

COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Spring 2026

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Video Games and the Meaning of Life

By Brian Julian



Yes, the title of this article is accurate. I will be discussing the meaning of life by examining two popular video games. You may be supposing that my aim is to declare that the games are a waste of time and to recommend that, if you want to find meaning in life, you should turn off the screens and go outside. This, however, is not my point. I enjoy video games, and I enjoy thinking about things. At times, then, this leads me to thinking about video games. In this case, I have been reflecting on the ways that two games—*Breath of the Wild* and *Minecraft*—illustrate two different ways of viewing the world.

If you do not play video games yourself, I ask you to bear with me. I will do my best to explain the games, but if I do not do an adequate job, I suggest turning to your friend, child, or grandchild for supplemental information. And may I also suggest that, when you are done reading this article yourself, you hand it off to a gamer in your life—perhaps that young adult who loves both playing games and asking big questions.

With that prelude, let me begin by asking a question: What makes a video game realistic? We might start by looking at the graphics. Does the game look like a photograph, or does it look like a cartoon? Or, if it is old enough, does it look like a bunch of dots? We could say that the more a game looks like a photograph, the more realistic it is.

Or, to take another approach to the question, we could look at a game's content. In the game, are you a knight fighting the dark elves with your pet dragon? Are you an F.B.I. agent trying to rid the world of shapeshifting aliens? Or are you planning the traffic flow of a city? The third case is the most realistic, since urban planning is something that happens in real life. In this way of looking at realism, I suppose that the most realistic game would be one with an endless supply of laundry and homework to take care of!

In this article, I am not going to focus on either sort of realism I just mentioned—graphics or content. One of the games I will discuss—*Minecraft*—has a world built entirely out of cubes; it is not even trying to achieve graphical realism. And both games involve using swords and potions to combat fantastical enemies; they are not trying to imitate my daily life. Rather, in asking whether these games are realistic, I want to look at the experience of playing the game and ask if it feels like real life. In particular, is a game that gives a player more freedom more realistic? The answer to this question, I will argue, depends upon how you see the nature of reality.

To show the kind of freedom I am talking about, let me first give a history lesson. (I am qualified because I have been playing video games since the 1900s.) When I was a kid in the 1980s, I played *Super Mario Bros.* (on the original Nintendo). It was a 2D platformer game, so the character was constrained to move within the flat, two-dimensional TV screen. In this game, you played as Mario, and your goal for each level was to reach the flag at the end. In order to achieve this goal, you could basically move in one direction: to the right. You also had limited movement up, down, and left—in order to avoid obstacles and stomp on enemies—but the play experience of the game was a rightward march.

In addition to each level being one-directional, you had to proceed through each level in order. Level 1.2 followed 1.1 and was followed by 1.3. After defeating the first world in 1.4, the next followed with 2.1. A few secret warp areas allowed you to skip over certain worlds, but even these did not allow you to do levels in a different order. They merely skipped you down the sequence.

In more recent years, many games seek to supply more freedom. Some of this is due to improvements in technology, allowing for 3D games that provide a whole new axis of movement (up/down, left/right, *forwards/backwards*). But even a 3D game can have levels with a clear goal and constrained trajectory, and those levels can proceed in a determined order.

There is a genre of game, however, that seeks to free the player of even these constraints. These games get the label “open world” since the idea is that you can travel wherever you want to go in it, and you can decide what objectives you wish to pursue in whatever order you want. Because of this freedom, open world games have a gameplay experience that is arguably more realistic. In real life, I am not constrained only to walk down hallways from one end to the other seeking a fixed goal. Rather, I can choose whether or not I want to walk down the hallway, and I can instead go downstairs to the kitchen or exit the building so I can enter another or go get on an airplane and fly to Australia.

Breath of the Wild and *Minecraft* are two open-world games that I will describe in more detail, pointing out differences in the amount of freedom each game gives to the player’s choices. Determining which game provides a more realistic gameplay will highlight two different ways that we can think about the world.

I will begin with *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. In this game, you play as a young man named Link, and at the beginning you wake up in a cave with no supplies. Upon exiting the cave, you see a beautiful landscape spread out before you. Soon you meet a man who sends you on a cleverly designed set of missions that teach you how to play the game. After completing these, you are told where the main enemy is—you can see the castle he has occupied in the distance—and that Princess Zelda is there fighting him.

And then you are turned loose. You can go wherever you want in the landscape: across deserts, over mountains, through rivers. But more than that, you can choose what tasks to perform and what order to perform them in.

You can go straight to the castle that contains the main enemy, seeking to defeat him in battle and save the world. You will die before reaching him, since you are weak and the castle is surrounded by robots with lasers. But you can still choose that path.

You can choose instead (more reasonably) to do the parts of the main quest that strengthen you and prepare you to fight the final boss eventually. In doing this, you will learn the history of what has taken place in the world, what the enemy has done and how he has been resisted. You will also get to participate in the resistance by helping other heroes save their villages from the influence of the enemy. This latter part is particularly satisfying, given that the designers have crafted the story so that each time you help save a village, it changes the landscape in a way you can see from a great distance.

Or you can choose to ignore the main quest and instead talk to the many characters scattered throughout the land. They will often have requests for you, sending you off on a variety of side quests. These interactions are sometimes written humorously, bringing a comic element to the game.

You can also ignore people and instead look around the countryside for shrines—buildings that contain tests of various sorts. Some are designed to test your fighting ability (my least favorite). Some test your targeting skills, such as whether you can get a ball into a hole at a distance. And some test your ability to solve a puzzle, manipulating the objects in the room in order to achieve the desired result.

Finally, at least among the options I will discuss here, you can simply explore the world. It has a variety of terrain, from deserts to grassy hills to snowy mountains. The game cycles between day and night, so you can encounter those landscapes in different lighting—including beautiful sunsets. It is worth exploring the entire map, even

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Kierkegaard *Practice in Christianity* A Book Review By Eliot Grasso

This term in Great Conversation, we are reading *Practice in Christianity*, a work by Kierkegaard that he considered to be his magnum opus. Here, Kierkegaard assumes the authorial guise of the ideal Christian in order to confront the Danish Lutheran Church with the charge that it is too comfortable. In Kierkegaard's day, a great many Danish Lutherans believed that being a Christian was advantageous because it put them on the “right side of history.” Their belief—inherited from a Hegelian form of historical progressivism—that the church's spreading across the world and with it the accompanying renown of Christianity proved Christianity's truthfulness—that Jesus is the Messiah. In other words, popularity was a sign of truth.

Kierkegaard confronts this position by arguing that one does not follow a glorious, victorious Christ, but rather, an abased Christ. That glorious Christ, Kierkegaard says, has not returned yet. Rather, in following Jesus, one is committing to obey the abased, despised, lowly, pariah Christ of 2,000 years ago who calls to his contemporaries, “Come here, all you who are burdened”—and who was overwhelmingly rejected by them. In responding to this abased Christ, one must accept that there is no victory, no social status, no wealth to be gained in this world—only the kingdom of heaven, which is *not* of this world. Kierkegaard writes: “This is the test: to become and continue to be a Christian, a suffering with which no other human suffering can be compared in pain and anguish. Yet neither Christianity nor Christ is cruel...it is the world that is cruel...” (196).

Video Games and the Meaning of Life

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the areas that do not have much to do with the main quest of the game. The designers have often tucked away interesting things to find—shrines, characters, unique natural features—even in the most remote locations.

With all this freedom of choice, *Breath of the Wild* is quite lifelike. In real life, if you are turned loose in a wilderness, you can choose where to go. (That is, if you do not die first.) And in real life, if multiple tasks are available, you can choose which to undertake. The gameplay is realistic.

Of course, there are games that provide even more freedom and so are potentially more lifelike. *Minecraft* is one such game. It gives only one instruction as you begin playing: Survive. Other than that, you are assigned no tasks and given no tutorial. (Fortunately, the first time I played I was with my then-eight-year-old, and he gave me tips.) So, unlike *Breath of the Wild* and like real life, you do not start off with someone telling you exactly what your main goal is and how to accomplish it.

In fact, all the goals are up to you. You can mine, collecting the game's many underground resources (dirt, stone, iron, gold, diamonds, etc.). Or you can collect plant and animal resources, either by roaming or by starting a farm. There are so many resources to collect in the game that you could make collecting them your main goal.

Or you can take those resources and craft. In *Minecraft*, you can build pretty much anything you want. You could build a mansion to live in. You could build a railway in a glass tunnel under the ocean. You could build a town where the Eiffel Tower and Sphinx are on either side of the White House. Your goal in the game could be to create whatever magnificent visions pop into your head.

You can also, as in *Breath of the Wild*, make your goal to explore. *Minecraft* has a variety of biomes to find and examine. A few of my favorites are badlands, mangrove swamps, and cherry blossom groves. Unlike *Breath of the Wild*, howev-

er, the *Minecraft* world is not laid out according to an established map. Instead, the whole world is randomly generated and practically infinite. Each biome has characteristic features, but which one you start in, how it is laid out, how big it is, and what biomes it borders are all random. This can make things exciting because if you travel in one direction, you never know what you will find. On the other hand, it could be that you will keep traveling and not find anything of much interest.

Setting your own goals is so much a part of *Minecraft* that even going to an area called the "End" and fighting the boss there (the Ender Dragon) is both optional and not actually the end of gameplay. Things pretty much continue on as before after you have defeated it. (I only know this from having read about it. Fighting is my least favorite part in *Minecraft*, so I have made other things my goals.)

Let me now summarize a few key features of the two games, so that I can return to the question of which is more realistic. First, both games allow freedom of movement, allowing you to explore wherever you want to in the world. However, *Breath of the Wild* is designed so that pretty much everywhere you go you will find an interesting landscape feature or gameplay element. By contrast, in *Minecraft*, you never know what you will find in any given direction or whether there will be anything of interest there.

Second, both games give you freedom to choose what you want to do. In *Breath of the Wild*, these tasks are handed to you by the game, whether they are pieces of the main quest to defeat the enemy or side quests presented by random people. As you complete them, you are making progress in the game: getting closer to defeating the main boss, satisfying the people, or solving all the shrines. In *Minecraft*, on the other hand, there are a variety of things you can do, but what you do and why you do it is completely up to you—the game does not "hand" you any tasks. In addition, there is no sense of making progress in the game besides what goals you assign yourself. If you decide to fence off a village to protect it from zombies, you can do so, and when you have, you have made progress

(in the sense of having done what you purposed to do). Even this progress is limited, though, given that the world in the game is functionally infinite. After you have fenced off that village, there will always be another, so your goal cannot be "protect all the villages."

So, which game is more realistic? There is definitely a case to be made for *Minecraft*. In real life, we are not handed specific tasks by each person we meet. We are not told right after we are born, "Here is the main goal of your life, and there in the distance is the specific place where you will complete it." We set goals for ourselves and often feel unsatisfied when we have reached them, realizing the need to set a new goal. It is also the case that as we go through life ("explore" it), we can go through times and places where it feels like nothing interesting is there to be found, like everything is random.

I would like to bring in another consideration before deciding which game is more realistic, however. At the beginning of this article, I said that the answer as to which game is more realistic hinges on what view of reality we have. Specifically, the question is whether the real world has meaning.

Many people answer this question by saying that any meaning in the world is something I bestow on it. I choose what life paths will feel significant to me, and achieving the goals at the end of these paths will provide my life with meaning. I could decide that my dream is to win an Olympic gold medal. Maybe I want to be famous for the stories I write. Or perhaps I have more modest goals, such as getting married and having a family or becoming a doctor and helping sick people. Thinking about meaning in this way is to see the world like *Minecraft*. I can embark on a huge variety of activities in the world, and which ones I choose to make my goals, which ones will give me meaning, is up to me.

Of course, looked at another way, saying that meaning is up to me is another way of saying that life has no meaning. If I am never able to write those stories, then I am never able to get famous for them, and so I can see my life as lacking significance—as meaningless. Or, even if I achieve my goal, it might not end up providing the satisfaction I was hoping for. Michael Phelps has won

more Olympic gold medals than anyone else, but he has explained how after the Olympics he would become depressed. Even after winning a record eight gold medals in 2008, he experienced depression when “coming off that high after doing something you set out to do your entire life.”¹ One way to describe depression is as a feeling that nothing is worth doing—that there is no meaning. Not just fame and medals are subject to let-down, however. I may also fail to have a family or to help sick people, and even if I do succeed at these, they may prove to be less satisfying than I had hoped.

Minecraft also illustrates this lack of meaning. At least it did for me. After I learned how the game worked, I set myself a few long-term goals, including making it to an area called the Nether and acquiring there the supplies needed to make potions. The game was exciting and fun as I went about pursuing them. Eventually I achieved them all. At this point, it struck me that now it was just up to me to set new goals. What is more, I had not accomplished anything objectively significant in the world. Yes, I had obtained the ability to make potions, but this is really just the possibility of setting new goals for myself—ones that require potions. Anything I had done was only significant to the world as long as I continued to see it as significant, and there would always be an infinite amount of the world untouched by me. Since there was no meaning to what I was doing in terms of the game, and since I currently had no goals of my own, I decided to stop playing for a while.

There is another way to see reality, however, one where we remember the existence of God. If God exists, then the world has meaning. Let me explain by illustrating with *Breath of the Wild*.

In this game, there is a main goal: Defeat the enemy. In the real world created by God, there is also a goal: Love God. True, it is not announced to you as you wake up from a deep sleep. It is also true that achieving the goal of loving God is not always as straightforward as storming a castle and dispatching the villain. But it is a real purpose set by my creator.

¹<https://www.olympics.com/en/news/23-time-gold-medallist-michael-phelps-opens-up-on-post-olympic-depression>

It provides my life meaning. And since God is the one who set this goal, it will not disappoint.

The existence of God also matters when I think about exploring the world. As I navigate the real world, I am interacting with the world God made. It is not random. Notice that in my description of *Breath of the Wild*, I kept referring to the “designers” of the game. Playing the game is a constant interaction with its designers and what they built for you to see and find. Real life is like that as well. As I go through the world, it may feel at times like things are random or uninteresting. But every single thing I encounter is a creation of God. My journey through the world is steeped in

meaning because it is continually interacting with my creator.

So, I would like to propose that of the two games I have looked at, *Breath of the Wild* has the more realistic gameplay. The most realistic game is not the one that gives maximal freedom—freedom to create meaning. Rather, a realistic game will reflect our freedom to interact with a meaningful world. 

Brian Julian is a tutor at Gutenberg College as well as an alumnus. He holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston University. He writes (and cartoons) at thinkingintheight.com, where he aims to make philosophical ideas accessible to a general audience.



Love's Work Now Online

At this year's Winter Institute, Gutenberg alumna Erin Greco premiered an art exhibit titled “Love's Work.” Created in conversation with Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, “Love's Work” featured original visual art and written words circling the themes of grief, change, and the transformative rescue of God's love. The pieces exhibited and Erin's talk from the opening at the Winter Institute may be viewed here:

www.erinmichellegreco.com/loveswork

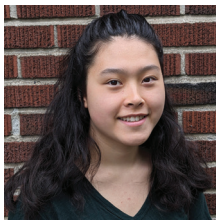
On Friendship: Letters to Our High School Selves

By the Gutenberg College Class of 2028

Friendship is difficult. When you are a high schooler and young adult, you do not have a large foundation to build on, nor much experience to inform your decisions. While we still have many, many lessons left to learn, we are proud of how far we have come. The Residence Program has given us more experience with community, and the wise teachers at Gutenberg have helped us expand our foundation. We share these letters to our past selves to serve as landmarks of our progress, to show us how far we have come, and to look back on as we continue to grow.

Dear 18-year-old Miyei,

I imagine this letter finds you at 2 a.m. the night before you move into Gutenberg. Anticipating a new community and potential friends keeps you awake as you pack the last bits and bobs into boxes. You have so much hope for the future. Speaking from the future, so many of those hopes have been realized just in the year and a half I have been at Gutenberg. I have had the chance you hoped for, the chance to practice the skills of friendship. What you don't know yet is that those skills have more to do with honesty and humility than with trying to win people's favor. So I hope you hear these reflections from me as a testimony to your—my—growth.



At this point, you might not realize that your way of approaching friendships is unhealthy. I know you really want to make a good impression on people, but in the Gutenberg community authenticity is valued more than the perfect facade. As an 18-year-old, your people-pleasing instincts are strong. You often turn to these instincts to smooth over an emotionally tense situation or to prove that you are interesting. Your interactions with fellow high school classmates and ballet colleagues are dictated by trying to look good. But none of this is necessary. Furthermore, you cannot build deep friendships on the foundation of people-pleasing. In fact, people can sense when you are putting on a facade. You are trying to win a deeper connection without actual vulnerability. However, while you might get some

temporary attention or peace from it, there's a world waiting for you beyond the facade.

I hope you realize now that seeking the truth is something that applies to your relationships just like it applies to your academic studies. Seeking truth is never easy, and it is especially hard to seek truth in relationships. Thankfully, growth is a process not a performance. So here are two practical things you can do:

- 1) Be honest with yourself and others about your shortcomings. Don't try to hide behind the good-student facade or the competent-Christian facade. You are fallible. You are in process. Denying that inhibits growth and vulnerability. This means the humble thing to do when your shortcomings affect other people is to ask for forgiveness and not deny that your actions were a problem.
- 2) Be honest with others when they hurt you. Now, there is a tactful way to do this and an accusatory way to do this. You need to be gracious because other people are in process too. But what I definitely don't want you to do is justify other people hurting you because they're in process. Do not pretend like you are unaffected. This isn't helpful for their process and certainly not for yours.

Take hope! This process will form you into the person you want to become and surround you with the people who can sharpen you like iron. I can see the effects of honesty in the many wonderful models of fellow students and tutors at Gutenberg. I respect those who can look me in the eye across a table over coffee and care enough to tell me a hard thing

I need to hear but who are also humble enough to admit their struggles as well.

So as you, past self, walk through the doors of Gutenberg College tomorrow, embrace this healthier approach to friendships.

Yours truly,
19-year-old Miyei

Dear high school Alison,

Do you know how you purposefully show up late to events just so you avoid one-on-one awkwardness before more people arrive? Do you know how you pull the sick card to get out of gatherings that you fear will be “just too awkward”? I know how you avoid awkward social situations like the plague because you regard awkwardness as a sign of failure in relationships rather than growth. Well, we've grown up just a bit and learned some things about awkwardness at Gutenberg that might surprise you. In fact, they will definitely surprise you, so buckle up!



I know you avoid awkward situations (especially with people you want to befriend) because you find those situations horribly painful, going over them multiple times in your head every single night when you can't sleep. But let me tell you something: You'll never become good friends with people unless you are willing to stick out a couple of awkward encounters, however long they last. Once you get past the awkwardness of small talk and being unsure how to end a conversation or carry one on successfully, you will unlock a deeper level of friendship. Then you can have the blurt-out-what-you're-thinking, stay-up-late-and-get-loopy, spill-your-guts kind of friendships that you crave.

So, high school self, who avoids awkward scenarios at all cost: Embrace the awkwardness. At the end of the day, nobody remembers you being awkward. I know it hurts at the time, and pain isn't fun, but it turns out that the common saying is true: Nothing good comes without pain. You certainly can't achieve a good thing like a deep friendship without going through the pain of

awkwardness. And guess what? The awkwardness might not go away! Having a deep friendship doesn't immediately dispel the awkwardness that you weathered to get there. You will still have awkward moments together because we are all awkward people to some degree. The difference is that once you move into a true friendship, the awkwardness that crops up becomes something that you can laugh about. An awkward moment in the laundry room won't keep you up late at night. It becomes a memory that you can laugh about. And guess what? You will also look back at the awkward phase of getting to know each other, and you can laugh about those moments too!

I hope you are convinced—or are at least considering the possibility—that awkwardness is not a sign of failure but rather a sign that you are working to relate to another human being. And why should that be smooth? You both bring different expectations, different hopes, different goals, and different experiences to the table. The similarity between you two is that you are both willing to weather the awkwardness to deepen your relationship. And that can be a beautiful thing. Remember, the awkwardness might never go away, and, at some point, it just might add to the friendship. So try embracing a little awkwardness, viewing it as a bridge to deeper relationships, not a roadblock. I think you'll find that people are willing to put up with more awkwardness than you give them credit for. Isn't it surprising that the thing you avoid

so religiously is the path to the thing you crave so much? As Eliot says, "A little awkwardness never hurt anyone."

Sincerely,
19-year-old Alison

Dear 17-year-old Hannah,

I know you are scared of losing your friend. And while you will not lose that person from your life, you will lose your friend as you know a friend to be.



You are stuck in a very unhealthy friendship, and it is hard for you to imagine what being a person looks like outside of that, when nothing else supplies you with excitement and value.

And I understand! It is exciting to share parts of yourself with someone—to share your thoughts, your hopes, your fears. But you are not just sharing parts of yourself, you are giving them away. You associate your every thought, hope, and fear with your friend, and you find all of your excitement in life from your friendship. But part of being your own person is finding some excitement in your own goals and opportunities, not just in those of another.

And I know that it is good to find value in helping someone—helping with school, with pain, with relationships. But you are not just helping this friend,

you are taking on your friend's burdens as your own. You assume your friend's every problem—no matter the scope—is something that you must bear in order to have value as a human being. But you will learn that part of being your own person is setting emotional boundaries and letting God be in charge of certain problems.

There is hope! You will not be stuck in an unhealthy friendship forever. Now that I have come to Gutenberg, I have built healthier relationships that bring me excitement and value without being the only things that define me. I have shared all my secrets with the members of my class, and they have shared many of their secrets with me. I have helped them, offering advice or sympathy as fits the situation, and they have likewise helped me more times than I can count. And even so, I remain my own person apart from my friendships. My every thought is not consumed by them, and my every action is not dictated by their problems.

I have learned how to have better friendships with others because I have learned more about what it means to be my own person, to feel excitement for my own sake, to find my value in my humanity, in my accomplishments, and in my Creator.

Despite all this, I would not undo your unhealthy friendship. The only way I could have learned about being a person is through the disappointment and the search for value that you will have to suffer through. If you had not been searching for this excitement and value, you may not have chosen the college and community of Gutenberg, which builds you and strengthens you—not just as a student, but as a person. And besides, with time, even your unhealthy friendship will change into a healthier one, bringing both of you joy and encouragement.

So do not despair (or do despair; you're seventeen after all). You will still feel excitement and value beyond the chains of this unhealthy friendship.

Much love,
20-year-old Hannah



Class of 2028: Hannah Davis,
Miyei Park, Alison Friesen

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Learning in a TECHNOLOGICAL AGE



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Technology pervades our lives, altering how we learn, teach, and parent. But which of these changes are beneficial? Which detrimental? How does the relentless efficiency of technological tools affect the development of our minds and the formation of our skills and practices? And if our ultimate aims are spiritual, what role should technology play in our pursuit of them? Join us as we think together about how to navigate the unique technological moment in which we live.

