God in the Machine: Video Games as Spiritual Pursuit (Acculturated)

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If he were alive today, what might Heidegger say about *Halo,* the popular video game franchise? What would Augustine think about *Assassin's Creed* ? What could Maimonides teach us about Nintendo's eponymous hero, Mario? While some critics might dismiss such inquiries outright, protesting that these great thinkers would never concern themselves with a medium so crude and mindless as video games, it is important to recognize that games like these are, in fact, becoming the defining medium of our time. We spend more time and money on video games than on books, television, or film, and any serious thinker of our age should be concerned with these games, what they are saying about us, and what we are learning from them.

Yet video games still remain relatively unexplored by both scholars and pundits alike. Few have advanced beyond outmoded and futile attempts to tie gameplay to violent behavior. With this canard now thoroughly and repeatedly disproven, it is time to delve deeper. Just as the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan recently acquired fourteen games as part of its permanent collection, so too must we seek to add a serious consideration of virtual worlds to the pantheon of philoso-phical inquiry.

In *God in the Machine,* author Liel Leibovitz leads a fascinating tour of the emerging virtual landscape and its many dazzling vistas from which we are offered new vantage points on age-old theological and philosophical questions. Free will vs. determinism, the importance of ritual, transcendence through mastery, notions of the self, justice and sin, life, death, and resurrection—these all come into play in the video games that some critics so easily write off as mind-numbing wastes of time. When one looks closely at how these games are designed, at their inherent logic, and at the cognitive effects they have on players, it becomes clear that playing these games creates a state of awareness vastly different from that which occurs when we watch television or read a book. Indeed, gameplay is a far more engaged process—one that draws on various faculties of mind and body to evoke sensations that might more commonly be associated with religious experience. Getting swept away in an engrossing game can be a profoundly spiritual activity. It is not *to think*, but rather simply *to be*, a logic that sustained our ancestors for millennia as they looked heavenward for answers.

Today, as more and more of us look screenward, it is important to investigate these games for their vast potential as fine instruments of moral training. Anyone seeking a concise and well-reasoned introduction to the subject would do well to start with *God in the Machine*. By illuminating both where video game storytelling is now and where it currently butts up against certain inherent limitations, Liebovitz intriguingly implies how the field and, in turn, our experiences might continue to evolve and advance in the coming years.

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