Infinite Dominion:
No Man's Sky and the Cultural Mandate[1]

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Imagine yourself regaining consciousness on an unnamed, seemingly uninhabited planet somewhere in the expanses of the universe. As your eyes slowly adjust to the natural light now flooding them, you realize you are outside any shelter, and you hear the robotic voice of your spacesuit's computer software inform you of your life support system initializing. You slowly look around, trying to get your bearings, trying to make sense somehow of not only where you are, but also what has happened. You gradually look around at the vast, empty landscape of the unnamed planet, recognizing its unmistakable beauty, yet nonetheless realizing the harshness of an environment to which you are foreign, an environment you instinctively know is inhospitable toward your presence.

Then you spot it: a crashed starship nearby. *Your* crashed starship. Smoke rises from the wreckage, and as you survey the bleak scene, there is no question what must be done. If you ever want to leave this planet, you must find a way to repair the ship. But before you can even begin to ascertain just what will be required to complete this task successfully, the voice of your spacesuit's software chimes in, informing you that your life support system is depleting rapidly. If you do not find a way to replenish the system's resources and keep life support actively running, you will die long before you can possibly direct any attention toward your ship. You stand up and you begin walking out into the landscape before you, hoping that out there is something—anything—that might be used to keep you alive.

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[1] This essay is a revised version of Matthew C. Millsap, "Infinite Dominion: *No Man's Sky* and the Cultural Mandate" (Paper presentation, Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Providence, RI, November 15, 2017).

So begins the space exploration video game, *No Man's Sky*.[2] Released for the PC and PlayStation 4 platforms in August 2016, *No Man's Sky* quickly found a wide audience among video game players, as evidenced by large estimated revenue.[3] A highly anticipated title, much of its initial success arguably owed to the unique pitch conveyed throughout its marketing campaign, a selling point that many players found enticing: the prospect of exploring planet-by-planet a functionally infinite universe procedurally generated by computer algorithms.[4]

Why would so many players find this compelling? Why would tens of thousands of humans take time out of their daily lives to play a game in which they explore a universe that does not actually exist outside of a virtual realm?[5] In this essay, I seek to argue that *No Man's Sky*—its mechanics, scenario, and the playing of the game itself—appeals to players largely due to its correlation to the cultural mandate (Gen 1:26–28) found in Scripture. Whether or not the game's designers or players explicitly hold to the Christian metanarrative themselves, the appeal of

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[2]*No Man's Sky*, developed by Hello Games (Hello Games, 2016). Throughout this essay, all references to *No Man's Sky* pertain to the initial build of the game upon its release on August 9, 2016. *No Man's Sky* has received subsequent updates and additional content, which are not addressed in this essay; thus, the degree to which the game has changed from what is described herein must be determined by the reader, should he or she choose to investigate.

[3]Colin Campbell and Charlie Hall, "How Much Money Did Steam's Best-sellers Earn in 2016?" *Polygon*, January 6, 2017, https://www.polygon.com/2017/1/6/14184200/steam-top-selling-games-2016. Actual sales numbers and exact total revenue for video games are difficult information to obtain, given that many video game companies choose to withhold the exact figures unless specifically used for marketing purposes. Many researchers, such as Campbell and Hall, therefore rely on alternative methods to estimate such figures. For 2016, the estimated total revenue for *No Man's Sky* on PC was $43.2M. This does not include total revenue for the other platform on which the game was available at launch, Sony's PlayStation 4.

[4]For an example of such marketing, see Hello Games, "*No Man's Sky* Gameplay E3 2014" (video), posted by HelloGamesTube YouTube channel June 9, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZO40WBNA60.

[5]"*No Man's Sky*," Steam Charts, https://steamcharts.com/app/275850#All. During August 2016, *No Man's Sky* averaged nearly 37,000 concurrent players on PC. The number of concurrent players on PC has since decreased. The number of concurrent players on PlayStation 4 from August 2016 forward is unknown.

the game nonetheless hinges upon the divinely imbued impulse of every human being to exercise dominion over creation, even if creation, in this instance, exists within an interactive, fictitious universe.

Toward arguing the thesis, I shall begin with an overview of *No Man's Sky* that details the way the game works and the player's progression through the game. Secondly, I shall discuss what is meant by the cultural mandate and what types of actions humans undertake to fulfill it. Thirdly, placing each of these understandings together, I shall offer three possibilities for how *No Man's Sky* and the cultural mandate might correlate, concluding that the chosen correlation demonstrates the game's appeal.

Before moving into the overview, it would be beneficial to make the reader aware of a key presupposition under which I am operating. This essay is not an apologia for video games. Indeed, in the milieu of the past decade (and earlier), that certain games are worthy of theological attention should be self-evident to those who have ears to hear. In this paper, I, consistent with an understanding of video games on both the conceptual and experiential level, presuppose that video games are capable of meaningful communication. Thus, my aim for the paper is that it may serve as an example of work built upon the foundation of a rightly assumed legitimacy of theological interaction with video games.[6]

No Man's Sky: An Overview

As mentioned previously, *No Man's Sky* is a space exploration game.[7] The opening scenario with which this essay began could be described as the premise of the game: The player is an explorer who apparently has crash landed on an unknown planet and must repair his ship in order to continue his journey throughout the cosmos. While this in itself is interesting enough to instill within the player a desire to progress, it

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[6]For more on such theological interaction with video games and a proposed framework for dialogue, see Matthew C. Millsap, "Playing with God: A Theoludological Framework for Dialogue with Video Games" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014).

[7]For a basic idea of the game's state on its launch date, see Sony Computer Entertainment America, "*No Man's Sky* – Launch Trailer | PS4" (video), posted by PlayStation YouTube channel August 9, 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aozqa_7PLhE.

becomes compounded when the player examines the crash site and discovers that at some point after the crash, an unknown intelligence has attempted to communicate with him by leaving him a message, a vague instruction to attempt to journey to the center of the universe.

As *No Man's Sky* is open in its design and affords the player a great deal of freedom, the player can choose to follow the intelligence's prompting to journey to the center of the universe, or he can completely ignore it and simply travel from planet to planet for the sheer satisfaction of discovering new worlds. The game is large enough that the player conceivably could spend hundreds of hours discovering and exploring new planets without ever moving any closer to the center of the universe.[8]

This is made possible by the fact that the universe of *No Man's Sky* is procedurally generated through computer algorithms.[9] Whereas most traditional game design is performed manually by human designers, much of the design of planets in *No Man's Sky* is executed by computer calculation. For a conventional game, the designers would, in effect, be designing every aspect of every planet the player encounters. In such a scenario, the designers would place specific flora "here" rather than "over there," create a lake of exact dimensions, precisely design rock formations, dictate a particular climate, design a substructure of caves below the planet's surface with navigation from point A to point B in mind, have designed the local wildlife according to minute detail, and so on and so forth.

In *No Man's Sky*, however, although the backbone of such design is in place as far as the game's assets (e.g., image files for rocks, water, components of plants, body parts of animals, etc.) are concerned, each planet in its entirety is generated by a complex computer algorithm from

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[8]The fact that the game is not narratively structured in a manner so strong as to send the player down a predetermined path is conducive to the overall theme of the game, which can be characterized as exploration, Kevin Schut, "Hello Game's *No Man's Sky*," in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 425–32.

[9]Procedural generation "occurs any time a game creates levels or spaces based on programmed rules, rather than on intentional design choices," Schut, 426. Schut further notes that the concept of procedural generation and its implementation are not expressly new when it comes to video games, but rather that procedural generation on the scale of what *No Man's Sky* has achieved is unprecedented.

various "seeds" the designers have programmed to use the available assets.[10] For example, when a player travels to planet Athanasius, an as-yet undiscovered planet, computer algorithms have generated the planet using the seeds, creating a unique planet whose exact landscape, climate, wildlife, etc. were not predetermined by human designers. In other words, the player lands upon and begins exploring a planet the game's designers not only have never seen, but also of which the designers do not know the precise characteristics. The player, at that moment, is literally the only person who has ever seen or visited this planet.

The lead designer of the game, Sean Murray, estimates that the computers behind planet generation in *No Man's Sky* have generated around 18 quintillion planets. According to his team's calculations, if a new planet was discovered by a player every second, it would take 585 billion years for every planet available in *No Man's Sky* to be discovered.[11] A scope this staggering is intentional. Murray's childhood fascination with the cosmos continued through adulthood and informed his design of *No Man's Sky* to the point of attempting to mirror in virtual form the reality in which we humans find ourselves—that planet Earth is but one planet among the multitudes in the nearly 10 trillion galaxies in the universe.[12]

Returning to the player's experience on his algorithmically-generated starting planet within the game and his subsequent progression, it is clear at the outset of the game that the initial goal is survival. The player must replenish the resources needed for his spacesuit to function properly, keeping life support active, so that he can set about attempting to repair the damaged starship. The onboard computer system within the suit indicates that the player has a scanner

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[10]Roc Morin, "Inside the Artificial Universe That Creates Itself, *Atlantic*, February 18, 2016,
https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/02/artificial-universe-no-mans-sky/463308/.

[11]Sean Murray, "*No Man's Sky*: A Whole Universe to Explore," PlayStation.Blog, August 26, 2014, https://blog.us.playstation.com/2014/08/26/no-mans-sky-a-whole-universe-to-explore/.

[12]Simon Parkin, "*No Man's Sky*: The Game Where You Can Explore 18 Quintillion Planets," *Guardian*, July 12, 2015,
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/jul/12/no-mans-sky-18-quintillion-planets-hello-games.

available on the suit which is able to scan the surface of the planet in an immediate distance and provide a readout of lifeforms, flora, raw materials. The player is also equipped with a laser mining tool he can use to extract elements from the plants and rock formations he encounters, storing them for use in powering systems or for use in crafting other useful materials.

The onboard computer also details what elements and materials are needed to keep life support active, so that the player can prioritize keeping a steady supply available in order to stay alive. Likewise, the computer details what elements and materials are needed to power the starship and to craft the components needed to repair it. The player first locates and harvests what is needed to keep himself alive, then locates and harvests the materials needed to power the ship and the materials needed to craft the components to repair it. Eventually, once the ship is ready to fly, the player leaves the planet and travels to another, either journeying toward the center of the universe as prompted by the unknown intelligence or exploring the planets of the universe as he pleases. Although the universe of *No Man's Sky* is not technically infinite, it is functionally so; as long as the servers for the game are kept running, there will exist quintillions of planets that will never be seen by human eyes.

Through this overview, hopefully I have provided enough of an understanding of *No Man's Sky* to anyone who has not played the game to grasp its basic concept and mechanics. Admittedly, no written description—a simplified one, at that—can do justice to the richness and complexity of a visual, virtual world that is meant to be experienced personally through play.[13] Yet insofar as the cultural mandate is concerned, this overview of the game will suffice for beginning to think through any potential correlation. After discussing the cultural mandate itself, I will then be in a position to develop this correlation further.

The Cultural Mandate

In order to argue that the appeal of playing *No Man's Sky* largely owes

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[13]This is—and will forever remain—the key difficulty in theological engagement with video games. A video game must be played in order for it to communicate meaning. Reported meaning, as is expressed here, goes only so far. See Millsap, "Playing with God."

to some correlation to the cultural mandate, I must establish precisely what I mean by the term.[14] For the purposes of this essay, the cultural mandate is the God-given command to mankind to exercise dominion over creation through care and cultivation, thus bringing creation into its full potential as it is developed into cultures. In terms of defining "culture," Andy Crouch offers a particularly helpful understanding in his book, *Culture Making*: "Culture is, first of all, the name for our relentless, restless human effort to take the world as it's given to us and make something else."[15]

In recognition that the cultural mandate is God-given, Genesis 1:26–28 has often been viewed as its primary expression:

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth"
> (ESV).[16]

Additionally, Genesis 2 contributes to an understanding of the cultural

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[14]The exact origins of the term "cultural mandate" appear to be unclear, though the essential thrust of the idea seems carried throughout much of the Kuyperian tradition. The idea and its consequent implementation are perhaps most notably manifest in the 20th century in the work and thought of Francis A. Schaeffer, himself influenced apologetically by Herman Dooyeweerd and artistically by Hans Rookmaaker. While I am unaware of any monographs focusing exclusively on the cultural mandate itself, there are some books that build upon it and argue positions on how Christians might fulfill it. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008) and Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004) are each representative of such works.

[15]Crouch, *Culture Making*, 23.

[16]Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references throughout this essay are taken from the English Standard Version of the *Holy Bible*.

mandate, especially the sections in which Adam is placed in the garden "to work it and keep it" (Gen 2:15) and in which God brings the animals before Adam so that Adam can name each of them (Gen 2:19–20).

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to go into full exegetical detail of these passages, it is worth noting four points particularly relevant to our concern. First, it is clear that God's command for man to exercise dominion over creation does not make said dominion a foregone conclusion, as though dominion is instituted via divine fiat rather than through an intentional exercise on man's part.[17] Man must *act* in order to have dominion, and it is clear that action is in mind in the subsequent Genesis 2 passage, in which God places man in the garden "to work it and keep it." Thus, a proper understanding of creation is not as an object in which man passively exists, but rather as an object with which man must actively do something. Adopting "object" terminology does not betray a crass utilitarianism, nor is it license for man simply to do whatever he wishes with creation. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that the creation into which man was placed was not intended to remain in its initial, uncultivated state. Man, under divine command, must act upon creation—indeed, creation has been designed and structured *so that* man will act upon it.

Secondly, it is no coincidence that in Genesis 1:26–28 one finds a direct connection between being made in the image of God and fulfilling the cultural mandate. While the exact meaning of the *imago Dei* and its implications have been a matter of debate within theological anthropology for quite some time,[18] the more convincing interpretations

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[17]Victor P. Hamilton notes that the way רָדָה ("have dominion") is used later throughout the Old Testament to describe a dynamic of authority in other spheres of human life indicates here within the creation narrative an understanding that man is created "to rule" the rest of creation from the beginning of his existence, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137–38.

[18]As the reader is likely aware, this is an understatement, to put it mildly. Complicating the matter are the differences between the strictly exegetical conclusions reached within Old Testament scholarship and the more theological interpretations thereof within theological anthropology. For an overview of the former, see Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988). For an overview of the latter, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the*

tend to offer a multifaceted understanding in which the God-likeness innate to human beings by virtue of the image incorporates multiple communicable attributes of God and/or appropriately limited anthropological imitations of his incommunicable attributes. Even when viewing the *imago Dei* primarily from a relational standpoint, this does not entirely preclude the inclusion of a functional understanding in which humans in some way mimic what God himself does, both in terms of creating and in exercising dominion.

As applied to the context of this essay specifically, J. R. R. Tolkien's understanding of humans as "sub-creators" proves instructive, as he rightly observes that all humans have something of a creative impulse within them, and that this creative impulse cannot be located exclusively anthropologically. Instead, the creative impulse all humans share as sub-creators has been placed within them from outside. It is natural in the sense that is universal to humanity, yet at the same time, it is supernatural in the sense that it is of divine, rather than human, origin.[19] Viewed contextually with the cultural mandate of which dominion is part, to be made in the image of God, then, is more than being a sub-creator, but it surely is not less. God intends that possessing his image will be what drives man to fulfill the cultural mandate faithfully, as to exercise dominion necessitates the use of creative faculties.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that fulfilling the cultural mandate logically demands the human development of the means to do so. Concerning Genesis 1:26–28, in order for man to exercise dominion over animals, one can reasonably conclude man would need to cultivate available resources and fashion tools from these resources to aid in this task. For instance, it is hard to imagine man being able to "have dominion

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Image of God (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014). For a survey on the whole, see Daniel Simango, "The *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27): A History of Interpretation from Philo to the Present," *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 42, no. 1 (2016): 172–90.

[19]J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in C. S. Lewis, ed., *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 90–105. Here I am drawing my own conclusions from a reading of Tolkien's essay rather than from explicit statements he makes within said essay. Dorothy L. Sayers (herself not an "Inkling," though influenced by her friends Lewis and Williams) draws similar conclusions in *The Mind of the Maker: The Expression of Faith and Creativity through Art* (London: Methuen, 1941), 19–30.

over the fish of the sea" (Gen 1:26) if he does not engineer the means to remain afloat while in the sea. Likewise, concerning Genesis 2:15, one should not expect that man would be able to work the garden and keep it effectively were he not to devise agricultural techniques and contrive physical tools to implement these techniques.

Lastly, the cultural mandate itself implies that fulfillment of the mandate involves both travel and exploration. The language used throughout the passage is expansive in nature. In Genesis 1:26, mankind's dominion is to be "over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." In 1:28, mankind is instructed to "[b]e fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it." Although God clearly places man within the garden of Eden for the purpose of cultivating it, there does not appear to be an expectation of remaining confined to the garden. The garden is not some mere subset of creation over which God has given man dominion, whereas the larger creation is intended to be left as-is, untouched by human hands. Rather, man is given dominion over all earthly creation, and if he is to exercise this dominion and thus fulfill the mandate, one can only logically conclude that—as originally intended—doing so will involve either Adam, his progeny, or both leaving the garden voluntarily prior to the Fall (Gen 3). This travel outside the garden naturally involves journeying into unknown territory, exploring places with which man has no familiarity.

I have identified four points of interest regarding the cultural mandate: that fulfillment of the mandate requires intentional action on man's part, that man's exercise of dominion over creation stems from a sub-creative impulse as found in the *imago Dei*, that the mandate logically demands the development of means to fulfill it, and that the mandate's expansiveness necessitates travel and exploration for fulfillment. With these four points in mind, I now move toward considering in what ways *No Man's Sky* might correlate to the cultural mandate.

Three Possibilities for Correlation

In this essay, I am arguing that the appeal of playing *No Man's Sky* is largely due to its correlation to the cultural mandate. Having provided an overview of the game, discussed what is meant by the cultural mandate, and included four points of consideration, I now move to the open question of just how *No Man's Sky* might correlate to the cultural mandate. Here I shall offer three possibilities and choose one as the most

promising candidate, acknowledging that each of the three have been adequately informed by the aforementioned points of consideration. The three possibilities are as follows: microcosmic fulfillment, competitor to fulfillment, and recreational mirror of fulfillment.

Microcosmic Fulfillment

The first possibility for correlation is that playing *No Man's Sky* actually would serve as a fulfillment of the cultural mandate on a microcosmic level. For this possibility to be correct, one must affirm two propositions in coherence with the four points of interest observed above: first, that the expansiveness of the cultural mandate does not exclude activities in virtual realms, which are themselves subsets of reality, and secondly, that there is no qualitative difference between actions undertaken in virtual realms and those undertaken in physical reality. I shall address each of these in turn.

While it is true that the expansiveness of the cultural mandate does leave open a wide variety of human endeavors that work toward fulfilling the mandate in some capacity, from actual human labor that produces physical transformation (e.g., the construction of a new building) all the way to the development of the arts (e.g., the production of and screening of a film), extending this understanding to activities in virtual realms likely stretches too far. Virtual realms are indeed subsets of reality, but a key difference is that their stakes—assuming there is no permeation into "real-world" consequences—are not actual.[20] Thus, whatever action one might take in *No Man's Sky*—from mining a particular resource to purchasing a needed component from a merchant in a virtual economy built off the scarcity of certain resources—has no true, lasting meaning outside of the virtual realm in which it takes place. This is not what is found in the biblical witness regarding the cultural mandate, where it is understood that exercising dominion makes changes of actual consequence.

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[20]Mark J. P. Wolf, "Virtual Worlds," in *The Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (New York: Routledge, 2018), 192–197. Those possessing familiarity with games studies as an academic discipline will recognize that the matter is actually more complex than I frame it to be here, but this statement must suffice for the purposes of this essay. Wolf's "Virtual Worlds" entry serves as a useful starting point for readers wishing to dig deeper.

Likewise, concerning the second proposition, it is difficult to argue convincingly that there is no qualitative difference between actions undertaken in virtual realms and those undertaken in physical reality. For playing *No Man's Sky* to be an actual fulfillment of the cultural mandate, in-game actions must be of the same value and weight as their counterparts in physical reality. For example, in *No Man's Sky*, if, while mining Omegon ore, I accidentally fall from a precipice I knew to be unstable and die, in most cases I can restart nearby and perhaps go look for Omegon somewhere else I know to be safer. Alternatively, if I am a coal miner in West Virginia and I make a calculated risk in mining in an area of the mine known to be unstable, and then end up on the losing side of that risk, I do not have an opportunity to rectify my life-changing mistake. Moreover, in the first case, choosing not to mine Omegon may negatively impact me financially in the in-game economy, but the consequences involved exist only insofar as they apply to the well-being of my in-game character, whereas in the second case, I might be motivated to take such a risk by the fact that my family for whom I am providing has not purchased food in over a week. Clearly there is a qualitative difference between in-game actions and real-world actions in these instances. Since each of the two propositions in this section should not be affirmed, understanding the playing of *No Man's Sky* as a microcosmic fulfillment of the cultural mandate would not appear to be a viable option.

Competitor to Fulfillment

The second possibility for correlation is that playing *No Man's Sky* competes against fulfillment of the cultural mandate. If this possibility is correct, then whether intentionally or unintentionally, the player plays the game *instead of* undertaking activities that fulfill the cultural mandate. More specifically, the actions undertaken in-game that exercise dominion over the game world effectively replace actions undertaken in physical reality that would exercise dominion over the earth. When examining the four points of interest addressed earlier, one sees how such a scenario might unfold. The player recognizes that he must take action within "creation" on the planets he visits in the game. After all, there is no leaving the initial planet without first cultivating the resources necessary to power the ship to its next destination.

In the "competitor to fulfillment" possibility, the player also is

motivated by the creative impulse instilled within him via the *imago Dei*, but in this case, he would be improperly exercising the creative impulse, as it is essentially being used in the wrong venue. The player recognizes that exercising dominion over the worlds he encounters in *No Man's Sky* requires the development of the means to do so, as in the third point of interest, so he uses the materials he harvests to do things like improve the efficiency of his mining beam, purchase materials for the purpose of engaging in intergalactic arbitrage, or develop a more powerful warp drive that enables him to expand his reach farther into the universe. The fourth point of interest—that fulfillment of the mandate necessitates travel and exploration—comes as no surprise here, as these two actions are part and parcel of the game.

At issue in the "competitor to fulfillment" possibility, then, is not the nature of the actions themselves as performed in-game, as though some measure of value can be assigned to them, but rather the broader context of where playing the game fits within living one's life in physical reality. But one must be careful here to note that the problem within this broader context relates to the replacement of activities that fulfill the cultural mandate with those that do not, rather than to an inquiry into an underlying biblical worldview or lack thereof present within the life of the individual in question, as though this were determinative of whether or not one has the capacity to fulfill the mandate. Whether believer or unbeliever, one's actions can be part of fulfilling the cultural mandate. The unbeliever who grows a small garden behind his home is at work fulfilling the cultural mandate, as is the believer who grows a small garden behind his home, regardless of whether the latter is more theologically informed than the other.

Returning to the issue of life context insofar as it concerns playing video games, the problem at hand is that there are some individuals who might excessively play *No Man's Sky* to the point of it taking the place of, or otherwise hindering, important life activities that actually constitute fulfilling the cultural mandate. The desire to play, in and of itself, is not wrong. In fact, I would argue that it is as prelapsarian and as God-given as is the desire to work.[21] But human desires are now twisted and marred

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[21]As much as I would like to elaborate upon this statement, space prohibits me from doing so, other than to offer this observation: Evangelicals have, on the whole, an underdeveloped theology of play.

by sinful human nature, and when virtual activities that mirror those right and good actions that bring about dominion over creation become so dominant as to displace the actions they were meant to mirror, one moves into abrogation of responsibility. In sum: Can playing *No Man's Sky* compete against fulfillment of the cultural mandate? Of course. But just because it can does not mean that it must, and just because it possesses this capacity does not necessitate the conclusion that "competitor to fulfillment" is the best candidate for correlation to the cultural mandate.

Recreational Mirror of Fulfillment

The final possibility for correlation is that playing *No Man's Sky* is a recreational mirror of fulfillment of the cultural mandate. This understanding is predicated on similar observations to those previously expressed. The actions undertaken in the game itself, in fact, mirror actions that are legitimate expressions of exercising dominion over creation in physical reality. Each of the in-game actions is intentional, as the player rightly concludes that they are necessary not only for survival, but also for progression. Hypothetically, a player could, in fact, remain on his starting planet, never repair his ship, and simply spend hundreds of hours within a small radius of his starting position doing nothing but harvesting exactly what he needs to survive. But the chances of a player actually doing this are slim, as there is something inside him which compels him forward, even if he ignores the communication from the unknown intelligence at the beginning of the game. The desire is for more than mere subsistence; it is for flourishing.

The *imago Dei* also informs the player's activities rightly, as this move toward flourishing is driven by the player's sub-creative impulse. The player does not create anything *ex nihilo*, as he must use only those resources allowed by the game's design, just as any human creates anything on earth only through the use of the existing materials brought into being by God's creative act. Again, as applied specifically to the context of *No Man's Sky*, there is something satisfying about working toward crafting the materials necessary to improve one's starship even if the modifications provide no substantive advantage in playing the game. Likewise, many players find creative joy in the discovery and naming of undiscovered planets, or in extensively exploring such a planet, scanning its local wildlife, and naming each new species. The parallels to Adam

exercising dominion over creation through the naming of the animals should be readily apparent. All of this in-game activity, of course, takes place within a context in which these actions require the means to fulfill them and in which they necessitate travel and exploration.

But if these actions, collectively constituting playing *No Man's Sky*, could potentially be a competitor to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate as a result of the correlative appeal they hold, is it possible for them to be exercised rightly? I contend that the legitimate expression of these actions in-game is found in an understanding of playing *No Man's Sky* as recreational in nature, specifically as a recreational mirror of fulfilling the cultural mandate. While space does not permit a full treatment of a theology of play or the essential goodness of recreation, that God intended recreation to be a regular part of man's earthly life is evidenced by both the divine example of and formal institution of the Sabbath.[22]

Viewed accordingly, many recreational activities can be understood to mirror fulfillment of the cultural mandate in some capacity. Yet when looking at *No Man's Sky* specifically, one sees a game whose design, mechanics, and player actions appear poised to mirror this fulfillment at a more fundamental level, a correlation perhaps not seen as vividly in other recreational activities (though in no way derogating these other activities). Put simply, the game is designed in such a way as to simulate fulfillment of the cultural mandate, and it should be both viewed and played accordingly. Thus, the appeal of the game, for both believers and unbelievers, should not be separated from this mirroring, for the appeal is actually derived from prelapsarian human nature itself.[23]

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[22]For good starting points regarding a theology of play and the ways in which the Sabbath informs it, see Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), and Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

[23]There are parallels to what I am describing here found in Tolkien's and Lewis's understandings of beneficial "escapism" as manifested through fantasy worlds, an escapism that actually fosters the individual having a deeper appreciation for the physical world he or she inhabits. See Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," and C. S. Lewis, "Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*," in *On Stories: and Other Essays in Literature* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1966; New York: Harcourt, 1982), 83–90.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that the appeal of playing a popular video game, *No Man's Sky*, largely owes to its correlation to the cultural mandate. This correlation is informed by the nature of the mandate itself, as real-life actions that legitimately demonstrate exercising dominion over creation have strong virtual counterparts within the game. Playing *No Man's Sky*, though something that can be abused as can any other recreational activity, is good when done within its proper confines. When the cultural mandate is taken in conjunction with playing *No Man's Sky* recreationally, one perhaps sees how an appealing video game may be rightly enjoyed in a God-glorifying manner.