “a great family and good friends” and is “very happy”. When asked if he likes himself he replied that he likes everything about himself, “because I am me!”

Jonas sees that he has joy, happiness and sensitivity. He was an easy target and bullied because he has a soft, gentle, loving personality. He feels that it was because he wore glasses that made him more like a nerd. Despite this, it hasn't changed who he is, although he realizes that he does not like to share any of his belongings with others. He feels that he gets aggressive and angry faster than he would like to, especially with other children in his class. When it seems as if they are going to talk down to him, he reacts faster than he would normally like to. Despite this he is not unhappy or sad.

## F. Faith and Spiritual Growth

Maria says that she was definitely created by God. “He just created all of us and me”. Her purpose in life has been to serve God and to bring people closer to Him, but she doesn’t do it so directly,

...a relationship with Jesus means that I am able to come to him for everything. To be a Christian means that you believe in God as our saviour, Jesus and the Holy ghost. I see God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as one. When I pray, I pray to God and Jesus. When I pray, I pray as though he was one of my best friends, I don’t say ‘God’, I make up a name or say ‘Hey Dude!’

When asked whether she thinks God hears her prays, she said,

I know that God hears me and answers me when I pray to him. As a small child it isn’t possible to forgive in my situation that’s why it’s only from God that I could forgive. I myself wouldn’t forgive like that; it had to only come from God.

When asked whether she feels that gaming has affected her spiritual growth in any way, she stated,

Yes, it makes me more aggressive sometimes and when I am in the game I can sometimes get angry, frustrated and aggressive. Games where you shoot – I know games are not something to do in real life, but in the game I enjoy the shooting.

Markus says that he heard and saw that others could speak in tongues at his church and so he decided that he would also like to speak in tongues and just tried and it happened. He prays to God thanking him for the day and his family and asks Him to help other people. When he prays to Jesus he prays for forgiveness. He believes he needs to be more “together with God” and more spiritual,

Now that I am getting older and I am in a school with multiple religions, I am not going to lie; I think “Is there really a God out there.” And others think of the big bang and I am also thinking about that.

Presently, he believes that to have a relationship with Jesus means that he is free to have his own life and that to be a Christian means that “you follow your life and can make your own road that you follow”. He goes every Sunday to church and also to the Friday *Teenkries*. He also goes on any special events celebrated at church, such as thanksgiving, Easter and Christmas. When asked about the effects of gaming on his spiritual growth, he stated that,

God is always for me there, so even if I stray off the path He is always there for me. I have seen it happen to people because of the gaming: they become popular or something and they become other people and they forget who they are, but it doesn't happen to me.

Jonas says he remembers giving his life to Christ a couple of times as a young kid in church with other groups in an altar call. He believes that his life is now given to Jesus. He believes he needs to pray more – that he doesn't pray enough. He prays to “God” and “Father”. He believes that to have a relationship with Jesus Christ,

...means that you know that someone loves you and cares for you. To be a Christian means that you should try to be pure and holy and to follow God and not sin; even when you are wrong and sin and it's a really bad moment, to try and stay on the right path. When I see I am not on the right path I look and see; no this is not right! ...And it's happening often, but then I stop doing it or go away from it and say to God, “Give me strength help me to stay away from it.” I ask Jesus to forgive me and I believe he does. Even though I am entirely alone there is always someone who loves me – Jesus.

When asked about whether his parents are religious and if he actually knows what religious is, he answers, “I think religious is to believe in a cause and to be faithful in that cause. My parents are like that. They are real Christians”. The family goes often to church and he also goes to the Friday *teenkreis*. When

asked as to whether he feels that gaming affects his faith or takes him away from his faith in any way he is very adamant in his reply by saying, "Not at all".

### *G. Forgiveness*

In Maria's case, she has forgiven the person who hurt her but feels that her personality has been affected by this and she is now "closed off and private, not allowing others within her private space and not trusting easily." As she talks, her arms are crossed across her body in a protective state. She states that she would like to "be more forgiving and trusting, but I am still scared of someone else hurting me again."

Markus replies that he forgives, but he has to think about it for some time. "I got angry today at school at a kid, and he was younger than me and that got me real angry....I just really don't like it when people disrespect me. But when I think about it, I go to sleep and tomorrow it won't bother me anymore".

With Jonas, he says that he can still remember the bullying and being emotionally hurt and "I believe it's because of this that I am getting aggressive and angry fast". If someone really hurt him, it's a part of him to forgive the other person.

### *H. Self Concept*

When prompted about how he feels about himself, Markus states that,

I like myself because I am me. I am in a great town with great people in it and I love my life". I have a chance to get a good education, I have good friends, my family loves me and what more can I ask! I know that God has a plan for me. I just don't know what it is as yet. I don't hide a lot, I am very open and I trust easily.

Jonas' response was, "Yes I am not a nerd anymore. I am not weak and small anymore." When asked about what he thinks his purpose here on earth is he answered that he is here to serve God. He feels his strong point is to encourage people. "If there is a boy and this boy says, 'I can't do this!' I say, 'Come on you can do this! Believe in yourself!' I support them and encourage them and this makes me feel good."

## I. Gaming

Maria plays during the week on her cell phone during breaks, while waiting for class or in-between class. She only really plays on the X-Box when her friends come over. When she comes home she usually first does homework, helps clean up the house, helps the younger brothers with their homework and will play if she has time. She would play approximately seven hours a week. The games on her phone are *How to train a dragon*, *Dumb ways to die*, and *Minecraft*. Games that she plays on the X-Box are *Call of Duty*, *Minecraft*, *Diablo*, *Halo*, and *Assassin's Creed*.

When playing these games she can get totally immersed in the game. Gaming makes her feel happy and relaxed, except when she can't successfully move onto the next level or her character gets killed. Then she feels frustrated and angry and "screams into a pillow". She usually plays the "good guy" in the games and the parts she likes most is the actual creating part, such as in *Simms*, where you create a character with families, homes and communities. Her brother usually buys the games and she just plays with what is available. At her home they have many consoles and so she can play with her friends and this makes it more interesting. She is really allowed to play anything as long as it's within the age restriction and it is not too violent or bloody. She is also not allowed to play games which depict satanism and where there is the performing of spells and evil deeds.

Markus feels that gaming has never affected him spiritually. He mostly plays on the X-Box. He plays *World of War*, *Dead space*, *Butcher Cell*, *Call of Duty*, *Skyrim*, *Warfare*, and *Grand Theft Auto*. At the moment it's mostly *World of War*,

I like to play first person shooter and role playing games like *Skyrim*. It makes me feel good and relieved when I play the game. There is stress in the world, not every family is perfect and sometimes you can get angry at somebody else and then when I play the X-Box it kind of puts me in a whole new world and I can just chill.

When he goes to school and when he is bored he does go back into the game in his imagination throughout the day. He will rerun certain maneuvers and

situations in order to work out how to win the challenge or move to the next level of the game. He doesn't get lost into the character or identify with the character. When he is in the game though,

...although its not part of me, it's my profile, my character. My best parts are doing trick shots. I like having fun like when you do 360's in the air and doing stuff with your hands when you do something cool and everyone sees it because you are online.

He usually buys his own games. There are some games that his parents don't like, such as high age restricted games, games that are satanic or evil or games with too much sexuality. They check this by looking on the back of the game box.

He is allowed to play whenever he asks, which is during the week or weekend. He plays around two to three hours a day. Some of his friends also play "Grand Theft Auto".

...It's a criminal game, it doesn't affect me. The games criminal stuff won't flow over into his real life and doesn't affect him in real life at all. A game is a game and it's not the real world. I see some of the things you do in Grand Theft Auto you get caught right away and that's good.

Jonas says he normally plays on an iPad and a computer. In the week he plays one to two hours per day and then weekend five to six hours per day. He plays *Star Wars*, *Clash of Clans* and *Minecraft*. The first two are online games and he communicates with other online gamers,

I feel excited and satisfied when I play, especially when it's a good game. It's fun. I get very angry though when it glitches or stops or freezes. Then I want to say a bad word and I try and stop saying it, but if I do swear I say "Sorry God, forgive me for what I said because I know these words are really bad".

When asking whether he ever gets lost in the game or identified with the players at all, he got quite defensive and protective. He responded with an adamant "No! I am always aware of the time and what's going on outside of the



game". When he is going through his normal daily activities and school day, his imagination is very active. He has always had a good imagination and he now uses it to recreate the scene and can work out how to assassinate the other character and also how to do certain strategic moves and win in tight situations. "It becomes part of my imagination .....but not in a bad way .....but I live in the game." When asked which character does he play he answered, "I play either the bad guy or the good guy. The good guy can be fun but the bad guy also can be fun and do things that the good guy can't do."

#### *J. Friendships*

The answers to the questions in this category have been recorded in Section B.

#### *K. Values and Morals*

When Maria was questioned as to whether her friends influence her in any way, she replies that there are some classmates who smoke and about a quarter of the class use drugs. They swear a lot and they talk about, and partake in, sex. She is not happy to say no to sex the whole time. If she has to be honest, she would like to also have sex but knows she shouldn't.

When gaming, her avatar will kill, attack, hurt the other opponent, steal something, get revenge, cheat, make a potion and perform a spell, but she will not allow the avatar to curse the other characters, sacrifice a human or pay honour to another god. In real life she would not allow herself to perform any of these, except that she would hurt another person if they were attempting to hurt her. She would also try to get revenge on someone who had wronged her.

Markus says that his friends don't influence him negatively and that they have similar principles to him even though they aren't Christians. "Gaming hasn't influenced me negatively and we all play the same games." When gaming he would allow his avatar to kill, attack, hurt the other opponent, steal, lie about something, get revenge, cheat, make a potion, perform a spell, but not curse the other avatar, sacrifice another human, and pay honour to another god. In real life he would allow himself to lie about something and get revenge, but not cheat or follow through on any of the other above-mentioned actions.

Jonas feels that in class the children are quite disrespectful to the teacher by talking back to him/her or even showing the finger behind his back. I notice that he is quite separate in his gaming hobbies and his friends don't play the same games or even have any form of gaming. He can't talk about the games with his friends. When asked about being influenced or drawn away from good and what is right, he says that pictures of woman and the portrayal of them is what tempts him. The games have very sexy women in them and he likes that and is drawn to the game by the sexuality of the women, he likes it when they are dressed sexy. He feels that this is wrong and doesn't like his attraction to this and is trying to fix it by talking to his pastor and using him as a mentor. When he does wrong things he prays to God asking Him to give him strength and to help him. He enjoys shooting games, but not so much for the killing, but for the action and the strategic moves he has to make. He says that a good game must have exciting fast-paced action, with interesting strategy moves and missions, where one needs to think carefully to make the correct choices and decisions within a captivating storyline; there must also be great role playing and interesting characters and it is very important that the quality of the graphics must be excellent.

He would play any game if he was allowed to play it. Even if was a satanic game, if it had good graphics, good storyline and good action, he would play it;

I am not into killing games, but I enjoy the fighting and warfare. Its fun shooting, to have all these nice big guns, like a soldier and have a story and it's nice to shoot. The really evil games, if they were really good, I would play them, but if it has spells and stuff I won't play it for the spells and stuff.....I play it for the good graphics and the good action scenes.

In virtual reality, he would allow his avatar to do all the actions mentioned above, except curse the other avatar, sacrifice a person and pay honour to another god. In real life he wouldn't steal something but he would cheat and lie about something and also get revenge when necessary. He also wouldn't make a potion, perform a spell, curse another avatar, sacrifice a person or pay honour to another god.

## **APPENDIX 7: Non-Christian teenager's interview responses**

This eighteen year old had a gaming history of highly addictive gaming behavior. This interview was performed without the questionnaire being filled in by the interviewee, although the same questions were posed to him, but in a totally relaxed and informal manner and environment. This interviewee was very open, truthful and expressive with reference to his views on his past addictive behaviour. He stated that he no longer games to such an extreme and is very careful not to let it get out of hand. He has placed boundaries on his time management. Clearly gaming addiction can be overcome.

Darius (not his real name) played throughout his teenage years, from fourteen to seventeen years of age, for approximately ten hours per day. During school terms, his total weekly amount of time spent gaming was above seventy hours. He played well into the night and in summer months when he had holidays he continued playing throughout the night, playing continuously for more than twenty four hours. During this period, his health was seriously affected. He suffered skeletal pain due to incorrect posture. Not only were his bones affected with pain, but there were also growth problems associated with malnutrition and vitamin D deficiency.

Due to being completely involved in gaming, Darius admits that he didn't take care with what he ate and drank or even how often he ate. He ate whatever was easily accessible and could be quickly consumed while gaming. Due to his long hours behind the computer, he didn't get out often enough into the sunlight and thus became deficient in Vitamin D. He no longer plays as many hours a week and only allows himself two to three hours daily at the present moment.

My interview started with Darius telling me about the game *The Last of Us* (Sony Computer 2013). The game is very violent with much shooting and killing and it takes place during the time of the Apocalypse. Your avatar character is an older man whose whole quest is to protect Ellie. There is deep communication and an intimate connection between these two characters. They bond and become like father and daughter. You play the role of the man and through the game and constant protection you give her, you develop a

deep connection to Ellie. At some stage in the game Ellie is about to be get raped. When retelling this story, Darius changes from 3<sup>rd</sup> person to 1<sup>st</sup> person as if he is in actual fact reliving the story in real life. He continues to say that "...you get so connected to the character that you even cry while playing this game". Ellie manages to hit her attacker off with the knife. He said that,

It's a very emotional scene and you actually feel how bad it really is to experience something like this. This is the best game I have ever played. Its very addictive and its single player.

He mentions that he played this game every day for a week. "It's so addictive that you can't sit down and not play it." He admits to being a computer addict and played ten hours every day for three to four years. He mentions that one of the most enjoyable components of gaming for him was that one doesn't play alone but with other people. He said,

...as in a multiplayer game, one doesn't only get addicted to the game, also, one gets addicted to the other people. They are your friends and they care about you and ask how you are and even when I don't play the game they send me a message and ask me if all is ok. So they push you back into the game. All my friends at school also did gaming and so then, when we sit together we only talk about the game.

He got involved in computers when he was very young, around five years of age, because his brother was a computer lover and introduced him to all forms of technology. By the age of thirteen years, he got introduced to multiplayer gaming along with his class friends. He mentions that gaming is like drugs, "...then it gets so competitive, such as these shooting games, you get higher scores and higher levels that it's actually like drugs." Gaming was the getaway, the runaway place. Whenever he was angry, bored, sad, or even hungry he would go to this "place" of gaming,

...whenever I had time, even just half an hour, I would play it, like someone who wanted to have a quick smoke. All my money would go into buying a gaming computer and then also the games. I would

pay up to 300-400€ just for 2 games. Gaming is like a drug, and it makes you feel good.

He feels that there is no connection between gaming and religion and:

...as a Muslim, I have to say my prayers during the day, but its only five minutes and so I can manage that. The laws in the Koran are in real life and don't affect or flow over into virtual reality.

He doesn't believe that gaming can cause aggression; in fact he believes he reacts in the opposite direction,

If I am aggressive and hurt then I can go to the game and kill and hurt there and then it's done. If I don't release my anger and aggression in the game where else could I let it out? Games helped me release my aggression and anger. Games don't make you angry; games make you enjoy your time. When you kill people in the game you are not actually killing someone, you are laughing with your friends online and talking and it's just for fun. You don't think I killed someone, it's more about competition and that I got my points.

He mentioned that while gaming he could get completely lost in the game and not be aware of the passing time. He explained that sometimes, after he has played a long time, when he tries to go to sleep, the computer screen with the game and its images would light up behind his closed eyes and he would he would still continue to play. His parents allowed him free reign and they only had two rules, not to hurt anyone and to have good school grades. He managed to maintain a good grade despite the influence of gaming and so they had no concerns about him.

He states that gaming teaches one to multi-focus when playing regularly, one learns to multitask. Even so though, his concentration was most definitely affected since he says,

...at school I could get lost in my thoughts trying to solve the different levels and maneuvers, but there is also a thing like self control and if you lose your self control it would be bad, but some games teach you

to remember things and you can use that in your studies to remember more things.

With regards to sexuality, he said that he was never affected by it and didn't believe it to be important. He mentions that,

...in Grand Theft Auto you can go to a strip club and you can see sex and something like this, but yes it's true that it gives a bad influence on who watches it, I don't know what they do. But for me it's not fun. My friends say it's very realistic.

When asked if he feels gaming affected his identity and personality, he says that the first person shooter games were what affected him the most, in a positive manner. He gained a lot more confidence and faith in himself and when one knows that there is another chance to live, you try again and again until you get the next level or conquer the task set for you and this creates perseverance. It was through gaming that he learnt to speak English so well.

## **APPENDIX 8: Lesson plans for the church**

### ***Lesson one***

Statistics on gaming and the economics and financial implications of games sold throughout the world will be briefly covered. This will also alert CFH to commercialization of gaming for the profit for the producers, as this is often the only motive for producing more and more games and therefore very questionable. Then an overview of the five lessons will be presented. All lessons will take on the format of an informal chat group with the lecturer giving an accompanying power point presentation with video clips and short testimonies. The following topics are then covered:

- Explanation of online gaming, role playing and how the player can identify with a character.
- Types of games, genre, age restrictions, story lines and game content will be discussed. Various criteria within the games that are acceptable to a Christian parent will be identified, empowering the parent with a tool so that they can determine whether the games their children are playing with are acceptable or not for Christians.
- Short video clips of game play pertaining to two or three currently popular games, highlighting the shocking elements.
- Interactive time with questions and answers.

### ***Lesson two***

In this lesson biblical norms and principles that pertain to gaming are covered as follows:

- The first two of the Ten Commandments and related Biblical themes:
  - Worship of the one God only
  - Idolatry
  - Witchcraft, sorcery, divination

- Jesus' teachings and Christian identity.
- Sanctification and one's journey with Christ.
- Interaction with questions and answers.

### ***Lesson three***

The topics to be covered are as follows:

- What is gaming addiction?
- What is normal gaming and what is abnormal gaming?
- Physical, psychological and spiritual influences with regards to gaming?
- The benefits and advantages of certain gaming.
- Parental advice with regards to time management and gaming content.
- Video clips of testimonies.
- Interactive time with questions and answers.

This is the end of the adult information lesson plans.

### ***Lesson four***

This lesson will comprise of a fully interactive discussion and teaching with the aid of video clips and gaming examples. Lessons four and five are only for the youth (pre-teens and teenagers), to teach the youth what to observe, what to be aware of, and what to reject or accept. Careful consideration will be taken with regards to game context, format and style. This will not be a witch hunt but rather an information session where the child/teenager is taught to make his/her own responsible fully informed decision as to whether they choose to play a game or not and how much time to devote to it.

### ***Lesson 5***

This lesson will entail playing various acceptable games exposing the youth to games that would previously not have been explored due to lack of interest, finances or perceived lack of action. An example of such a game is the



*TheGameBible* leased in 2015 where the adventures of Biblical characters are portrayed in gaming format with action and excellent game play and good graphics. Other games such as *Age of Empires* (strategy game), *Minecraft*, *Siedler*, *Mario* and similar games will be discussed and experienced.

Later, lessons will be designed by the youth, presenting their own game synopses from Biblical stories. This will be an exercise to show that games do not have to be filled with elements of evil, violence, bloodshed, sexuality, and grotesque supernatural creatures. The following is an example of such as exercise where I have composed a write-up for a potential game that could be designed. The write-up, which would appear on the back of the game box, is as follows:

Centuries ago the first king of a nation was jealous and insecure and through his actions, threatened to split a nation, but there was one who would save the nation from this terrible fate. He was the chosen one, the only one willing and able to bring about peace. As he fights for survival in a scattered world of giants, brutality and death, he experiences betrayal, lust, and sabotage from those closest to him. Your mission is to try and change the fate of this character, who is prophesised over and who will affect the world for generations by one of his offspring leading to the salvation into his kingdom over a thousand years later and beyond. In order to fulfil his mission, he needs to gain experience through various quests of archery, sword fighting and sling shot accuracy. Fighting demons through musical compositions and pretending to be insane are quests while fighting against an evil King who is power hungry and killing and destroying nations around him. He learns to endure hardship, survive temptation and accept the consequences of his decisions. You are taken through the world of criminals where they hide in caves; into the life of royalty and experience the life of a King. You lead your character through various quests where he fights lions and giants and partakes in vicious battles where death is threateningly close. Side missions such as negotiating a peace treaty, marrying a fair maiden or conquering a city are included.

## **APPENDIX 9: My thoughts on further necessary research**

1. Review current literature relevant to digital gaming: the kinds of games and assessment of gaming from theological, social, psychological and educational perspectives (there might be one or two more). Applicable headings here could be historical development of gaming; who designs and produces games; what motivates the writers and producers of these games?; story lines; how games are played; the graphics and sound effects; and reasons for the popularity of gaming. The above perspectives could be taken separately and reviewed in the relevant literature.

2. Then based on this thorough review of relevant and up-to-date literature, look at the advantages and disadvantages of gaming in some detail in different categories. One category could simply be religion, i.e. how gaming today might affect a child's religious beliefs (whether Christian, Muslim, atheist, etc). From this review, criteria from the literature reviewed for assessing the advantages and disadvantages of gaming from each of the perspectives (religious, educational, psychological, etc) would be gleaned.

3. Develop a matrix from a biblical study on how to evaluate gaming from a biblical perspective. This would require developing biblical criteria for assessing games and the impact on the teenagers' spiritual development.

4. Then a detailed study of one of the most popular games that has caused me most concern. This would not only cover the story line, but a variety of aspects so that the game can be properly evaluated in terms of a matrix of criteria designed in 2.

5. An empirical study. Firstly a survey of about 100 Christian teenagers from a variety of churches in my city (all anonymous); a not too long questionnaire (about eight to ten questions with say four or five possible answers per question from which an answer must be selected). A separate questionnaire (same format) for the parents of the 100 Christian teenagers. By designing questionnaires carefully one can easily process the results

with relevant computer software in a variety of graphs showing the situation at a glance. From the results of this survey, choose a few areas for further research using the interview method with about ten Christian teenagers and their parents. In other words, this would focus on areas that clearly from the questionnaire results need further exploration and understanding. Flowing out of the results from the questionnaires and the interviews, choose a number of questions/areas to explore together in a focus group composed of approximately ten Christian parents and their teenager children. The value of the focus group is that issues are thoroughly discussed and further explored and ideally the group ends in a fairly united position regarding understanding the phenomenon primarily from a Christian perspective and the kind of resulting church approach that would be most suitable.

6. Consult critically a few models of good practice in the area of church approaches to digital gaming among their teenagers.

7. Finally dialogue and then synthesis the above into a pastoral model for the local church to gaming.

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