

# Living Virtuously in the Virtual Age

BY JASON BYASSEE

**At least three kinds of books are written to pass judgment on the new digital technologies—the scolds, the cheerleaders, and the in-between books that neither damn nor bless. While the latter books are harder to stereotype, harder to write, and harder to read, they are much more likely to tell the truth.**

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**T**here are at least three kinds of books that are written to pass judgment on any important new development in human affairs. First, there are the scolds: “This new thing is evil!” they cry, with a sandwich board on their chests and a bullhorn in hand, screeching for passersby to repent. Then there are the cheerleaders (forgive a gendered stereotype). They chant, in some sort of rhyme with unending perkiness, “OK! We, like, totally love this!” Then there are the in-between books that neither damn nor bless. Such books are harder to stereotype, harder to write, harder to read, but much more likely to tell the truth.

In this batch, Quentin J. Schultze’s *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004, 256 pp., \$22.00) is the scold. Digital technology is a threat to democracy, to our souls, to dappled things and puppy dogs, and to all things decent people should hold dear. The book’s argument is clear, its writing lively and full of zingers, and it finally overshoots. The new *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 224 pp., \$19.95), a collection of essays edited by Craig Detweiler, cheerleads. God is present, quasi-sacramentally, in such media as Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGS), and if you or I aren’t playing, well, like, we’re totally not with it, and our

Facebook friends are going to tweet about how '1.0' we are. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser's *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York, Basic Books, 2008, 400 pp., \$16.95) is the balanced book, as it examines what life is like for those who have no memory of life before the digital divide (circa mid-90's). It is also the boring one. Perhaps the two young lawyers, one at Harvard and the other at St. Gallen in Switzerland, pine to testify before Congress; I can just imagine the tone of their testimony: "Yes, digital culture has these defects concomitant to these flaws, nevertheless legislators ought not be overly zealous...." Anyone in the chamber is checking their Blackberry; the four viewers still left on C-SPAN are already dozing.



We will start with the cheerleading. Detweiler now directs the Center for Entertainment, Media, and Culture at Pepperdine University after having done similar work at Fuller Theological Seminary. I have written elsewhere with respectful disagreement about his characterization of divine presence in film, appreciating the effort to find traces of the divine outside the Church but disagreeing with his conclusion, so if I write irreverently here it is out of no personal animus. While Detweiler has worked at evangelical institutions, the collection he introduces and concludes here falls so hard into liberal Protestantism it almost reads like unintentional satire. "Jesus dared to descend into our everyday situations and struggles. He seems like the type of person who would come alongside a group of gamers, grab a controller, and join the fun" (p. 16). Notice the move: we like something, therefore God must like it too, since all we know about God is that he is at least as nice a guy as we are. We see here the total evisceration of what we *do* know about Jesus: that he is the Messiah of Israel, shaped in the mold of Israel's scriptures and worship, whom Christians worship as the enfleshed Word of God and Lord of the Church. For Detweiler and friends, he is just another schlub on the couch with a controller.

It gets worse. "We want to talk about God as experienced and revealed in, around, and through video games" (p. 9). It would be sacramental theology – if there were any evidence that these authors possess any sacramental theology. "'Til Disconnection Do We Part: The Initiation and Wedding Rite in *Second Life*," an essay by Jason Shim, argues that wedding rites between players in the popular computer-generated parallel world "can be as real and meaningful as those enacted in one's First Life" (p. 150). For in *Second Life*, one can be intentional in "thoughtful negotiation of one's worldview" (whereas, presumably, in real life, one cannot). If such full-blown Gnostic championing of a fake world at the expense of God's creation does not worry you, try this paean to gaming passed on by a child interviewed by one Daniel White Hodge, "I know [God's] there, I can feel him in games like *Halo 3* sitting next to me just being happy for me.... I get lost in the game. Sometimes

you can go all day and not even realize it, but, in all that, I know that God's still there, it's kinda funny that way" (p. 174). And here I used to wonder why God was too busy to answer the prayers of those raped or maimed or dying in civil wars in Sudan or Congo—he was smiling like a friendly idiot as a gamer's sidekick. Several authors gush that gaming can solve age-old theological riddles, like free will versus predestination (games show that it

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is both!), or whether there is only one way to God (there is more than one way to win a game—so pluralism wins!). Gamers can also understand death and resurrection—they die and revive on screen all day.

If this is the way to find God in technology, I suggest we unplug and make for the hills. There are hard questions to ask of gaming culture, especially since it rakes in more money than movies now (some \$50 billion a year

is no small amount of change). There are interesting parallels between some games and stories of faith, especially in games that ask the user to play God. One can find parallels of the sort Detweiler and others identify, as one can find between Christianity and any other story. But those are extraneous abstractions, ones that push us no deeper into the mystery of faith, but simply add religious topping to the self-titillation we were engaging in anyway. My own marginal notes in this volume include this, one of many despairing comments: “I’d like to kill myself now.” In a gaming universe that would be fine, I would just revive with the push of a button. It would be a bit tougher in the real world. And for the fleshed Son of God to submit to the ungentle hands of his murderers cost a bit more. So too should our discipleship.



Quentin J. Schultze’s *Habits of the High-Tech Heart* is a needed stiff drink after a draft of such unadulterated saccharine. This professor of communications at Calvin College worries that technology “divert[s] my attention from the central concerns of life...to relatively trivial pursuits” (p. 13). And he wants his balance back. For the Web promotes a sort of “promiscuous knowing,” a surfing on the top of things that he characterizes as “informationism” (p. 22). It is no accident that pornography has long been a driver of digital innova-

tion, for the Web itself promotes “pseudo-intimacy” (p. 12). This is not the sort of knowing that can make the knower a better or wiser person. It rather obliterates such human fundamentals as time and space. It promotes individualism and pushes its users into aping celebrities. The Web creates, in short, precisely the sort of Gnostic religion that Christians have long said can get you damned (that is, after all, what heresy does), and which Detweiler and friends celebrate.

As I said, Schultze overshoots in places. Lots of the ills named above and expostulated on at length in the book are sins of our culture generally, begun in the Enlightenment and spread out and thickened in modernity. The sort of instrumentalization of knowledge that happens online, supplanting face-to-face communal knowing, did not begin with the Internet. Arguably it began in the garden. Technology functions here, as with many technophobes, as a sort of substitute for original sin.

Schultze is surely right to reject what he rejects – the “radical selfism” (p. 17) cultivated by digital culture (and just think, publishing in 2002 he had no inkling of Facebook!). He is also right in some of his proposed solutions: St. Benedict and medieval monks advocated reading great books exceedingly slowly, chewing over words and phrases like a cow over its cud. The sort of wisdom that makes good living possible surely comes only at a price and through discipline. And yet Schultze’s prescription has a bit of poison in it as well. His primary solution is something he calls “revealed religion”: “We cannot discover virtue in raw information, only in time-honored moral practices that flow from people’s faithful commitments” (p. 46). I agree. Yet I, like Schultze, am a Christian. I am not sure there is something called “revealed religion” to which I adhere. I am rather baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, hoping for his return. A pitch for religion *in general* reminds me of a professor’s quip about the “chapel to all faiths” at Vanderbilt Divinity School: “So if you want to offer a human sacrifice to Molech, go right ahead.” If any religion will do, then why not Detweiler’s happy Gnosticism? Schultze would do better to explore the particular riches of his own school’s Reformed heritage over against the neo-gnosticism that is upon us than to try to broaden his appeal to all religion that is “revealed.” For it is that very move to broaden that eventually has Detweiler and friends worshipping their joysticks.



Finally, Palfrey and Gasser are the voice of moderation in all its correct dullness. *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* means to explain to digital immigrants (who remember what CD’s, newspapers, and folding maps were like) how to think about those for whom information has always been accessible online and easily manipulable. This one

is helpful if you do not know what a mashup is (where you take a speech or song and rearrange it to your liking) or do not know the history of Napster and little old ladies being sued out of existence by the recording industry. The book is at its best when describing digital overload: in 2007 there was more information posted online than has ever been published in books. A lot more: three million times more. Those of you who think your blog might

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change the world, think again: 120,000 new blogs are launched *every day*.

*Born Digital's* greatest virtue is its refusal to hyperventilate. Sure there is a digital overload out there, but there are digital solutions to that, like search engines and RSS feeds. Sure, kids are under some threat because of the Internet, but not any more than they are in real life. Indeed notions of privacy are under some assault as companies record

more about us than we would ever like made public. Sure there is more Internet activism in politics, but "the participatory acts are not fundamentally altered in the process" (p. 260), and governments use the same Web to monitor its citizens as those citizens use to speak out against tyranny. In each of these highly-publicized cases the authors raise an alarm only to squelch it: legislation is almost never the answer (except against violent video games). Neither is laissez faire inactivity. A "blended" approach, headed by parents and teachers proactively engaging their kids about their Internet use, is the way forward toward the richness offered by the Web without the pitfalls. See? Commonsensical, boring, and true. Book the authors for your next panel on the future of the Web.

The most interesting moments in *Born Digital* — the ones that touch on theology — are quite fleeting. Palfrey and Gasser quote one Harvard student: as opposed to print publications that reliably start and stop, "on the Internet...there's no beginning and no end" (p. 185). I have heard that somewhere before. Digital natives are so wired that their understanding of identity is changing. They can have as many fake selves as time allows, but however many avatars they have, their "true" self is more set in cyber-stone than ever. Once one could pack up and move off to another continent and start over. No more. Google is changing our very notions of the continuity of human identity, both in terms of how we understand ourselves and how

others understand us. Claims like that cry out for theological commentary from a people who think baptism changes our identity far more than digital innovation ever could.

Palfrey and Gasser's snoozer of an appeal to take a breath might be just what we need, as we constantly freak out over the new technologies coming down the pike seemingly every time we hit refresh on our email. We are still sinners, God is still good, and the gates of hell still will not prevail against the Church. Detweiler wants to rewire the Church for a sort of salvation-by-gaming; Schultze to rewire it to prevent a kind of techno-damnation. The "answer" is somewhere in the middle. *Born Digital's* suggestion to calm down is a good first step. Now if we can just find the second.



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