

Online fellowship: The ethical world of multiplayer gaming

by [David Keck](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue



A scene from "Assault on the Ringwraiths' Lair" in The Lord of the Rings Online.

A majority of people in the United States now play electronic games like Call of Duty, Candy Crush, and Words with Friends. Follow the money: in 2010, electronic gaming in the United States produced approximately \$25 billion in revenue, whereas box office receipts for Hollywood movies totaled less than \$11 billion. And gamers no longer are isolated individuals playing on their own. Multiplayer games create intense competitive and cooperative social relationships with their own set of norms and expectations.

As a chaplain I often talk with gamers and listen to them. I've thought about my own experience as a gamer. And I've detected something profound at work, something with both ethical and theological dimensions. I believe that understanding gaming and the life-enhancing dimensions of gaming is critical if Christian leaders are going to relate to gamers. Yet for the most part we are ill prepared for such conversations. We feel uncomfortable. Either we assume that talking about gaming will make a young person feel guilty about spending too much time playing, or we're so puzzled by the whole phenomenon that we don't know what to make of it.

To begin, simply observe a gamer at play. Take the character of Kamakazy, or to be accurate, the person playing the character of Kamakazy. He types "anyone for Assault on the Ringwraith's Lair?" in the chat window on his computer, looking for other players who want to join him in The Lord of the Rings Online, in a challenging six-person fellowship against the forces of evil. Kamakazy is a hero in a MMORPG, or

massively multiplayer online role-playing game. He interacts with hundreds of other human players, as well as Elrond, Eowyn, Gandalf, and thousands of computerized characters in the legendary Middle-earth of J. R. R. Tolkien. Those who respond to Kamakazy's call for a fellowship may be Christians. They may be old or young, and live in America or another part of the world; they may be male or female, Jew or Greek, rural or urban. They may or may not be mature enough to play this particular game or know how to balance time spent playing the game with other aspects of their lives.

These players are attracted to multiplayer adventure gaming for any number of reasons—the challenge that a complex game might present; delight in becoming a hero in a captivating story; curiosity about a particular setting (such as the mines of Moria in Middle-earth); the competition to see who can become the best player; or the desire to make friends while doing something difficult together (such as defending villagers from a massive orc attack). Gamers also speak about the value of having an outlet for life's anger and frustrations. As one Christian gamer said, "I know I have these tendencies in me, and it feels better when they're not all bottled up."

Multiplayer games are also popular because they are artistic achievements. Successful MMORPGs embed engaging stories of struggle and achievement in inviting worlds with epic scenery and dramatic music scores. As opportunities for cooperation and competition in an aesthetic environment, many games are part opera, part sport, part hobby, and part fellowship hall. The appeal of gaming runs deeper, however, when it taps into existential hopes and regrets.

One of the attractions many games exhibit is the ability to design the player you start out as and to make decisions that determine the character you become. Kamakazy has chosen to be a hobbit, a diminutive person of incredible, unexpected strength. He's allowed to determine his appearance—his body type and size, hairstyle, clothing, etc. He can design an imagined self, opting to look beautiful, strong, wise, carefree, or goofy. Further, digital characters do not age or suffer from prolonged diseases; their wounds heal rapidly (without scars, unless the player wants the scars as a fashion statement); and when they are defeated in combat, they "respawn" elsewhere in the game and carry on. Gamers enter a world where they do not have to worry about being overweight, unattractive, or mortal.

Games often allow players to choose specific character classes with distinctive abilities and group responsibilities. Kamakazy—or Kam, as he’s called by his online friends—has decided to play as a Guardian. (One Catholic gamer compared such specialization to having a charism.) His role in the game is to draw the attention of trolls away from the weaker members of his party and endure the trolls’ bludgeoning attacks so that his fellows can accomplish their task (i.e., dispatching the trolls efficiently). The name Kamakazy thus is not a racial slur but rather an apt description of who he aspires to be—someone who ferociously and selflessly charges into danger in order to protect those he cares for.

With some exceptions, all characters are created equal and advancement is meritorious. Any game-mechanical differences between race, sex, and class are developed with “play balance” in mind, so each character starts out with comparable capacities. Not only is there a fundamental fairness as the game begins, there is a recognizable justice as the game progresses. Although it helps to have powerful friends, and while some games provide ways for players to pay real money for specific advantages, for the most part players achieve excellence, status, and power through persistence, hard work, and a willingness to cooperate with others. In the game it’s what you do, not who your parents know or how much you have, that makes the difference.

Kam has developed friendships with other people through the game. He greets Amphiltras, Tess, or others when they appear (gamers are notified when players on their friends list log on), and he has joined a “kinship,” a group of people who play the game together regularly. (He was once a member of the Guild of Destroyers and is now a member of the Energizer Bunnies.) These friendships have emerged through hours of welcoming each other, learning from one another, and succeeding and failing together. His friends know that they can count on him, and he has learned to trust that they will do their jobs (supporting him with healing spells or rapidly shooting deadly arrows). Thus he is learning about leading and following as well as about resolving conflicts constructively.

Sometimes players form fellowships outside of the game as well. Dads of Destiny is a group of about 10,000 members (dads and nondads welcome) whose members communicate through their website’s forums about topics of common interest such as time management, good parenting, and advice about bedwetting. They all play Destiny, and their shared enjoyment has transformed their online interactions into a sort of digital fellowship hall. Like members of a church, they emphasize welcoming

new members and helping out whenever possible. Recently, when a disturbed gamer deleted the characters and achievements of an 11-year-old boy, members of Dads of Destiny and other gamers stepped in to help the boy re-create his characters and recover his gear. Similarly, a student in our university's flight program credits members of his online gaming group for encouraging him to follow his passion of becoming a pilot. Fellow gamers guided him through the steps he would need to take. This student now gives back to the group and has developed a 22-page manual on how to play one of the roles in their game.

Kam has attended a digital funeral: when players learned of the sudden death of one of their fellow gamers, they organized an in-game memorial service. Kam and about 40 others put on their best costumes and rode their horses in a procession through the town of Bree before stopping to fish together at the spot where the deceased player's character used to cast his line. The person playing Kamakazy was a young teenager at the time, and in some sense this was his first funeral. Although he had attended other funeral services with his parents, this was the first funeral he chose to attend on his own—coming together with the community “seemed like the right thing to do.” He selected his own clothes and decided how he would conduct himself in the fellowship of mourners. He revealed his growing awareness of the importance of community when he said, “If he had not been in a kin, his death would have gone unnoticed.”

The games provide the mechanics, but players create their own social interactions (some hold practice sessions for the more complicated competitive games). And gamers develop their own ethical standards. For ill or for good, because multiplayer role-playing games can be both deeply self-involving and social, these standards can constitute performative acts—digital speech and actions that help construct the moral identity of the player and establish him or her in the world.

Players who “ragequit” (leave a fellowship abruptly because they get angry) are not invited to join a fellowship the next time. Gaming has the potential to teach us how to deal with defeat and failure in real life just as sports can. Young basketball players often benefit from a wise coach's postgame talk. In gaming, people who disrespect others find themselves shunned, and players warn others about creepy behavior or someone who cheats another player in an online trade of equipment or gold. Bullying happens, but bullies can be reported to the game's administrators who enforce the code of conduct and retain the right to block a person from playing the game.

Hurtful behavior has consequences—but so does altruistic game play. On more than one occasion Kam has patiently helped a “newb” (new player) deal with failure. The newb’s mistakes meant that Kam and the rest of the fellowship were not able to achieve their quest after 30 minutes or more of intense gaming. But instead of insulting the newb or booting him from the fellowship, Kam encouraged him and shared how he had learned from mistakes. He understands that games such as LOTRO are tremendously complex and take time to master and that it is the responsibility of experienced players to help others develop. If you ask, players will tell you that when another player risks her own success or even her own death in order to help you out, that other player is ultimately saying, “You matter.” These performative acts reveal and shape character.

Though he is still young, Kamakazy has learned that the way he welcomes players and conducts himself in the game can make a tremendous difference for others. He may not know anything at all about the real lives of fellow players, but he knows from his own experiences that many people have difficulty establishing genuine friendships or finding a safe place to belong. He understands that people want to develop competency and make meaningful contributions to a team. He realizes that part of the appeal of designing a mighty character with bulging biceps and powerful plate armor may lie in the fact that the player feels powerless in school or at work.

As he comes to understand that he has the power to build up or to tear down (cf. 2 Cor. 13:10), Kamakazy is developing awareness of his ethical agency. He has benefited from the guidance of other gamers, some of them adult Christians. And to the extent that games and sports teach us how to live well (and teach the value of hard work and teamwork, for example), the people we play with can make all the difference.

A study by Christopher J. Ferguson and Adolfo Garza suggests that parental involvement with a child’s gaming helps develop altruistic behavior. Jane McGonigal, one of today’s leading pro-gaming voices (who speaks of her debt to Buddhism), argues that gaming, when properly understood and wisely practiced, does not offer simply escapist entertainment: it can enhance creativity, agency, and cooperation. Churches can assist in this effort by offering gamers an opportunity to reflect on what it means to live out one’s beliefs as a gamer. As ethicist Scott R. Paeth says, gamers need a community of moral reflection to develop “a deeper level of moral understanding.”

Understanding these life-enhancing dimensions of gaming is critical if we're going to help gamers with Christian formation. Gaming is a complex social and ethical world, and those who game, who live with gamers, or who work with and care for gamers must consider how God may be using these "online fellowship halls" to form disciples. If we simply ask, "Can you tell me what games you like to play and why you enjoy them?" God may use that moment for something meaningful. I believe that gamers are hungry for such conversations.

Read the sidebar article on [resources for Christian formation & video games](#).