



Arts and Spirituality

Session 2: Wednesday, June 5, 4:15–5:45 p.m.

“Barbie, Dolly Parton, and Taylor Swift: Creativity, Strength, and Truth Telling”

Location: Pembroke

Micki Pulleyking, *Missouri State University*, Convener

- **Nancy Posey**, *Lipscomb University*
- **Karen Fletcher Smith**, *Northern Seminary*
- **Sarah Stone Watt**, *Pepperdine University*, Respondent

Culture is strongly shaped by the arts, religion, music, film, and storytelling. Here we explore the intersection of justice, spirituality, imagination, embodiment, and the arts. By looking at the music of Taylor Swift, Dolly Parton, and the storytelling of writer-director Greta Gerwig, this session will focus on truths of the imagination. The arts help humans access aspects of our experience, enhancing our understanding of ourselves, others, and our world as a path to transformation.

Micki Pulleyking, *Missouri State University*, “Barbie’s ‘Contemplation of Incarnation’ will preach!”

“What Was I Made For?” asks the *Barbie* ballad as she seeks answers to the meaning of becoming human. Director Gerwig weaves symbolic contact between Barbie and her creator, (Ruth Handler), with Michelangelo’s, “The Creation of Adam”. Barbie wants agency, to be more than a conduit through whom stories are told. As Barbie faces her fears, her creator takes her hands and tells her to “feel”. Scenes of people and emotions, joys and sorrows, flash before Barbie’s eyes; she is troubled and “called” to see women and men set free from their packaging.

Nancy Posey, *Lipscomb University*, “Southern Icon Dolly Parton: More than Glitter and Butterflies”

Few people achieve celebrity status without polarizing a large segment of society. Dolly Parton, however, has reached superstardom while crossing religious, political, and socio-economic barriers. Through her love of music and gift of songwriting, Parton has expanded her influence into all areas of culture. Her success has afforded her the freedom to chart her own path and improve countless lives without losing touch with her roots. The presenter will trace Parton’s spiritual roots from the fundamentalist church where her grandfather was “an old time preacher man” to her current expressions of spirituality and generosity.

Karen Fletcher Smith, *Northern Seminary*, “Swift Lament: Pop Liturgy for Ecclesiastical Wounds”

Liturgy gives guidance, voice, and supplication when our words cease. How can we express lament when familiar worship songs, prayers, and sermons trigger fresh wounds? This paper argues for the use of pop liturgy to bring voice and healing to those wounded by the church. The depth of lyrics from Taylor Swift offers the modern Christian applicatory words to their ecclesiastical wounds. Through the writing of Swift, listeners can find a sing along experience that brings a pop theology of lament when familiar ecclesiastical language brings more harm than good.

Session 5: Friday, June 7, 9-10:30 a.m.

“God and Gaming: the Intersection between Faith and the Burgeoning Art of Video Games”

Location: Pembroke

Micki Pulleyking, *Missouri State University*, Convener

- **Grant Testut**, *Oklahoma Christian University*
- **Timothy Williford**, *Student, Oklahoma Christian University*
- **Chris Rosser**, *Theological and Instructional Librarian, Oklahoma Christian University*

Video games have been around for over half a century. Though the medium still struggles to be accepted by some circles as a viable art form, it has demonstrated its ability to influence the broader culture through economics, language, music, and a recognizable iconography. Some game developers have used their craft to make profound statements about life, death, love, loss, politics, and even religion. This session is a venue for the discussion of video games as art, and of their potential to hold meaningful conversation with people of faith.

Grant Testut, *Oklahoma Christian University*, “‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance’: Rekindling Jesus’ Playful Ethic in Theological Education”

The presenter recently built a theology course called God and Gaming, in which the class explored faith in conversation with video games. They learned about video games as play, as art, and as interactive narratives; they learned about the theology of play. The course was even structured as a game in which the participants were not just “students” but “players”. This paper explores what the course revealed about a neglected corner of theology, and how such theology can spur students and faculty to collaborate in creating art out of education.

Timothy Williford, *Oklahoma Christian University*, “Am I Jesus Christ?: the Ludological Effects of Portraying Christ in Video Games”

SimulaM is developing a first-person Jesus Christ simulation video game through publisher Space Boat Studios, which is called “I Am Jesus Christ”. This paper explores how placing the player in the role of Jesus Christ has problematic ludological results that do more to undermine than to support the gospel narrative. The presenter will explain the player-avatar relationship in video games, outline the differences between narratology and ludology, and critique SimulaM’s game against another upcoming religiously-themed game.

Chris Rosser, *Oklahoma Christian University*, “Learners at Play: Seven Pedagogical Shifts for Teaching across Epistemologies”

The rise of gamer culture has inspired innovative strategies for gameful course design by which classroom identity reconfigures from communities of learning to learners at play. Gameful design helps mitigate problems of epistemic authority, de facto instructor or institutional assertions of authority over diverse epistemologies. Just as video games broaden encounters with different ways of thinking and of inhabiting diverse worlds, so also gameful design encourages exploration and fosters desire-driven encounters with diversity. This presentation outlines seven key pedagogical shifts for teaching across epistemologies, illustrated through three exemplary gamified courses.