

SNEAKING PAST
WATCHFUL DRAGONS:
IMAGINATIVE
APOLOGETICS AND THE
GAMES WE PLAY

Karise Gililand on How Games are a
Delayed Apologetic

*He who changes the sports is secretly
changing the manners of the young.*

-Plato, *The Laws*, Book VII

In *The Laws*, Plato says, “he who changes the sports is secretly changing the manners of the young.”¹ He is proposing that the values passed

¹ Richard Gamble, Ed., *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What it Means to Be an Educated Human Being* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), 18.

down through games are pivotal to the perpetuation of the culture of a civilization; this continuity is a way of engaging the player in what has come before. If the curriculum and value choices we teach in the classroom perpetuate the values of a culture in an educational setting through choices such as literature or religious values, then could the games or sports we play also be a part of this value transfer? Plato certainly thought so! If this connection between sports and culture holds true, could we utilize this idea of games as a *delayed apologetic*, the sort of piecemeal epiphany that teaches through a combination of immediate experience (in this case, play or athletic experience) and culminates later in a fuller understanding of a concept buried in the heart from that previous experience? We can combine imaginative apologetics and the games we play for a unique imaginative apologetic opportunity

C.S. Lewis wrote about stealing past “watchful dragons” to describe the ability of literature to reach the hearts and minds of a reader with ideas they might not otherwise consider.² He proposed that such stories could work upon the imagination

² C.S. Lewis, “Sometimes Fairy Stories May Say What’s Best to Be Said,” in *On Stories: And Other Essays on Literature* (Orlando, FL: Harvest Books, 2002), 47.

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to bring the heart to Christ. Indeed, his own experience was something of that sort. He credits the work of George MacDonald with “baptizing his imagination” long before he committed his life to Christ, or even acknowledged that there is a God. Dr. Holly Ordway had much the same experience through the literature of Tolkien. In her book, *Not God’s Type*, she calls this the “light from the invisible lamp.”³ These “baptisms of the imagination” happen, in part, due to the invitation into what English majors everywhere know as “the literary universe.” This is the realm in which the story exists. The boundaries, rules, characters, geography, values, consequences, hierarchies, and plot all add up to the story as a whole. The characters in a story would only do what they *would do* and *could do*, within the believable bounds of their make-believe story. They go only where they *could go*, according to the particular literary universe. Each literary universe has a feel or “flavor,” which Lewis calls the “Kappa element.”⁴ This Kappa element is the resonance of the universe as whole, how the setting and interactions and all

³ Holly Ordway, *Not God’s Type: An Atheist Academic Lays Down Her Arms* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2014), 89.

⁴ Michael Ward, *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010),

of the pieces combine to form an overall impression for the reader. Does the story take the reader there, or as Lewis noted in the case of *The Three Musketeers*, does the author leave one feeling that Paris might as well be London, for all the distinguishing (or lack thereof) the author made?

Entrance into this literary universe depends mightily on the ability to exercise a “suspension of disbelief.” This is the moment that the reader drops into what they know is “a story,” but the gate of the mind has opened, and they experience the story as “real.” Not to say that the reader loses their intelligence, but that their imagination is fully engaged in the process. They no longer stand outside the story; they are *immersed in the story*.

One day in P.E., while playing, “Walk the Plank”, a Kindergirl “fairy” was accosted by a Kinderboy “pirate.” “Arrgh, Ye scurvy dog!” growled the pirate, waving his pool noodle “sword.” The Kindergirl drew herself up imperiously, pointing her noodle “magic wand” at him and pronouncing scornfully, “I’m not a *scurvy dog*, you pirate! I am a *fairy!*”.

In the case of these students at play, they were fully immersed; they *were* pirates and fairies. The immersed readers must know what happens next, they agonize over the characters’ choices, they

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debate the probability of an action within the tale, and they are elated (and crushed) along with the characters. They *experience the tale*, imaginatively speaking. So it is with fully immersed children at play.

Understanding the literary universe is key in understanding how we might apply these ideas to the realm of games. If we understand the ways that the literary universe functions in order to draw the reader in, then we can utilize this same idea in games. For games, like literature, have their own universe as well. The universe of games is bound by rules, by roles, by consequences, by choices, just as the literary universe. Games have a narrative or story. Games have a beginning and an end, and they have a story arc and a climax. We may invite our friends into a game, just as an author invites his reader. And we may purposefully design games that impart certain themes and roles, just as an author both consciously and unconsciously, communicates values through his work.

Christianity has a long tradition of employing sports metaphors to communicate the Gospel. The Apostle Paul particularly utilizes racing. In Acts 20:24, Paul declares, “my only aim is to finish the race.” 1 Corinthians 9:24 says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets

the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.” Galatians 2:2 states, “I wanted to be sure I was not running my race in vain.” Later, Galatians 5:7 admonishes, “You were running a good race.” In 2 Timothy 4:7, Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” The author of Hebrews spurs us on with a verse from chapter 12: “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out before us.”

Why does Paul choose this metaphor over and over again? He chooses it because *it works*. We all understand what he is saying, because everyone plays a game like this race at some point in his life. If everyone plays games, if there is a Christian precedent for using sports to communicate the Gospel, and if games have that same invitational literary universe as a story (and thus apologetic opportunity), might we utilize these truths to create an intentional imaginative apologetic opportunity in the games we play?

Just this past month, our school put on the play, “Peter Pan, Jr.” To tie P.E. into what our Fine Arts Department was doing, I devised the games, “Walk the Plank” and “Neverland.” In these games, students were pirates, fairies, Lost Boys, Tink, Peter, and Hook. We played the games in the week leading up to the play. One of my precious

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kindergarteners, William, came up to me the Monday after the show, exclaiming, "Coach G.! I went to see Peter Pan! Did you know they walked the plank, *just like we did in our game?*" Did you hear that? *Just like we did in our game.* He saw the connection immediately after the play. He had experienced "walking the plank" in play, and it resonated when he saw it in the story. This resonance is what we are looking for, apologetically, in our games. I didn't have to tell him: his mind recognized the experience of his body, spirit, and imagination.

Like the action of "walking the plank," so the themes of justice and redemption can be buried into the experience of our students, to be drawn out again later. One might play "Narnia Tag," a freeze tag game in which the citizens of Narnia are trying to escape the petrifying wand of The White Witch! In a game such as "Narnia Tag," the White Witch is rampaging through Narnia, seeking to turn the citizens of Narnia into stone statues. Only one can save the day: Aslan, the Lion! What we are teaching our students when we play games with themes of justice and redemption that include ideas such as: I am imprisoned and cannot save myself; I need the One who can save; and only One can save? The literary connections themselves make the game

worthwhile, but the apologetic implications of such a game are intriguing. Perhaps someday, the student reads the scriptures and recognizes this Narnian experience of needing to be saved. Perhaps his play and delight in this adventure of a game, and the ideas of rescue and hope, will remind his heart of lessons that he does not yet realize that he knows. Like William, his intellect would then connect with what his body and spirit *already know*. Dr. Ordway saw Christ in Aslan and Aslan in Christ much later after reading Lewis's work. In the same way, this game might teach, through immediate experience and later revelation, man's need for redemption and the Way to justice.

Another example is the game of "Capture the Ring" (derived from *The Hobbit*, of course) in which the whole team must work together, each man in his role, to succeed. How like the body of Christ! It is not just "kid" or "book themed" games that provide such an apologetic. Sports, from track to volleyball, provide ample opportunities to enact (or to detract from, according to the approach) the Gospel. Make no mistake, we teach *something* when teach students what, and how, to play. All of our sports and games can translate through their particular universe, the same way that a book would transport and teach us within its literary universe,

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if we are mindfully choosing and playing those games that impart through the imaginative apologetic, the values of Christianity.

This is not to confuse imaginative apologetics with sermonizing. That I did not tell William the connections to Peter Pan is an important point. In playing games with an imaginative apologetic, we will be tempted to break the magic. We will worry that they "won't get it." We will want to tell them *flat out* the connections. Don't do it. The "spell" of the game is as important as the message itself, for without the immersion, the "unbroken fourth wall," without that suspension of disbelief, the student will not truly *experience* the game. They will only be *thinking about the game*.

Imaginatively speaking, another important comparison is that of Lewis's ideas of "enjoyment" and "contemplation." In his essay, "Meditation in a Toolshed," Lewis discusses the ideas of "looking at" and "looking along."⁵ What one sees by using the light to look and what one sees looking directly at the light by which we see are two different things. So it is in playing games. We are "enjoying," not "contemplating." Take the example of a fellow who asks a girl out on a date. He then spends the entire

⁵ C.S. Lewis, "Meditations in a Toolshed," in *God in the Dock*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 230.

time asking her how the date is going, where their relationship is going, what she thinks about everything he says or does as it relates only to the date. In the first place, they are not actually enjoying a date, they are only thinking about or contemplating the date. In the second place, he is probably not going to get that second date. One needs both contemplation and enjoyment in a relationship.

And so it goes with the games we play. Games are for enjoyment and experience. (I am not saying that one would never discuss a game; just that during the game there's a certain "magic" happening that shouldn't be broken.) It's not necessary, even immediately afterward, to explain all the theological nuances of the game. The teacher should not deliver a mini-sermon on the apologetic implication of Narnia Tag. This would be like a literature teacher constantly interrupting the reading to point out all the connections. The better practice is dropping deeply into the story and guiding them into making those connections for themselves. If we rush the intellectual "contemplation," we miss the body and spirit's "enjoyment," and damage the connections possible through the combination of the active and contemplative. Instead of fast-forwarding to the

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conclusion, give your students the gift of their own "ah-ha" moment. Allow them the space and time to find the connections on their own.

In this, we are employing what might be called a "delayed apologetic." The delayed apologetic is one that is intentionally latent; it is not overt; it waits. One does not shout when tiptoeing past dragons, after all. Delayed apologetics are realized slowly, over time, bit by bit. Such an apologetic does not rely on an immediate argument as much as a deep imaginative or cultural immersion. It might be, as with Lewis and Ordway, years until that "experience" translates fully intellectually. Trust that God is at work in what you are playing, even simple games, and rely on His perfect timing. Pray over your games, your friends, and their hearts. Remember that we may plant and water but God gives the increase. Be assured that, in the end, it is possible to get past the dragon.

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