

Article 2: Video Games, Pro and Con

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The first white-on-black video game I ever saw was the famous “Pong” game, where one straight white line (supposedly the tennis racket) would bounce a square “ball” across the screen to a second straight line “racket”. The square “ball” could also bounce off the side walls and a score was recorded when one or the other racket missed the ball and it passed into cyber oblivion with a subsequent electronic tone.

I remember it being fun for a while, but after a time, the new quickly wore off. After all, it was slow, there wasn’t much action going on, and there was pitifully little computer graphics happening. Any eight-year-old child could master the game in three minutes. It took me ten.

But in the age of 3-D computer graphics, vivid colors, riveting sound effects and wild fantasy worlds that are designed to keep a youngster’s attention for hours, the old Pong game is no match. It went the way of the keyhole punch, black & white television, vinyl LPs, and the eight-track tape. Even so, it was perhaps a harbinger of things to come.

As a crisis counselor for decades, I cannot overstate how many young people I worked with that struggled in school, had problems with their parents, and were identified as “ADHD” or any number of other “Ds.” That portion of the school population was less than five or ten percent when I worked in the schools in the 1990s. Today, it has ballooned to what most counselors would agree to be over twenty-five percent – or higher.

Two things came to light. First, a growing number of young people came from families where the parents did not value education, nor did they encourage their children to do so. Secondly, more and more young people were getting distracted by the newest techno-toys, in addition to the traditional “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll.”

The irony for me was that my young, troubled clients, by their own reports and those of their parents, would come home after school, make a bee line to their bedroom, and crank up their X Box, Play Station, or Wii game and become transfixed for hours. Sometimes they would do so with friends, sometimes in solo mode. Parents would report that they hardly saw their child after that, typically having to call them repeatedly to eat supper, do chores, or do their homework. This frequently turned into an argument, and over time into a pattern of parent-child interaction.

In spite of the squabbles, many of these parents admitted that they liked the fact that they knew where their children were, knew what they were doing (or thought they did), and knew who they were playing with every minute of the afternoon and evening. Granted, that was saying something and certainly seemed better than kids running the neighborhood and the parents not knowing where, or with whom they were running.

But as often happens with technological innovations, what starts out as a playful, helpful, even wonderful option can turn south and get ugly if not monitored carefully. Aside from the obvious tradeoffs of too many kids spending way too much time fixed in front of a computer or video screen, one seldom saw young people playing in the parks on Saturday mornings. Barely two generations ago, parks would be filled with kids from the neighborhoods starting pick-up baseball games or touch football games. That's no longer the case. Far too many young people these days are cloistered in their homes playing video games, or sleeping in because they played into the wee hours the night before.

Many counselors I knew over the years reported that the use of video games was being utilized as babysitters by some parents. After all, while the child is "fixed" on the video game, he or she is not writing on the wall with markers, not picking fights with a sibling, not tearing up the bedroom, not bugging the parent to take them to the mall, and not whining because the parent didn't have time for them. In some ways, and in some families, this was viewed as a "godsend." I'm not so sure. It also means that the parents and the children are not interacting with each other.

The darker side of this scenario is, I believe, that these children are missing opportunities to learn healthy ways to interact with people in the real world. We learn to speak, walk, and read by practicing. Unfortunately, we learn to isolate ourselves in the same manner. These children are actually losing huge blocks of time where they might well have been learning something valuable – something that would enhance their lives for a lifetime – but were instead learning only how to advance to the next level of *Call of Duty*, *Iraq War*, *Ultimate War*, *Gears of War*, or any of the rather disturbing cultural spinoffs like *Grand Theft Auto*, where a child basically learns to be a criminal. Other games allow the youngster to choose between being a soldier, a terrorist, or a citizen.

Some would argue that these games and others like them are quite harmless. Just games, after all. However, growing research and anecdotal evidence might argue with that assumption. In a world where increasing numbers of students find school "boring" and a very difficult place to stay focused during the day, a growing number of youngsters develop an urgency to get home and jump

on the flash-and-dash video games that have become so popular. And naturally, it's not always just the kids.

I've actually had a child report that one night at home her video game broke and ceased to work. She went to complain to her mother, who was playing a video game on her unit, and the girl was told to "take the issue up with your father." The girl went back to the parent's bedroom, where her father was playing on his brand new XBox. This girl had great difficulty getting either parent to pay much attention to her.

Oh, all right, I have no real problem with video games as a temporary form of entertainment. The problem is that too many young people have little parental limitations put on them and get "hooked" on playing the games and simply cannot get enough. Some go into raging fits when they lose, or are "killed" in their favorite game of violence. Other teens I've worked with had big problems with insomnia and many struggled to do homework or stay focused enough to read a chapter in their history book – in spite of being able to focus on the video game for literally hours on end. That irony brings up a couple of interesting points, I think.

First, there are those who argue that visually implanting thousands, even hundreds of thousands of violent or irreverent images into the mind of a child, is not harmful and doesn't create significant problems. I'm not so sure. One cannot argue with the fact that our culture is filled with millions of individuals in prison, and millions more that were released from prison and walk around with prison mentalities, never mind criminal behaviors. And how many millions more are impacted as their parents, spouses, children or friends? And secondly, those nay-sayers can't argue against the fact that increasing numbers of our children raised on flash-and-dash struggle to be interested in school, to say nothing of their losing interest in learning in general.

If pumping images and sound bytes into our little brains through television, radio, computers, video games, and cell phones has no real impact, then why do advertisers around the world spend many billions of dollars in annual advertising in every one of those arenas? Having been a former small businessman in the past, I can assure you they don't spend that kind of money without some sort of positive response to their products.

I'm reminded of a western wear store owner I knew back in the 1970s. I was working at a regional radio station and he had a long-standing contract with our station to run ads featuring his famous boot stock. Even for Fr. Stockton, Texas, and being a small store, the man sold around 100 pairs of boots every week. He became convinced that he had been established so long, and that everybody knew where he was, that he didn't have to run those ads anymore. So he stopped.

Within about three weeks, he called us back and immediately reinstated his former contract for ads on our radio station. When asked why he changed his mind so quickly, he told us that his average of 90 to 100 weekly boot sales dropped to less than 30 almost immediately, and was still dropping by the end of the third week. Images and sound bytes do have impact.

I once told a young client that his brain, in some ways, was like a basket. What he put into the basket (and his brain) was what he would have in it. I still believe that is largely true. Over time, those images and sound bytes add up. And what we focus on and put into our brain is, over time, exactly what we will find there.

The message here is simple for good parents. You can allow your child to play video games if that is your desire. No problem. But if you want to avoid some of the more troublesome side effects of inordinate amounts of “gaming,” it will be wise to have some basic rules of limitation. Books on parenting strategies or helpful sites online can help you devise your particular strategy, but we will list some possible rules here, in hopes that they might prove useful.

POSSIBLE VIDEO GAME RULES:

1. Always have homework done (with proof) before any video game play can happen.
2. Limit the number of hours playing the game to one (1) hour (or less) per child on weeknights. No more than two (2) hours on days of the weekend. Keep in mind, even with these limitations, a child could spend 360 hours in nine months of playing flash-and-dash, action packed, perhaps even violent (or occult-laden) video games. That same amount of time would go a long way toward learning a second language or mastering that pesky math class. That amount of time could really firm up the bond between a son and a father if they went fishing for half that many hours in the year. A little harmless entertainment is one thing. Huge chunks of your life squandered to reach level 50 of *Gun Master Onslaught*, is quite another.
3. For every hour on the video game, demand that each child get 1 hour reading, playing outside, exercising, or interacting with others. The idea is to make sure your child gets some balance in their daily activities. If they won't do it on their own, the good parent insures that it happens.
4. If grades at school begin to suffer, hours on video games and watching television should be reduced or barred, at least until the grades have recovered. Access to video games can be great leverage points for a parent.
5. Research the games your child wants to purchase (or get in a trade from friends). Watch your child play each new game, at least for a little while, so that you can see for yourself exactly what sort of material they are being exposed to in the game. Another good idea is to walk in periodically and notice what they are into at that particular time.

6. If siblings fight over access to the video game, a good rule is for all who are fighting to lose the privilege for the remainder of that day and night. If they get mad and break the video game, have them do special chores around the house at five bucks an hour until they earn enough to replace it. They'll never break another game after that.

7. One last thing to remember is that if you take the game away from your child for a reason listed here or due to the breaking of one of your own rules, make sure the punishment fits the level of the crime. Above all, be fair and consistent and never back off a rule you've established. If there's something wrong about it, or it's not working like you envisioned, then call a quick meeting and change the rule to suit you. You'll feel good that you acted when you needed to, and your children will feel like they're involved, and will like the fact that you're not afraid to alter rules when they need to be revamped. Negotiating these sorts of deals with your children are great ways to increase parent-child interactions, and the patterns you establish doing this, may well come in handy later on as your child grows into a full-blown teenager.

What follows are helpful tips for parents from the Entertainment Software Rating Board:

Check the [ratings](#). Use both the rating symbol on the front of the package and content descriptors on the back to select the most appropriate games for your child and family. Visit the [ESRB website](#) to search for rating information before you head out to the stores.

Carefully read and look at the package. Game content is described and depicted in detail on the back of virtually every game box.

Talk to other parents and older children. This is a good way to learn about computer and video games.

Monitor your child's video game play. Just as with TV, movies, and the Internet, it is always a good idea to be aware of and involved in the games your children play.

Exercise caution with online-enabled games. Some games let users play with other people on the Internet, but it's important to realize that some of these games contain live chat features or other user-generated content, including character models ("skins"), settings ("maps"), weapons and other content that are not part of the [ESRB rating](#). Online-enabled games carry a warning on the package that reads "Game Experience May Change During Online Play."

Be aware of downloadable "mods" that can significantly change the content of a game. Most PC games can be altered through the use of downloadable programs called "mods" which are broadly available on the Internet and can change the content of the game. Since players create them, mods are not considered in ESRB ratings. It is important for parents to be aware that some mods can alter a game in ways that may not be appropriate for younger players and may be inconsistent with the ESRB rating.

Learn about and use parental controls. Some of the newer video game console and handheld hardware devices offer parents the ability to limit what type of content their children can access upon activating built-in parental control features. By activating parent controls you can ensure that your kids only play games that carry ratings you deem appropriate for them.

Consider your child's unique personality and abilities. Nobody knows your child better than you do; consider that knowledge when selecting computer and video games.

Play computer and video games with your children. Play games and talk about them with your kids as often as possible. This is a good way to have fun together as well as get to know which games your child finds to be interesting and exciting, and why.

Read more than the ratings. [Game reviews](#), trailers and "demos" that allow you to sample games are broadly available online and in game enthusiast magazines, and can provide additional detail about game content that is useful when determining which games are appropriate for your family.

The final message regarding video games, actually falls back to a basic message to parents regarding their children. Get involved in what they are doing in their lives. Find ways to spend time with them. Teach them about things in life that are important to you. Teach them to value things like treating others with respect, developing a strong work ethic, and being willing to work hard for things they want in life. Teach them how to interact with others, and how to resolve problems, and give them chances to practice those lessons. The end results can produce amazing young people.