QOHELETH AND THE PLEASURE OF WASTING TIME: 
THE BIBLICALLY BASED NATURE OF VIDEO GAMES

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(N.B., We wrote this as a dual presentation. The change from regular type to italics signals a change in voice from Mike Best to Corrine Carvalho. What would have been obvious to the audience, but not to a reading public, is that Mike is a young male writer, and Corri is an older professor of Biblical Studies. These contexts should be kept in mind as the paper is read.)

“Go outside.” “You have no life.” “You’re wasting your life away!” These are just a few of the challenges to my identity as a gamer over the years. In fact, these are special in that they were not made by vapid faux-pundits nor anonymous keyboard warriors, but by people in my life: family members, classmates, coaches, girls I liked… Outside of my exclusive circle of gaming friends, the hobby was taboo. Like training wheels or coloring books, gaming was just a childish distraction that at an unspecified point in my life should be replaced by a ten-speed, The Chronicles of Narnia, and football. Even today, the terse command, “go outside,” fills me with dread. Not that I have anything against the great outdoors, but the simple sentence represents a common social stigma that has plagued gaming since long before I became a gamer. “Go outside” is not invitation, it’s expulsion; it doesn’t precede suggestions of outdoor activities more enticing than gaming, nor does it offer any explanation.

Video games are a waste of time. Let’s establish that right now. Parents and pundits around the world have been right all along. No amount of reasoning, justification, nor discourse can redeem video gaming of this simple truth. The hours and hours I’ve spent playing games is time I could have spent shooting hoops in the driveway, memorizing chords and scales, poking at
anthills, or skulking around a mall; washing dishes at Quizno’s, putting in that extra effort for the A, volunteering at a church, or sleeping; tying knots, lifting weights, drinking to excess, or criticizing my peers; performing my gender, attracting a mate, building a shelter, hunting, gathering, anything. And sometimes I do regret the time I’ve spent with my computers and consoles.

In fact, my hobby is unique in that it measures exactly how much time I waste on it. I can open the Steam program and order my library of games by total hours I’ve spent on each. Games like *Overwatch* and *Bloodborne* track my playtime in-game, while others like *Hearthstone* have third-party peripheral programs that boast playtime-tracking as a desirable feature for dedicated or competitive players. I can accurately admit that I have wasted 130 hours stabbing zombies in *Dark Souls III*, and 200 hours in *Ark: Survival Evolved* staving off dinosaurs. Neither come close to the investment I made in *CounterStrike: Global Offensive* as an undergrad, however: 990 hours in total, equivalent to 40 days and nights. I have officially wasted over a month of my life on a single First Person Shooter video game. One thousand hours wherein I formed only brief acquaintances, made no money, and experienced absolutely no academic stimulus. How can I justify such waste?

*If any biblical book is an expert guide to wasting time, it is the book of Qoheleth. It provides a comprehensive survey of meaningless activity, all the while never once mentioning an activity that most people would agree is meaningless. The book does not go after the Tyrion Lannister’s of the ancient world, nor does it castigate the ancient equivalent of gamers. Instead Qoheleth pokes at the very activities that most social systems value: career, health and money. The only two things that Qoheleth does not label as meaningless are God and joy (סמחה).*
The book of Qoheleth has always been polarizing, and the divide usually cracks along party lines: those who love the Old Testament’s covenant theology and salvation history experience the book as depressing and unworthy of canonicity. Those who view salvation theology as false news, however, often experience the book as the most honest piece of writing in the collection. I have to admit that I have always been in this latter group.

Focusing on the book’s theme and structure raises fundamental theological questions, questions that function as narrative puzzles that require the reader to take an active role in their dialogue with the text. In this paper, Mike and I will explore the theological richness of meaninglessness, honesty, and joy through a dialogue of these elements in both video gaming culture and the biblical text, showing that the text directs the reader to find the most foundational theological questions by honestly embracing the joy of meaningless activity. In this sense, this paper provides a biblical basis for gaming. Only by embracing meaningless activities does the human person come to reject the very category of meaning as inherently enigmatic. Only by rejecting a quest for meaning does someone come to embrace the limited joy of life as that which is divinely ordained. In this sense, video games are as inherently meaningless as a brilliant career or the pursuit of an ethical life.

In some ways, Qoheleth calls to mind the rhetoric of the contemporary edgy teenager. You know the stereotype: moody, dramatic, existential to a fault. They avoid their family and find casual interactions boring. They notoriously answer questions with “Whatever.” They have nothing but contempt for the sheeple that conform to the system by working for the man and contributing to society. They skim Sartre and Marx and revere social deviants like Tyler Durden. “Life is meaningless and nothing matters” appears to be the root of their cynical rejection of pop
music and family outings and optimism in general; I happen to be an expert on the disposition because it wasn’t long ago that I was so insufferable.

However, the book of Ecclesiastes itself doesn’t immediately invite such a comparison be drawn because even though Qoheleth offers no more solutions for the meaninglessness he observes across the human experience, he actually finds it encouraging that there is so little inherent value in the activities we choose to invest in.

Meaninglessness is at the heart of the book of Qoheleth, and it achieves its contemplation on vain pursuits by utilizing many of the essential elements of play, including requiring the agency of the player/reader, the use of evocative aesthetics, and the engagement with virtuality. By taking the question of meaning seriously, the book becomes its own puzzle. To start with the most obvious example, many of the essential elements of the book have intentionally ambiguous meanings. As Ingram has demonstrated, a common trope in a riddle involves playing with a reader’s expectation of what a word means.1 The riddle can be solved by substituting a less common meaning for its more expected meaning. Word play, such as that found with the word “house” in Nathan’s oracle, also involves the reader recognizing various meanings of a particular lexical item, here playing with literal and metaphoric uses of the word.

Several prominent words in Ecclesiastes are used this way. The most notable example, discussed by almost all commentators and monographs, is the characteristic word, הָבֶל, which can mean vapor, breath, vanity or futility.2 This variability is blatantly apparent to the translator, who must juggle the desire to indicate to the reader that the same word is being used multiple times in the text with the goal of translating it properly within each context. In passages
such as 1:14 and 2:26, where it stands in parallelism with wind, breath seems more appropriate, while in summary statements about the pointlessness of human effort, such as 1:2 and 12:8, futility might work better. The original audience, however, would have heard the same word each time, and would have to puzzle over how best to understand it. In some ways, then, the book of Qoheleth is a kind of theme and variations on “תָּהִלָּה-ness.”

Through the repetition of the word, the Book of Qoheleth leads the reader to question the very things that proverbial wisdom, and contemporary pundits, assume have value: wealth, honor, health, reputation, social standing, to name a few. Similarly gamers today are often confronted with the same assumed dichotomy found in proverbial wisdom: games are “תָּהִלָּה” in comparison with career, social standing, education, and good health. Qoheleth invites us to question these assumed social values.

Counterstrike provides a great modern example of a futile activity. It’s an eSport worth millions of dollars, but like traditional sports it eschews internal textual value so as to preserve the competitive integrity of every match. In other words, I spent the vast majority of my thousand hours in just five unique compact virtual settings. There is no deeper narrative to analyze for the sake of research, and enough of the anonymous human interaction is so vulgar I actually found the game more enjoyable without a headset. Despite my investment in the game, my skill ranks just above the fiftieth percentile among millions of players worldwide. Worse still, I am now entirely burned out. All those hours of practice now make a decidedly negligible contribution to my life.
How could I feel that this activity has value, when much of my identity as a gamer is informed by constant reminders that my hobby is little more than a useless time-sink? Gamers like myself grew up with a constant flow of confusing mixed messages: the same generation of role models that lambasts our dependency on games and escapism spends billions every year producing and aggressively marketing the latest in sedentary entertainment. So many studies have been done on potential effects of virtual violence, electronically-induced obesity, and the perceived asocial nature of the “basement-dweller” gamer that the community at large seems to have internalized a negative view of itself. In my grade school experience, to be caught discussing video games at school was to risk social suicide. Kids that played more than others were somehow labeled as “nerds” or “losers” by their gaming peers without a hint of self-awareness. As an adult I am still confronted by gamers accusing each other of being “no-lifers” or worse, usually by way of turning their own in-game shortcomings back on those who outperform them. Recently, an old gamer friend recommended I see the latest Spiderman reboot, and I reciprocated by recommending a game I enjoy that employs similar thematic elements. He informed me that he had outgrown video games, then again suggested I go see the cartoon hero don the red tights for the sixth time in fifteen years.

_I contend that at the heart of the book is the expectation of the agency of the reader. The book presents an unsolvable puzzle. It poses questions it cannot answer, and conundrums that cannot be resolved. As a result the book, which is about enigma, is not meant to be experienced in a strictly linear fashion. While some puzzles require that the puzzles be solved in a fixed order, so that one cannot progress to the next puzzle until the current one is solved, others require a re-iterative action where the expectation is that clues are gathered and the puzzle re-visited. The_
aesthetic pleasure of the puzzle comes through this repetition that reveals more at each encounter.

The text of Qoheleth expects high levels of agency, interaction and immersion from its audience. First, the introduction of the narrative avatar plunges the reader into a fictive Israelite court. For a second temple audience, this would mean the re-engagement of its romanticized national history. The book poses conundrums that the reader is left to solve. Is toil worth it? Is there any gain in ethical behavior, and, if not, why should one pursue it? Is pleasure good or evil? This need to answer his questions turns me into an active participant in this virtual world, and expects me to interact with the text more intentionally than say a narrative of an historical event.

The framing narratives to the book intensify the book as puzzle. The traditional-sounding narrator seems at odds with the contents of the book he presents. Why does he want us to enter Qoheleth’s dark world? Does he need us to solve it for him? Or are we meant to loath him as simplistic and naïve once we have come out of the puzzle? I love the book Ecclesiastes, in large part for its refusal to be solved. I appreciate a text that is supposed to look different each time I encounter it, and that has many solutions, and, simultaneously, almost none at all. This is the evocative aesthetic of enigma.

While Qoheleth is often called skeptical wisdom, it is really more open-ended wisdom, as opposed to the common sense aphorisms found throughout the book of Proverbs which expect silent assent. Each solution should bring pleasure, even if that solution is only partial or temporary. For Qoheleth, the enigmatic puzzle with its shape-shifting solutions is the goal of its aesthetic effect, because this acceptance of enigma is true wisdom about God.
The main character of Qoheleth, challenges the assumptions of those who claim play is a worthless activity. In fact, the enigmatic nature of the character provides another parallel with the world or play. While many biblical books either make little to no effort to identify their main character or authorizing voice, the book of Ecclesiastes goes out of its way to identify the author, but with identities that make little sense. He is clearly a male, but his title is a feminine singular participle; although scholars note that this may simply be an abstract noun, the fact that this title is not common suggests that the reader must work to understand it. Koh, for example says that while he is presented as Solomon (a king and a son of David), other elements in the book, clearly require a later voice. Barbour concludes that he is a composite of Israelite kings, one which incorporates Hellenistic royal critiques, but I would read the text as playing with the metaphor of Semitic royalty, rather than designating a specific monarch, much like Cinderella is a generic princess with no historical source.

Read in this way, Qoheleth as main character invites the reader to travel through this puzzle alongside the avatar of a West Semitic king, one who is revered for his wisdom, a trait made publicly manifest in his material success. Note the number of times that the book links wisdom and prosperity, even as it negates the connection. The irony that the book plays out is that the symptoms of success fail to bring a satisfying resolution to the puzzle that is life. The virtual world that the narrative elements conjure is part of the puzzle’s tableau, an essential element of its aesthetic function. The reader is transported into a virtual realm, where a wise king poses unanswerable questions to himself and, thus to his audience, playing along at home. Just like The Talos Principle, where the robot avatar does not match the ancient settings, thus undercutting any attempt to “read” the puzzle as a historical re-creation, so too the
inconsistencies of a newly named Solomon talking like a Hellenistic philosopher cue the audience that this is play, and Qoheleth is a mask.

Most recently, my roommate and I tuned in to the opening night of the well-advertised Overwatch League, a huge production amongst eSports scenes which boasts the best talent from around the world competing for a multi-million dollar prize pool. As we watched the Dallas Fuel duel it out with the London Spitfire, I tried to fill my non-gamer friend in on some of the player rivalries and teamplay mechanics that makes professional Overwatch such compelling entertainment. One of the game’s greatest hurdles for new viewers (and even for new players) is that even in its well-polished state, the sheer quantity of stimuli on screen at any given time creates a dense bedlam of bursting colors and unique sounds which easily confuse. The best way to ease a new viewer like my roommate into the show, I reasoned, was to focus on the players themselves, so I did: I explained that the Fuel had signed several of the biggest names in Overwatch streaming which generates a lot of interest in the team by the thousands of individual fan-bases, while the Spitfire had opted to sign an entire team directly out of South Korea, which sacrifices much of that immediate fan interaction to guarantee a stronger, ego-free team dynamic with a great shot at winning a title. My roommate frowned at this, then said “I just can’t believe people pay other people to play video games.”

Qoheleth doesn’t discriminate between vanities. There is no metric in the book of Ecclesiastes by which to evaluate which waste of time is better than the next. Is it not true that in the contemporary period, one can download music in a matter of seconds and enjoy it immediately and from the comfort of one’s own home? Why, then, do we buy tickets to see the same music performed live?
Evidence of this waste is all around us. I am reminded of that popular Minnesota pastime, catch-and-release fishing. A fisherman prefers to spend hours a day in silence and solitude, often rising with the sun for a chance to battle a creature humanity conquered thousands of years ago. I myself have a nice open-face rod and an assortment of bobbers and lures but for the casual angler the actual “sport” requires snacks and socializing, but rarely yields any fish. By contrast, an enthusiast does not just “go fishing:” they might get up at six, take down at least two long rods off the wall, fasten a number of homemade flies to their tan bucket hat, grab their Coleman waterproof overalls, two tins of Copenhagen long-cut and a Pepsi; they might drive for an hour to hike for another half to that spot they like, all because it’s raining but not quite storming and “rainbow trout hit harder just after it rains.” Then they proceed to release every fish they catch anyway.

This same irony plays out through Qoheleth’s discussion of toil, work or deeds in the text. Clearly the author values work and finds that those who enjoy their work, find satisfaction in it, are better off than those who don’t. He even suggests that those who are objectively oppressed, whose toil benefits someone else, yet who still enjoy their work are wise or at least experience pleasure/joy. Yet the book also shows work as futile, incapable of guaranteeing the success it promises. It could be that the author would accept that work is noble when done for its own sake, i.e. because it is what God has granted humans to do, but any human effort done purely for achieving some other end is ephemeral, an illusion, wasted effort, smoke and mirrors (pick your metaphor).
Perhaps part of the reason video gaming is so often labeled a waste of time is because of the nature of its virtuality. One must access the virtual world via a screen and interact with it via a controller or keyboard. The screen is like Alice’s looking glass—through it there may be wonder and adventure, but it’s hard for uninitiated onlookers to share in the experience. I find this divide most apparent anytime I want to watch professional gaming, or eSports, on the television in my living room. Like most fans, I rarely publicize my interest in eSports by projecting it onto a television, mostly because of how self-conscious it makes me. One of the common accusations against video games is that they are not “real,” certainly not like the bloody fights in hockey or the real injuries in football. This virtuality is levelled as an accusation, as if fake blood is inferior to real blood. Yet every contest plays out according to a random set of rules that define the competition. Hitting a 90 mile per hour fastball with a club is no more real than taking over the world in Civ V.

Virtuality is also at the heart of the book of Qoheleth. For the book of Qoheleth, the solution to the puzzle resides in the mind of God, which is the same as saying it is inconceivable. The book attributes wisdom and pleasure to God, but also describes God as unknowable and enigmatic. If the goal of wisdom is to understand better God’s relationship to the created world, then the goal is essentially unattainable. Wisdom becomes a kind of via negativa, where the only true statements possible are negations. This is not a capricious God; there is a plan. This is not a cruel God; there is joy. But it is certainly an inscrutable God.

So far, we have shown that assertions that some activities are wastes of time or בהבל in both the ancient world and today raise the fundamental question of whether any human activity has inherent worth. “Enjoy life...because that is your portion” (9:9). “Joy” is the key to the
book, but, like מְזַמֵחת, toil and Qoheleth himself, the use of the word presents a final intertwining puzzle. The root for מְזַמֵחת, appears nine times in the book. While it is a rather common Hebrew term, this concentration of usages is noteworthy. Outside of the book of Qoheleth, the word has the same variety of meanings as does its English equivalent. It characterizes thanksgiving rituals (e.g. Ps 43:4MT), defines the description of Purim in the book of Esther (chap. 9), and expresses the emotions of the returning exiles. It also describes more mundane joys, including sex and partying.

Qoheleth instructs his audience to embrace מְזַמֵחת wherever it can be found. Not surprisingly, the word remains ambiguous in the book, often paralleled with the word TOB or good. While it is not equated with physical pleasure (wine and laughter; 2:2-3) at the beginning of the book, it is later often paired with eating and drinking. By the end of the book in chapter 9, it is associated with everything that brings joy, such as nice clothes, remaining well groomed, having a wife that you love, and, ultimately, “anything that is in your power to do” (9:10). As a result, joy and מְזַמֵחת go hand in hand.¹⁸ The solution to the pointlessness of human action is not pursuit (of anything, including joy: see 7:4). The solution is to embrace the pointlessness of activity so that one can enjoy their toil, their family, and the pointless activities in their lives (9:9). Why? Because that is what God has given us: joy.¹⁹

This realization makes sense of two aspects of the book’s ending. First, the final poem in chapter 12 closes the main part of the book with a soliloquy on the ephemeral quality of joy. It reminds the book’s ideal audience (young males, I would assume) to enjoy their life while they can, to take pleasure in the simple things that fade: sunshine (v. 2), physical vitality (v. 3), music (4), vacations (okay I stretched that a bit: safe travel v. 5), material things (6), and, finally, life itself (v. 7). The list allows for my stretch on v. 5, because it functions as signifying all of the
things that bring joy. Enjoy the things that God has given us to enjoy: that is the command of the sage.

The book ends with an ironic nod to its own absurdity. In 12:11-12 the book admonishes its own pursuit of meaning and purpose, by trivializing the obsession with finding wisdom and calling out his own work as a “weariness to the flesh.” While some scholars view the book of Qoheleth as a comedy, farce or satire because of the many ways that it unravels itself, for me the book reads as honest ironic reflection. In the end, the author confesses that even his own pursuit, which brought him no joy, was חבל. I picture him snuffing out his oil lamp as his wife calls to him to come to her embrace. Yes, he says to himself, joy is the only thing that escapes the charge of pointlessness.

And I imagine him on a couch boasting to his friend as he clinches a win in MarioKart, or at a computer leading a group of 40 peers in a high-level World of Warcraft raid, chasing the same joy today as he would have in his own time. To Qoheleth, there is no essential difference between these activities and those he calls us to enjoy in Ecclesiastes. Ludologist Johan Huizinga remarks in the opening pages of his seminal work Homo Ludens that Nature could have formed humanity with a proclivity toward pastimes with far greater utility and practicality, but instead she “gave us play, with its tension, its mirth, and its fun.” Qoheleth leaves us with a similar, more poignant sentiment: God, not nature, gave us play, and the joy that it brings. It may be that we find that joy in חבל, but since a proclivity toward play is consciously bestowed in us by God, it should be treated as a gift and experienced regularly—even if that requires a certain amount of screen-time.
Does Qoheleth recommend hours upon hours of any single vanity? Not likely. There is no place in the text where he describes his favorite source of joy, nor does he advocate the pursuit of joy over a healthy, well-rounded life. Kids should go outside, at their parents’ behest if necessary. But it is important that we understand and communicate that essential purity of play in its many forms: video gaming is not somehow a lesser form of what is already nothing at all.

1 By riddle, I do not necessarily mean the humorous. On Ecclesiastes as satire, however, see E. L. Greenstein, “Sages with a Sense of Humor: The Babylonian Dialogue between a Master and His Servant and the Book of Qohelet,” in Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel, ed. by R. J. Clifford (SBLSym 36; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 55-65.


6 Salyer, 126-66.


14 On the way that the first person voice highlights the character’s subjectivity, see G. D. Salyer, *Vain Rhetoric: Private Insight and Public Debate in Ecclesiastes* (JSOTSup 327; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

15 Crenshaw, *The Ironic Wink*.


19 “Joy” is not the same as hedonistic pleasure, as commentators note, but note that the book is not concerned with making a distinction.


