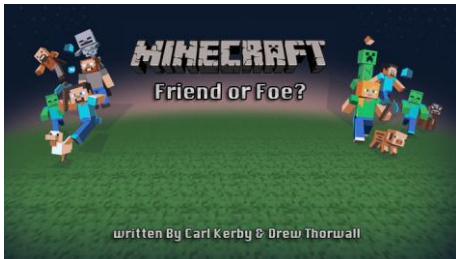


MINECRAFT: Friend or Foe?

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by Carl Kerby Jr. and Drew Thorwall

WHAT ABOUT MINECRAFT?



Would it surprise you to hear that video games carry spiritual messages? Graphics aren't the only thing that has progressed over the years as storytelling and cultural commentary in games rival that of any other media. The amount of spiritual content in video games has increased exponentially. Running a ministry that deals with video games as we do, we get all kinds of questions about specific games. "Is it okay if I let my child play Call of Duty? Is Assassin's Creed really that bad? Was Pokemon made by the devil?" Perhaps the most common question we have received is, "What about Minecraft?"



To help answer this question we'll give you a little more background on spirituality in games. We'll see what it looks like to wrestle with questions of ethics within a game universe before then showing some specific examples of intense spiritual messages.

Minecraft is described as a first-person sandbox game, first launched as a tech-demo in 2009. It has exploded in popularity as it allows the player free rein to "craft" and build nearly anything they can imagine. A crude comparison would be to think of it as an infinite set of virtual legos. There is a lot to like about Minecraft and it's various difficulty settings allow it to be tailored to audiences young and old making it a favorite for families with young children as well as the hard core gamer. You can play it on many systems from a top of the line PC or even on your phone.

Would it surprise you to hear that even Minecraft delivers a spiritual message? We'll get to that, but first let's give a little more background. Spirituality, and more specifically Christianity, are represented in many ways in modern games. At times they serve as a plot device (i.e. seeking enlightenment or confronting God). At times spiritual character archetypes (or stereotypes) are played as the hero or more commonly the villain (i.e. a church or spiritual leader brainwashing their followers). At times it is merely present in the thematic search for the meaning of life, nature of good and evil, or nature of God. The reality of spiritual content in games can be as intriguing as it can be dangerous, but it can also provide many opportunities for spiritual conversations if we are equipped to hold the games we play up to the light of God's Word.

Parents who ask the questions about specific games are often hoping that there is someone out there who can give a simple answer to a what is truly a complex issue. Sometimes, we at Apolomedia feel like people want us to be "game priests" making declarations of blessing or curse for what to play or not to play. However, we don't just need a thumbs up or thumbs down on specific games! We need to know how to handle any challenge, question, or spiritual topic that may arise. We believe that the most important thing we do through our ministry is to teach parents and gamers to get into God's Word and discover who God is and what it looks like to glorify Him in all that we do, even gaming..



Got it? Ok, now let's get back to Minecraft. It's popularity, creativity, and ability to be expanded without a separate new game release means that Minecraft has been around and will be around for quite some time. We have had some experience playing the game, but the vast time commitment required to "beat" the game was more than we could afford. In fact, for a long time many players did not even know it had an ending! Nonetheless, it was obviously a very creative and engaging game. You can mine materials to build towers, buildings, bridges and statues. The best way we have found to describe it is it is to compare the game to a digital canvas with a full set of paints and brushes. When you play Minecraft, you are the artist and the game is your canvas.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

No one brought up any spiritual questions about Minecraft at first, though there were some initial concerns with the game. The “zombie-like” creeper characters could frighten little children (and skittish adults!). There is also a depiction of a digital hell in the game they call “The Nether”, designed to be a fiery pit invoking the imagery of hell. Now we’re getting closer ([see our article HERE on this topic](#)), but even that is only available in some modes of the game. Another concern, as is raised from time to time with video games, is the addictive quality. There is so much to do, so much to create, that the time put into the game can be limitless.

Is there really a spiritual message to be concerned about? If there is what can we do about it? Ban the game? Burn it? Delete it? That might be the easy way out, but let’s dig a little deeper together. We always try to teach people two things when it comes to video games. 1. Watch what you play. Don’t take anything for granted and don’t give anything the benefit of the doubt. Understand the messages, go to the word of God and find answers. As 1 Thessalonians 5:21 tells us, “Test everything, hold on to the good.” 2. Watch how long you are playing. We don’t believe playing video games is wrong. We are gamers ourselves! However, it is important to make sure they don’t consume your life. Have you heard the old saying “show me your checkbook, and I’ll tell you matters to you”? The same goes with time. Show me how you spend your time each day and I will show you what’s important in your life. Ephesians 5:16-17 says, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

As we began to watch what we played and opened our eyes to the potential messages in Minecraft, even we were surprised by the spiritual content we discovered. While it may primarily be a game of building-blocks, Minecraft nonetheless does have a plot and underlying themes. Think for example about the nature of the game itself. Strangely, and perhaps unintentionally, it also raises ethical dilemmas for the player. When playing online, you have the freedom to do and act as you wish even in worlds created by other players. There is a practice within the game called “griefing” in which one player intentionally destroys the work of another in order to cause them grief!

It raises an interesting question: Is it wrong to do something wrong in a game? It’s just a game, right? Let this illustration help you think that question through. You recall that we have described Minecraft as a canvas. Well, there are many talented artists in the real world. If you were to give them a canvas, they would make a beautiful work of art that could be used to glorify God by reflecting His creativity. Other people, however, could take the same canvas and the same set of paint and paint brushes, and paint something grotesque, ugly, oppressive, even evil.

In Minecraft, you never know what kind of “artwork” the other players will make. Parents, that means being extra careful who they play with and how they play when they play online.

But let’s get back to that artist....

*To read this article in its entirety, go to:
<http://apolomedia.org/2014/05/minecraft-friend-foe/>*