Opinion
NCR Voices

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Last month, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich released a statement condemning a White House social media post that spliced together real scenes of the war in Iran with clips from Hollywood action movies. The video was captioned "JUSTICE THE AMERICAN WAY" and presented the bombing of Iran as mere entertainment.

Cupich wrote: "A real war with real death and real suffering being treated like it's a video game — it's sickening." He added, "The moral crisis we are facing is not just a matter of the war itself, but also how we, the observers, view violence, for war now has become a spectator sport or strategy game."

What Cupich was rightly calling out is the growing trend of treating nearly *everything* like a game. We also see this with the rise of so-called "prediction markets," such as Polymarket and Kalshi, which allow individuals to place bets on virtually anything, including sporting events, political elections, state assassinations and war.

Last week a U.S. soldier was indicted, accused of using classified information to gamble on such websites about the military operation that resulted in the capture of Nicolás Maduro, the former president of Venezuela. Federal prosecutors say that the soldier made more than $400,000 by betting on a series of outcomes related to the operation after learning classified details about it in advance.

Related: Cardinal Cupich condemns White House video about Iran war

Like Cupich, Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy has publicly decried the rise in such gamification and the disturbing trend of placing bets on human lives and tragic violence. In a Substack post, he wrote: "What does it do to our soul, as human beings and as American citizens, when questions of life and death, misery and famine, war and peace, stop being matters of morality and become ways to cash in and make money?"

Murphy notes that rather than looking at the existence and impacts of these prediction markets solely through an economic or political lens, we should reflect on the moral implications that arise when people can place wagers on pretty much anything, thereby turning all aspects of reality into a game and life into sport.

> I worry that something really important dies inside us when we stop thinking about the big questions of how to organize our collective

> economic and political life through a moral lens. I think we are built to be moral creatures; we naturally care deeply about the suffering of others. When we can make money off of that suffering, or simply view government decisions that cause suffering as a game that we wager on, it hollows us out in unseen ways.

I share the concerns expressed by Cupich and Murphy, as well as Pope Leo XIV who has also condemned depictions of war as a "video game." I particularly appreciated Murphy's reflections on what these trends may be doing to our souls, describing the phenomenon as contributing to our collective "spiritual disintegration."

> There is something inherently dehumanizing about seeking to monetize every facet of life, every possible circumstantial outcome.
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Indeed, the ubiquitous move to "gamify" nearly everything — including tasks in the workplace, and education and the classroom — feels deeply troubling to me on several levels. The emergence of this trend also appears to parallel the increasing use of smartphone game apps that replicate casino-like stimulation with bright colors, repetitive motions and noises, the desire to earn points or credits and programming designed to maximize user attention and time on the application.

While it may seem innocuous enough to play a "mindless" game on your phone, and it's true that in moderation it is probably harmless, studies show that a growing number of people (and not just young adults) are becoming addicted to smartphones and gaming apps. The World Health Organization has even established a category of addictive behavior known as "gaming disorder."

It should not be surprising then that many people are seeking gamelike stimulation, competition and motivation in other sectors of their life. People are looking for that increased dopamine hit!

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Whereas sports fans may have previously enjoyed cheering on their favorite team for the love of the game and pride that comes with a team's seasonal success, sports-betting apps have now ratcheted up the perceived stakes of competition with real-world financial consequences on the line. The prediction market explosion has taken this quest for the next win to a new level, flattening all aspects of life into a game that can be won or lost. And the consequences are troubling.

For example, it is disturbing how in this gamified world motivation is increasingly tied to points and competition, financial risk and return and the rush of dopamine activation. This can lead to a decline in what is known as "intrinsic motivation." As a result, people become less motivated by their own aims, interests or curiosity and instead seek external validation, competition or reward.

This would seem to diminish one's interior life, which is the source of creativity and art, novelty and innovation, success and cooperation. There is also the risk of greater social isolation and alienation from oneself, others and God.

Another troubling aspect of this trend is how it conflicts with silence, prayer, reflection and introspection. As the Trappist monk and spiritual writer Fr. Thomas Merton famously asserted in his 1961 book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the only way we come to know our true selves is by seeking and discovering God. Prayer is the condition of the possibility of spiritual authenticity. And a gamified life leaves little room for quiet meditation away from devices and distractions.

It is for this reason that I'm also skeptical about the value of so-called prayer apps, especially those that include gamified elements and in-app purchases. We should be cautious about those spiritual things that come with a price tag, for we live in an age when the temptation to profit by digital simony is quite real.

There is still another concerning element to this gamification trend. It also contributes to the objectifying and instrumentalizing of other people. There is something inherently dehumanizing about seeking to monetize every facet of life, every possible circumstantial outcome. I found in Murphy's reflections an insightful observation about what this gamification of life does to us. He writes: "I think the transformation of moral questions into financial questions hardens us to suffering, or at the very least, excuses us from grappling with the complicated questions of right and wrong in public decision making."

In this way, we should worry about the effects the gamifying of life can have on our consciences. As Murphy puts it, these trends can harden us to suffering and that lack of compassion contributes to our turning our neighbors into a commodity whose future can be bought and sold. It weakens our consciences rather than forming them well, and it clouds our ability to see the common good as the primary aim of our social and political efforts.

At a time when world leaders are killing innocent civilians in inexplicable wars and then celebrating those tragedies as if they were video games or action movies, and people are placing bets and reaping thousands of dollars on the lives of others, the only sane and Christian response is condemnation and protest. As followers of the Prince of Peace, we must strenuously object to this gamified culture of death and model another way to be in the world: the way of justice, peace, love and communion.

Read this next: Pope Leo condemned the scourge of gambling. Some US Catholics beat him there.