PLAY IT SAFE PRESENTS

THE

Modern Parent's

G U I D E

TO

Kids and Video Games

By SCOTT STEINBERG

Feat. Johner Riehl and Rusel DeMaria

Foreword By Dr. Carl G. Arinoldo
Author, *Essentials of Smart Parenting*

INFORMATION FOR TODAY'S GENERATION™

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"Contains a wealth of information… An absolute must-read for parents and children alike!"

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Director, Human Simulation and Patient Safety Center,
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"Takes the bite out of your worries and offers practical strategies on when and how to tame the high-tech beast."

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"Helps you be on the same team with your child and not their opponent."
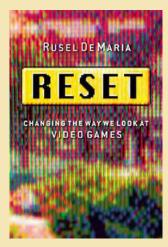
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INFORMATION FOR TODAY'S GENERATION™

As millions of proud parents already know, raising a happy and healthy child remains the single most difficult and rewarding challenge that you'll ever face. But in today's ADD-afflicted world of buzzing BlackBerries, app-infested iPads and jangling Bluetooth headsets, it can often seem like an increasingly daunting task. From texting to social networking and instantly sharing videos recorded right from one's cell phone, technology continues its relentless advance, putting new ways to connect and communicate at kids' fingertips with each passing day. Coupled with the growing demands that work and personal commitments are piling on contemporary families, and increasing pace at which society now moves though, it's enough to make even the most tech-savvy parent's head short circuit.

Once upon a time, it may have seemed like enough to simply keep tabs on your children's favorite Internet sites. Nowadays, after work, between chasing barking dogs and wrestling giggling toddlers into their pull-ups, you're somehow also expected to monitor the games that kids play, movies they watch and music they download… all of which are suddenly streaming live 24/7 from dozens of devices. Just one problem: Where to turn for advice when you're presented with a problem that's just been invented, let alone one that our parents never even had to face? Thankfully for those who've ever sat exasperated, head

Parenting expert Scott Steinberg

in hands, after attempting to tear their teens off an online-connected video game system or peel a shrieking four year-old away from the DVR while the smoke alarm blares and pot boils over, rest easy. Help is on the way.

Designed for a new generation of parents—one confronted by technology at every turn—*The Modern Parent's Guide* series of books can help you take back control of your life. Offering Information for Today's Generation™, all are founded on the guiding principle that education, communication and participation are vital to making technology a safe, fun and enriching part of the family dynamic. Providing hints, tips and tricks via which parents and kids alike can learn to better educate themselves and more effectively communicate, they're not just written in a language that's easy for everyone to understand. Each also delivers unrivaled insight into the opportunities and challenges that new devices, software and services present.
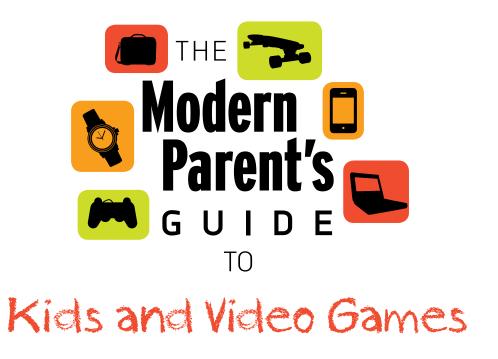
From in-depth discussions of pressing concerns to essential reading and top online resources, we provide the tools that can help you succeed. But ultimately, it's your own active interest in shaping technology's impact on the home that will make it such a memorable and rewarding part of your children's lives. Just as technology continues to evolve, so too do those looking to help kids grow alongside it gain in knowledge and understanding daily. Only with your help can we continue to thrive and stay ahead of the curve.

As a fellow parent and working professional, I'd like to personally welcome you to the discussion, and invite you to share your continuing thoughts with us online. Remember: These days, there are no gurus, only responsible kids and parents, who owe it to each other to stay informed, open-minded and, most importantly, always willing to discuss and debate both the upsides and downs that progress inevitably brings.

Scott Steinberg

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Kids and Video Games

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Play It Safe Presents

THE MODERN PARENT'S GUIDE
TO KIDS AND VIDEO GAMES

DEDICATION

To K, R, J and L, who helped bring the magic of technology and video games into my life, and my own K, who's shared in so many of the wonderful discoveries that it has brought.

But most of all to Z, without whom this never would have been possible, a simple reminder: Erase words like "can't" and "impossible" from your vocabulary. However tightly barred and shuttered some doors appear, remember—there is *always* another way.

et me begin by saying that I am honored to have been asked by Scott Steinberg to write the foreword for this wonderful book that you are just beginning to read and enjoy. Scott and I have worked together previously regarding video games—Scott as the technology expert and I as the psychologist, looking at interactive entertainment from a psychological and educational perspective.

As you are doubtless aware, more and more people in today's world seem to be using increasing numbers of electronic devices in the course of daily life. You yourself may regularly come in contact with various types of cell phones, digital music players, tablet PCs, HDTVs, media streamers and computers in the course of a single day alone. In addition, today's technology users now include just about every possible age range from the youngest preschooler to the most senior citizens. Hence, it would seem to be a great idea for individuals, especially parents, to learn how to make use of these devices in a constructive and productive manner: Only by doing so can the average user hope to derive all of the positive benefits that such innovations can offer. Parents in particular are in a great position to supervise, guide and instruct children and adolescents in the use of these items, especially computers, in such a way that all parties glean constructive upsides from the exchange.

The book that you are now holding in your hands guides parents in helpful ways toward accomplishing precisely this goal. Furthermore, the author has done a wonderful job in presenting this valuable information in a clear, straightforward, and easy-to-understand manner. In my professional opinion as a psychologist, I believe that Scott offers very useable information on how to derive many of the cognitive, social, and behavioral benefits of gaming for children, adolescents and parents alike.

While video games have been around for a long time, it is quite easy for the general public to be unaware of the range of positive benefits that can be gained through playing various types of casual games. For instance, research has shown that, in the cognitive realm, a player's attention span, concentration ability, and focusing skills are exercised and enhanced. In addition, there also appear to be beneficial effects for the user's problem-solving and decision-making skills. Planning ability and overall thinking capabilities have also been shown to benefit from playing casual games. From a psychologist's point of view, it is interesting to note that all of these aforementioned skills are necessary components for the average child to possess in order to hopefully achieve academic success, given the child's innate abilities.

It has also been reported that a child's social skills can be exercised and improved through the use of computer games. By playing with another person or persons—be it a parent, a sibling, or a peer—children can learn (and practice!) what it means to take turns; enjoy valuable lessons in teamwork and cooperative play; and also gain experience in exercising patience and self-control. Again, these are very valuable and important assets for children to familiarize themselves with, cultivate and use.

In my professional practice, I hear from parents that they have found that playing video games alongside their children has provided the family with an excellent means for the two generations to bond and have some quality time together. Additionally, gaming with a child also gives the child a wonderful opportunity for one-on-one conversation with his or her parent. While this is important for all children of all ages, it is especially important if there is a child in the household who may be shy and not prone to opening up about things such as emotions and/or problems that may be troubling them at any given point in time.

In addition to the above advantages, playing casual computer games with a single child or multiple children can also have a significant positive influence on the parent-child relationships existing within the home. And, while we're on the subject of gaming with kids, setting up regular "gaming times" each day and/or evening should provide the added bonus of giving parents and kids something to share that they have in common. This, again, can help to strengthen the parent-child relationship.

Worth pointing out, however: Whenever a parent is considering offering up (or a child wants to engage in) some type of leisure-time activity, the parent must always insist that the activity, or chosen game, be age-appropriate for the particular child or children involved. Happily, as you continue to read through this book, you will find that the author gives valuable guidelines for parents to follow when deciding which game titles fit the description and which don't, given the ages of the kid(s) in question.

In addition, up to this point, you've probably noticed that I have been touting the many positive benefits of playing casual games—benefits which are applicable to both children and adults alike. But, as with almost anything in life, along with the positives come some negatives as well. However, I want to note that, with some careful planning and wise decision-making on the part of parents—and, of course, by heeding the guidelines contained in this book—such negative aspects can be greatly minimized, if not completely eliminated.

One of the main criticisms that critics of any form of gaming tend to cite is the negative effect that these interactive outings allegedly have on individuals based on the violence inherent to a number of specific game titles. Another oft-reported negative is that a person of any age can become addicted to playing video games. Critics go on to say that, if addicted, spending too much time playing games can lead to social isolation and, for children and adolescents, a marked decline in academic performance.

While these and other types of negatives do exist, it is imperative that parents be extremely vigilant and closely supervise what their children are watching and playing. Also vital is to monitor how kids are using whatever electronic devices that they may have access to. Of foremost importance for parents is to take every step possible to try to ensure that their children are not being exposed to any type of objectionable material. (Regardless of the type of media producing said material, video games or no.) Also, any gaming session should have reasonable time limits in place and those limits must be adhered to.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that as you continue to read through and enjoy the following volume, you will learn valuable information and helpful guidelines that should enable you and your children to gain the most benefit from your gaming experiences.

Dr. Carl G. Arinoldo
Executive Director
Sunbury Consultation Services

What is it about video games, a beloved source of entertainment for countless parents and children worldwide, that also troubles so many so profoundly? Are the same titles which can tickle our fancy, transport us to endless worlds of wonder and spark our imagination in infinite ways really such a bad influence, or potentially harmful?

Perhaps the answer has as much to do with society's ever-changing standards as it does with actual electronic amusements themselves. As history reveals, all forms of popular media have, at one time or another throughout the course of their evolution, been viewed by some as a threat to health and morals. Movies, comic books, radio, television and even pinball games have all been subject to skepticism and, often, their days in court. Turn back the clock, and you can clearly see that each of these art forms was singled out as "bad for you" at various points over the past several decades. For example: Mid-century DJs were encouraged to save America's youth by not playing rock 'n roll music and popular artists such as Elvis Presley were looked upon by many parents with fear and distrust. Likewise, the Johnson Act of 1950 dealt a great blow to the nascent pinball industry by prohibiting the interstate transportation of "gambling" devices, which included pinball machines, stigmatizing a simple flipper-mashing pastime. Now, video games are the "new kid on the block," relatively speaking, from a cultural standpoint. They must be bad for us. It's only logical.

In the case of video games, concerns began to surface almost as soon as interactive entertainment began to appear in the arcades and on home machines, as early as the 1970s. Exidy's *Death Race*, in which the player attempts to run over screaming stick figures, sparked a nationwide media uproar in '76. But it wasn't until the early 1990s that the field faced a truly concerted effort at regulation from members of the United States government. When Captain Kangaroo appeared beside Senator Joe Lieberman in 1994 in disbelief that the nation's children were allegedly being exposed to mature diversions such as *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*, the game industry quickly got its act together. In order to forestall a legislative "solution," interactive entertainment leaders formed a ratings board that would function as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) would for the movie industry—the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or ESRB.

History tends to work in cycles though, and lately there have been renewed legislative attacks on video games, such as the recently resolved case of Brown vs. EMA (formerly Schwarzenegger vs. Video Software Dealers Association), which proposed government regulation over the sale of "violent" video games to minors. As part of the case, California Senator Leland Yee asserted that the sale of violent video games to minors should be a crime. However, video game industry advocates objected on the grounds that other forms of media weren't subject to the same restrictions, among other arguments. The Supreme Court eventually ruled in June 2011 that video games should indeed enjoy the same First Amendment protection as other forms of entertainment, and therefore struck down the law.

Despite these endeavors, it may surprise you to note that the persistence of popular beliefs that video games are harmful to children tends to surprise most individuals within the game industry. Over the past decades, professionals have seen mounting evidence of a significantly positive side to game playing. And yet, 17 years after the ESRB was formed, many still only hear the negative side of gaming reported in the media, and almost nothing about the positive impact that games can have if played in a healthy manner as part of a well-balanced life.

"Games are an amazing invention that entertain and inform in ways different than traditional media," says Joseph Olin, former president of the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences (AIAS). "But many critics have little or no experience with them and therefore don't understand where there could be artistic or educational value… No different than with film and TV, media sensationalism and ignorance can contribute to the fear that games are harmful to children."

"There's absolutely no scientific evidence showing a positive correlation between violence in individuals and the games they play," he argues. "Major studies from The Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health, *The Journal of Adolescent Health* and *The British Medical Journal* have all shown no conclusive link. According to market researcher the NPD Group, nearly two-thirds of all games sold are rated E or E 10+ as well, meaning that they're found to be appropriate for players of all ages or children over 10 years of age, respectively."

Perhaps the ultimate irony is that the majority of players today are not young children. The average video gamer is, in fact, 37 years old and the amount of adult women playing on PCs and consoles actually outnumber teenage boys by nearly triple. Bottom line: Video games aren't kids stuff. Even among parents, the majority see video games as a positive influence on their children—68% according to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA).

Games are simply a tool, suggests David Thomas, who teaches critical video game theory at the University of Colorado. "We live in a media-rich world, and video games are part of that diet," he says. "Kids are incredibly savvy these days. But being children, they still need guidance. Games can be beneficial to children as a modern form of media, albeit one that they need to learn how to use, cope with, contextualize and manage."

All too often overlooked in debates are the sizable educational and social benefits that games offer kids as well, suggests Winda Benedetti, who writes the Citizen Gamer column for MSNBC.com.

"A lot of parents are unfamiliar with gaming and afraid of the unknown," she says. "But games can be a huge positive for children, as long as you set reasonable limits. When my three year-old watches TV, he just passively zones out. But when he plays games, he's actively engaged, thinks about what's happening, talks to me about what's happening on-screen and takes away so much more from the experience. Games offer parents enormous untapped potential."

The great thing about video games nowadays is that kids are learning new skills without even knowing it. Experts have seen increases in lateral and critical thinking, problem solving and dynamic decision making amongst players, not to mention obvious improvements in hand-eye coordination. In fact, much of what kids get out of games maps pretty closely with the skill sets required of 21st century job seekers.

Games actually model a very solid learning process. Players of all ages are encouraged to discover and experiment at their own pace, failing and trying new approaches to solving virtual problems, which also helps build confidence and self-esteem. Digital diversions provide a unique sense of perspective and engender heightened levels of empathy due to their interactive and contextual nature as well. From raising awareness of pressing social issues or allowing kids to assess situations from multiple viewpoints, it's becoming increasingly clear that there's more to games, literally, than meets the eye.

"Games aren't solely an entertainment medium anymore," says the AIAS' Olin. "[Many] emphasize cooperation and sharing and encourage kids to learn economic basics, like *Animal Crossing* and *Club Penguin*. Other games like *LittleBigPlanet* foster creativity while online games such as *Toontown* teach lessons of teamwork and community, and the *Professor Layton* series focuses on critical thinking and puzzle solving. Games illustrate the concept of risk and reward in a manner that's comprehensible and engaging."

Despite these upsides though, "journalists seem to cover stories about violence in games with more enthusiasm than positive ones about potential benefits," cautions Ariella Lehrer, CEO of software publisher Legacy Interactive. "Some of the complaints that games destroy a child's ability to concentrate or do harm to the developing brain are silly. The research is not completely clear, but in general, the data paints a very different picture."

Ultimately, expert consensus suggests that the choice of whether games can be beneficial or detrimental to kids comes down to fundamental playing habits, exposure to age-appropriate content and, most vitally, active parental involvement and awareness.

"Games are a social currency that can enhance the relationship between parent and child— no different than any other medium," says Olin. Most parents know their kids' friends, the shows they watch and some of the music they listen to. I always recommend that they take the same approach with the games that their children play."

Lehrer, whose titles include sophisticated animal doctoring simulations such as *Pet Pals* and *Zoo Vet*, says games for kids can be challenging and don't have to dumb down the experience. To the benefit of all, perhaps it's time we held the debate surrounding games, and their lasting impact on families, to the same standard. For the moment, if you are still undecided, we ask only that you keep an open mind and consider using this book as a guide to helping your kids get the most out of video games while maintaining harmony and balance in their lives.

At the end of the day, only you can decide what's right for your children. But when it comes to making informed decisions, knowledge is power—and, as popular children's toy and TV series G.I. Joe used to say, "knowing is half the battle." Welcome to the next level: Won't you come and play?

Scott Steinberg
www.topparentingexpert.com

THE

Modern Parent's

G U I D E

WHY VIDEO GAMES MATTER

By Johner Riehl, founder, FamilyFriendlyVideogames.com

It used to happen all the time. I'd be at a party or other social setting with my wife, an attorney who advocates for the rights of foster youth, and the conversation inevitably would turn to our careers.

And what do you do, Johner?

"I work in the video game industry."

I would always get one of two reactions to the "v" word. Every so often I'd see a twinkle in the husband's eye (or sometimes the wife's), and they'd immediately want to know if I could tell them more about their favorite game, or discuss news of the next big upcoming title.

But more often than not, my work was dismissed as unimportant and trivial. Video games, in the eyes of many parents, seem to be at the forefront of many of the negative issues plaguing society today, and the word itself may as well be a four-letter one as far as many families are concerned. But my work on video games isn't as insignificant in comparison to my wife's work as many might think.

Parents and families need to open their minds and rethink what they know about video games, because they're now firmly entrenched in everyday life. What's more, they've also been shown to have many positive impacts on society and the families that play them.

Perhaps 15 years ago you could have dismissed video games as a passing fad. But these days, it's hard to imagine a world without them. Whether it's home systems from Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony, portable options like iPads and mobile phones, or even online computer and Facebook games, at least two-thirds of American households play some sort of video game.

The truth is that many parents these days grew up with video games and are now sharing their hobby with their kids. But there are still older parents and grandparents who did not, and there remains a persistent notion that all video games are geared and marketed towards minors, and today's youth must be protected from the evils of video games at all costs.

A lot of the negative discussion of games stems from the fact that often when video games are covered in a mainstream media environment, it's the most violent, sensational and shocking games that are highlighted. Much of the research and focus of debate is on the negative impact of games, and much time and energy is also spent rebutting and debunking outrageous findings, such as an allegation in February 2011 on Fox News by a so-called "expert" who said that sexual innuendos in video games like *Bulletstorm* caused players to perform real-life sexual crimes.

While this debate was quickly quelled since the research cited didn't actually exist, critics of video games often point out that exposure to violent video games has a negative impact on today's youth. But there are several reasons to be leery of these claims.

One problem cited by many of the studies linking video games with aggressive behavior is the correlational nature of the results. For example, are people who play violent video games more likely to commit violent acts, or are people who commit violent acts more likely to play violent video games? Whether or not violent video games cause violent behaviors gets caught up in the classic problem of erroneously determining causation from correlation.

Additionally, many of the negative results that are so strongly associated with video games can also be correlated to exposure to other violent forms of media, including music and movies. Most reasonable parents understand that just because a film like *Saw III* is violent, it doesn't mean that kids shouldn't be allowed to see *Toy Story 3*. But often, video games get singled out for discrimination over other forms of entertainment.

Ironically, chances are that it's easier for kids to get their hands on inappropriate albums or films than on questionable video games. A 2011 report by the Federal Trade Commission actually shows that the video game industry is doing a better job than the music and movie industries at regulating the sale of age-inappropriate games to minors.

Many parents would also be surprised to learn that the vast majority of games published are approved for most ages. In 2010, 73% of all video games rated by the ESRB carried a rating of E or E10+. Only 5% were rated M for Mature (17+). But even though the number of family-friendly video games far outweighs the number of games for mature audiences only, many parents prefer to focus their attention on the small number of extremely violent games, and use their feelings about them to dismiss all video games as negative influences. But it's important to think twice before painting creative media of any sort, including video games, in its entirety with the same brush.

"As parents, we need to ask what we are rejecting before we simply write it off as a waste of time," says Dr. Yvonne Fournier, an education and child advocate. "Just because today's parents either did not have a video game system as they were growing up, or grew up with many of these systems in their infancy, does not mean that the boom in gaming we see today is worthless or bad for our children. After all, each generation had a unique set of toys to reflect the times."

Fournier also thinks that parents need to realize that their children's workplace will be different from theirs, and that playing video games can help teach many important skills.

"They can learn to think in terms of goals and strategies; to take risks without fear of attempting; and—perhaps most important for the workforce of 2020—to expect and accept failure without paralysis and know that success may take weeks or months."

Degrees in game development are already in high demand as part of the multibillion-dollar video game industry as well. *The Princeton Review* even ranks the top 10 undergraduate and graduate programs for video game design. What's more, a number of possible industry job

functions don't even require you to spend hours behind the controller, or possess programming or art skills. Kids motivated to pursue a career in the business can now aspire to work for video game companies in the fields of marketing, accounting, law, public relations, human resources and more.

According to the ESA, in 2009 the value that the entertainment software industry added to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was $4.9 billion. In 2010, computer and video game companies directly and indirectly employed more than 120,000 people in 34 states. The average salary for direct employees is $90,000, resulting in total national compensation of $2.9 billion.

Video game concepts are also increasingly being incorporated into today's education system, as interactive school programs are being created to make curriculums more participatory, immersive and fun, with video games as the model and inspiration. States such as West Virginia have even adopted "active" titles like *Dance Dance Revolution*, which get players up and moving, as part their physical education programs, in hopes of better exciting and motivating pupils.

In fact, one program in New York called *Quest to Learn* utilizes "games-based learning" which, according to its website, emphasizes active participation, strategic thinking, constant feedback and creativity, all skills taught by successful video games. While the school emphasizes that it's not a place where children spend their day playing only commercial video games, it does embrace "the principles of game design to create highly immersive, game-like learning experiences" in the classroom.

Perhaps more important than the increasingly ubiquitous role of video games in the nation's economy and educational system are the many positive physical and emotional impacts that these titles can have for families as well.

Research cited by game designer and author Jane McGonigal highlights benefits for kids who play the right kinds of games, and notes that upsides are amplified when these games are played together with family. According to McGonigal, kids who spend just 30 minutes playing a "pro-social" game like *Super Mario Sunshine* (in which you clean up pollution and graffiti around an animated island) are more likely to help friends, family and neighbors in real-life for a full week after playing the game.

A new breed of active games made possible by the motion control interfaces that devices like the Wii, Kinect for Xbox 360 and PlayStation Move provide have also led to a new type of video game that requires players to move around and exert physical activity. These games can have a great effect on the health, well-being and fitness of today's children. Studies have found that kids who play these "active games" or "exergames" as part of their daily activities burned significantly more calories at their resting metabolic rate than those who played more sedentary amusements.

For many parents, the concern isn't that their kids are playing video games at all. It's that their kids are playing too many video games, or the wrong type. Experts agree that the amount of time kids spend playing needs to be regulated, and happily, more than ever, today there are a number

of tools that parents can readily use to help keep track of usage habits and time.

Even with monitoring, though, many parents still fear their kids will become addicted to video games. But one of the key recommendations for parents who are worried that their kids are playing too many video games isn't to ban them entirely: It's to embrace them and participate. Many experts recommend that parents who are concerned that their kids play too much should spend time playing video games with their children. The suggestion may run counter to many parents' instincts, but it makes sense. Parents who do so won't just be more knowledgeable about the games their kids are playing, and how tots are interacting with them. They'll also be able to form new connections and better bonds because they are meeting their children on their own turf.

"Being invited by your children to play video games with them is like getting an invitation into their world," says Chasity Hicks, a mother of three kids (aged 6, 11 and 14) from Oklahoma. Hicks admits that she's not very good at some of the games she plays, but the point is that she has fun with her kids, and can connect with them over a shared activity that all can enjoy. "Video games have brought my family closer together," she says. "I definitely wouldn't trade anything for the memories made by my family's love of playing games."

Slowly but surely, parents are embracing the positive emotional, physical and psychological impacts of video games. With each passing year, I grow increasingly confident that the work I do to highlight positive video games for families is just as important to society as my wife's work with foster youth. And hopefully, more and more, parents will start understanding that video games can, and should, be a positive part of their family's routine.

But parents also need to take an active role in the video game purchasing process to help better monitor the games that their kids are playing. Families must further take steps to become better educated and informed about the many different types of games available today, and more capable of determining which ones are right for them, as well. Learning to effectively track, filter and manage the titles your kids play, and how and where they play them, is vital to helping gaming take on a healthy role in one's home.

Keep in mind that it's not enough to simply find out more information about the games your kids are playing alone either—parents need to actively work to find games that the whole family can enjoy. Surveys show that those who do play video games with their kids report that playing video games has helped bring their families closer together. That kind of benefit should be more than enough to persuade any concerned parent that they need to invest the time to learn more about video games.

So the next time you're in a social setting, and someone mentions the "v" word, instead of just talking about titles or trends of interest, consider also taking the opportunity to discuss the positive impacts that video games can have on families. And be sure to do so with a smile and twinkle in your eye, because—despite what critics may say—"video game" is not a bad word.

CHAPTER 1:

THE NEW RULES OF THE GAME

Commercial video games debuted roughly 40 years ago (other forms even earlier if you count 1958's *Tennis for Two*, played on an oscilloscope) and they have steadily grown in popularity over the past few decades. Today, they are a form of mainstream entertainment with production and advertising budgets that rival anything that Hollywood and the film industry produces. And sales continue to boom, with revenue now totaling nearly $18.6 billion annually according to the NPD Group. A third generation of players who've grown up with gaming has further begun to emerge, and the quality, complexity and variety of video games now available is both staggering and continuing to grow.

From a pop culture standpoint, it's nearly impossible to escape the impact that video games have had on society. Nearly everyone knows who mustachioed Nintendo mascot Mario of *Super Mario Bros.* fame is, or can recognize other popular characters such as *Donkey Kong* and *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft. Releases of major games such as *Call of Duty* and *Halo* have additionally become nationwide events, to the point that some actually consider the annual release of leading football game *Madden NFL* an excuse to take a national holiday and skip work. Any bus, train or plane experience these days invariably involves at least a few travelers playing *Angry Birds* on their iPhone, or enjoying a round of *Tetris* to go. Video game ads also regularly appear on TV, billboards, buses and more. From major cable networks to radio stations and magazines, everywhere you turn, there it seems video games are.

Computer and video games are now a part of the lives of 72% of all American homes, and contrary to popular opinion, played primarily by adults. The most frequent purchasers of video games are 41 years old, while the average player is 37 years old and has been playing for 12 years. Approximately 42% of players are women, and 29% of those over 50 years of age also like to sneak in time behind the keyboard or controller. Moreover, 76% of all games sold in 2010 were rated the equivalent of G, PG or PG-13 films. Tellingly, a majority of parents of kids who play video games say that the medium is a positive influence on their children.

"I think the biggest misconception among parents is that games are for kids," says Patricia Vance, president of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), the group responsible for setting game ratings. "Many parents today, however, have grown up with games, so I think that [perception] is diminishing, but I believe there is still this fundamental misperception that games are for children. And that's why we try hard to make sure that parents are aware of ESRB ratings and use them regularly, and the vast majority of them do."

Of course, statistics are simply a form of aggregated data, and there are both many different

types of games out there and kinds of players as well. For parents, the good news is that family-friendly titles continue to serve as one of the most important segments of gaming, and a steadily-growing one at that. Systems such as Nintendo's Wii and Wii U, and accessories like Sony's PlayStation Move and Microsoft's Kinect continue to expand the category with each passing day as well. Their focus on promoting active physical game play that is fun for the whole family, and healthy for the mind and body, has spawned a new and growing market for fitness-oriented games.

Meanwhile, science continues to highlight various positive benefits of video games, while debunking some of the worst attacks on them. The evidence is mounting through studies by universities, the U.S. military and researchers in many fields that electronic amusements offer players a shockingly large number of benefits, whether they are meant to be educational or not.

Consider a recent study from Brigham Young University, which demonstrates that girls in particular greatly benefit from playing video games together with their parents. These positive benefits include a higher-level of parent-child connectedness. Researchers further found that girls who play age-appropriate video games with their parents have lowered levels of depression, anxiety and aggressive behavior. They also exhibit a higher level of pro-social behavior toward family members.

Studies by the office of Naval Research have additionally found that video game players enjoy significant increases in perceptual and cognitive ability when compared with non-gamers. Surveys of action game players show improvements in visual perception and attention and the ability to process and act on multiple sensory inputs simultaneously—abilities that come in handy during such activities as driving a car or piloting an airplane.

In fact, rather than denounce video games, the Federation of American Scientists states that kids should play more games, not fewer. "The success of complex video games demonstrates that games can teach higher-order thinking skills such as strategic thinking, interpretative analysis, problem solving, plan formulation and execution, and adaptation to rapid change," the Federation announced in a recent report. "These are the skills U.S. employers increasingly seek in workers and new workforce entrants."

Most video games bolster self-esteem and many of them encourage cooperation and teamwork too. With the arrival of a new crop of motion-sensing controllers, video games can also provide players with a workout. Studies show that playing active video games compares favorably to walking on a treadmill at three miles per hour, in some cases providing greater exercise and energy expenditure. There are many great active play titles on the market as well, offering an equally diverse range of ways to exercise and improve your health. One in particular, *Body and Brain Connection*, challenges both the mind and the body at once, helping train players to think and coordinate their actions quickly.

With all their potential, findings are clear. Video games can be a powerful force for good in, and positive element of, a child's life if they are enjoyed in moderation, and if, as a parent, you are directly involved in your children's purchases and playing habits.

In this book, we'll provide you with all the tips, strategies and resources you need to ensure that you and your children get the best out of video games, and that games can serve as a healthy recreational activity for the whole family. We'll also equip you with the vital tools and tricks that can help you avoid the potential pitfalls associated with games and kids. With your involvement, video games can be a safe, fun and educational activity for all ages.

The good news being that today, you have more control than ever over children's video game activities. With your participation, games can become not only a treasured source of excitement and inspiration. They can also serve as a crucial instrument in your plan to actively shape a healthy future for loved ones.

Some of the basic tools you'll be able to use to ensure that games become a healthy and enriching part of your family's life include:

GAME RATINGS

In a later chapter, we'll explore the primary rating system for games—that offered by the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or ESRB. The ESRB's rating system works much like the MPAA ratings you see for movies, providing the video game rating equivalents of G, PG, PG-13 and R. See Chapter 6: Using Video Game Ratings, for more details.

ONLINE RESOURCES

There are many online resources devoted to helping parents of gamers, such as **Common Sense Media**, **FamilyFriendlyVideoGames.com** and **GamerPops**. These websites can provide information on games from a family perspective, examining whether or not games are appropriate for certain ages and offering tips and advice for playing together. They can also help you track down safe and sensible software choices that are right for your family. For a list of helpful destinations that parents and kids can visit on the Internet, see Appendix D: Online Resources For Parents.

PARENTAL CONTROLS

Parental controls are tools built into video game systems by manufacturers that let you limit the amount of time children play; restrict the titles that they have access to based on age-appropriateness or content descriptors; set boundaries on online play and social interaction; and monitor overall playing habits. See Appendix C: How to Setup and Use Parental Controls for step-by-step instructions on how to configure, operate and most effectively utilize these options.

HOUSE RULES

Establishing and enforcing house rules and healthy gaming habits is an essential step for families who purchase and play games. Whether you're just buying games for your kids, or looking for games that you can enjoy together, making sure that you're on the same page about which software is right for your family, and how to best interact with it, will help avoid conflicts. See <u>Chapter 5: Setting Ground Rules</u> to learn more about setting basic guidelines.

APPS AND SOFTWARE PROGRAMS

A growing range of apps, software programs and widgets (downloadable bite-sized desktop applications) for computers and smartphones let you block access to inappropriate online sites, make devices and systems inaccessible during certain preset hours, and/or provide various filters and safeguards that allow kids to enjoy a positive online experience. For a deeper look at the range of high-tech precautions available, see <u>Appendix T: Tools for Keeping Your Kids Safe Online</u>.

In short, there are a number of tools, resources and options in place that parents can readily tap to help make video games a positive part of their family's lives. But many parents still have no trouble finding reasons to fear video games. In the next chapter, we'll take a closer look at, and address, many of the most pressing concerns.

CHAPTER 2:

COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT VIDEO GAMES

Video games are often used as a convenient scapegoat for many of the issues affecting today's youth. Advocates for outdoor play often lament that kids spend too much time indoors playing games. Health experts say that kids need to get up off the couch and put down the video game controller and start moving around. Politicians and parental groups decry the way games allegedly desensitize children to violence, expose them to questionable content and/or promote addiction.

While it seems like blaming video games is an easy way out sometimes, it's important not to simply dismiss the questions and concerns that so many parents have raised about video games today. Many of these issues are perfectly valid and legitimate, and only through understanding what causes such apprehensions to arise, and persist, can parents discern ways to properly deal with them.

Some of the common concerns many parents have about video games include:

- **Amount of Play Time**
- **Age Appropriateness**
- **Health and Obesity**
- **Addiction**
- **Safety Concerns**
- **Violence, Aggression and Misbehavior**

Here, we'll take a closer look at each of these issues.

Amount of Play Time—How much is too much? Ask yourself: What is the appropriate amount of time children should be allowed to spend playing video games? Although this is a highly personal decision, based entirely on your family's individuals needs, most experts agree that setting limits on all screen time is important for healthy development. Many families start with a daily screen time allowance, such as one hour per day, and add or subtract time as a reward or punishment for good or bad behavior. Note that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting a child's use of TV, movies, video and computer games to no more than one or two hours a day. The National Institute on The Media & Family further suggests offering no more than an hour of video game time daily.

Whichever advice you choose to follow, beginning at a fixed base level, such as an hour per day, can make a good starting point, giving you some wiggle room to add or subtract time based on children's behavior.

Age Appropriateness—Although it seems obvious to many parents that different content is appropriate for different ages when they think about movies or music, many parents struggle with figuring how and when to introduce their kids to video games. There are not only a vast number of different video game titles available to choose from targeted at multiple age groups, but also many different ways to play that appeal to kids of different ages. Parents further disagree as to when it's appropriate to first introduce a child to gaming. Many parents allow their one and two year-olds to play games on their smartphones—a concept which may seem foreign to other families. Others wait until age four, five or six, as preschoolers begin to master the hand-eye coordination necessary to enjoy simple console and online computer games. Consider that elementary school kids who are mastering their reading skills will have even more game possibilities open up to them, as many more advanced games offer text-based instructions and on-screen tips. As kids get older, they'll also be presented with possible entry into the world of online or social network games for services like Facebook. Regardless of when you choose to make games available to children, by the time kids enter kindergarten, it's likely that they will have experienced video games through a number of different devices and platforms in one form or another.

In short, the reality is that there's no hard and fast guideline for when to introduce video games into your home. Each of the above milestones are accompanied by their own gaming rites of passage, and only you can decide when your child is developmentally, emotionally and socially ready to embrace them. Speaking with your children's teachers, caregivers and certified professionals may help you gain greater insight into appropriate timing, however.

Health and Obesity—If you are concerned that your kids are becoming "couch potatoes," you aren't alone. Parents everywhere are witnessing their kids becoming slothful or seeming not to get enough exercise. Video games are a part of the equation, as are the foods they eat and other issues that can range from social concerns, the availability of active alternatives and even deeper-seated emotional troubles. When it comes to games, the key is to balance game play with other activities, including, but not limited to, outdoor play, reading, team sports, group events and community service. Luckily, an increasing number of today's games require players to move around in order to control the gameplay. As a general rule though, many parents require kids to experience two hours of outside time for every one hour of video game time. We encourage you to experiment and adjust as needed, and,

of course, also set aside time that the entire family can spend together.

Addiction—For some kids, there is a real danger of becoming too involved in playing games, or even in living too much of their lives in the virtual world of the Internet. In rare cases, true symptoms of addiction can develop, and such kids can require direct help from their parents, peers, and professionals to regain control of a healthy, balanced life. While a change of environment and routine can sometimes be enough to break kids out of an addictive mindset, the reality is that it's hard to prohibit kids from using technology on a regular basis, since it's such an integral part of daily life. Many experts encourage parents to become more engaged in the addictive activity in an effort to better understand the problem and prospective solutions. They also encourage families to actively seek out professional help should children exhibit warning signs of addiction. Several of these warning signs, according to the Search Institute, an independent non-profit organization dedicated to creating healthy communities, and other sources, include:

- Playing for increasing amounts of time
- Lying to family and friends about video game usage
- Thinking about gaming during other activities
- Using video games to escape from real-life problems or bad feelings, as well as anxiety or depression
- Becoming restless or irritable when attempting to stop playing video games
- Skipping homework in order to play video games
- Doing poorly on a school assignment or test because of time spent playing video games

Safety Concerns—The Internet has opened worlds of opportunity to gain information, make new friends and play in amazing virtual universes with people from all over the world and different cultural backgrounds. There's much positive to say about it, but there are also some real dangers to be aware of, including identity theft, cyber-bullying and exposure to information and influences that are far different from those your family values. In fact, according to the 2011 Norton Online Family Report, children worldwide spend more than 1.6 hours per day online and almost two-thirds of them report having had some sort of negative experience. The same survey notes that only 45% of parents realize this, underscoring the need for more parental involvement and education as a starting point, followed by effective communication with kids so that they, too, can comprehend the

dangers and how to avoid them. We dig much deeper into the myriad issues facing families online in <u>Chapter 9: A Guide to Online Games</u> and <u>Chapter 10: The Dangers of Online Play</u>.

Violence, Aggression and Misbehavior—While video games are rarely the primary cause of violent or antisocial behavior, they can frequently be seen as a part of the problem, especially when conflict occurs over gaming habits. There is also some evidence that kids can become more aggressive or even violent in the short term after playing certain types of games. Note that such rises in aggression are similar to how they might behave after playing a highly active and physical sport, such as football, or how they might act after a seeing a particularly brutal movie. In general, many experts have found that video games in and of themselves do not cause kids to be any more violent than other forms of entertainment. Additionally, many times kids that are predisposed to misbehavior may inherently be drawn to certain types of darker or more violent entertainment. However, it is important for parents to identify video game and entertainment choices that won't contribute to or exacerbate behavior problems, and monitor the way in which children consume these titles. Doing so can help minimize both conflict within the home and negative impulses, as well as associated outbursts.

• • • The Latest on Violence and Video Games • • •

Perhaps rightly so, it seems that any discussion of families, kids and video games always includes at least a mention of the impact of "violence in video games."

On one side, entities in support of regulating and restricting games based on violent content often point to research that says that video games, without a doubt, lead to increased aggressive behavior as well as other negative consequences, just as other forms of violent media do.

On the other hand, advocates that consider video games a form of free speech say that not enough relevant research has been done to show any correlation between only video games and violence, and even go so far as to say that no causal link exists between the two.

So what's really the latest on the violence in video games debate? As you'll see here, the answers are surprisingly complex.

What do "noise blasts" have to do with a discussion of violent video games?

In an attempt to measure aggression and violence in individuals, researchers have to come up with ways to quantify violent outcomes without actually allowing violence.

As Brad Bushman, a professor of communication and psychology at Ohio State University, told us in a phone interview, it's impossible to perform cause and effect scientific studies on violent behavior because you can't give test subjects weapons and have them inflict harm on one another.

So, to attempt to measure this correlation, Bushman and other researchers use techniques involving "loud noise blasts," in which research subjects are able to use sound aggressively against others.

But these noise blasts themselves are the source of some controversy, as many argue that they aren't a good measure of violent behavior.

For now, though, these noise blasts seem to be the best tool that researchers have to measure the impact of violent video games.

New research using "noise blasts" is showing a link for the first time between playing violent video games and aggressive behavior.

A May 2011 study from the University of Missouri shows that the brains of violent video game players become less responsive to violence, and that this diminished brain response predicts an increase in aggression.

"Many researchers have believed that becoming desensitized to violence leads to increased human aggression. Until our study, however, this causal association had never been demonstrated experimentally," said Bruce Bartholow, associate professor of psychology.

During the study, 70 young adult participants were randomly assigned to play either a nonviolent or a violent video game for 25 minutes. Immediately afterwards, the researchers measured brain responses as participants viewed a series of neutral photos (such as a man on a bike) and violent photos (such as a man holding a gun in another man's mouth). Finally, participants competed against an opponent in a task that allowed them to give their opponent a controllable blast of loud noise. The level of noise blast the participants set for their opponent was the measure of aggression.

The researchers found that participants who played one of several popular violent games set louder noise blasts for their opponents during the competitive task than participants who played a nonviolent game.

In addition, participants that had not played many violent video games before completing the study and who then played a violent game in the lab sported a reduced brain response to the photos of violence, which researchers considered an indicator of desensitization.

"More than any other media, video games encourage active participation in violence," said Bartholow. "From a psychological perspective, video games are excellent teaching tools because they reward players for engaging in certain types of behavior. Unfortunately, in many popular video games, the behavior is violence."

Video game industry advocates still maintain that there is no link between violent video games and any real-life violence.

The Entertainment Consumers Association (ECA) uses carefully-worded statements as it stands against research that links violent behavior with violent video games. According to the ECA's website, there has "never been a causal link established between real-life violence and video game violence in any verifiable scientific study."

To support this claim, the organization points to facts such as a decreased national crime rate at the same time that video games have increased in popularity, as well as evidence that recent rampage killings could not be attributed to violent video games. Ultimately, it also argues that the research that does exist is too focused on video games and excludes the impact that other forms of violent media may have on kids.

"I'm unsure about the conclusions that can be drawn or even inferred by qualitatively looking

at the results so far and extrapolating from there," says ECA president Hal Halpin. "We would like to see more research regarding the impact of media on both children and adults. Our concern is that no research to-date has been done that is longitudinal, objective and inclusive of other forms of media (i.e. movies, music, etc.). Instead, what we've seen is study after study that examines gaming to the exclusion of all other forms of entertainment, clearly biased studies, and/or ones that do nothing more that correlate adrenaline spikes and dopamine responses to stimuli... essentially the very same as if you were to surprise someone, saying 'Boo!'"

How can some experts say that there are no negative effects associated with playing violent video games when others say the opposite?

Many experts recently, and very publicly, sided with Halpin and the Entertainment Software Association as part of the Supreme Court case Brown vs. EMA, which brought the violent video game debate to the forefront of public consciousness. The case hinged around the issue of whether or not the government should play a role in limiting the sale of video games that contain violent and mature content to minors, or if the game industry's preexisting system of self-regulation was enough. (Justices would eventually rule that the proposed regulation was unconstitutional, citing videos games' right to free speech, as provided for in the First Amendment.) Much of the debate around the case focused on the impact of violent video games on youth.

In an amicus filing known as the Millet Brief, more than 80 professors, researchers and industry experts poked holes in evidence citing a correlation between violent video games and psychological or neurological harm to minors. Problems cited included the gap between proving a correlation and causation ("Are young adolescents more hostile and aggressive because they expose themselves to media violence, or do previously hostile adolescents prefer violent media?"), methodological flaws with the studies, small sample sizes and the problems with "meta-analysis," which amplify erroneous results from previous studies.

Ohio State's Bushman, who has performed many studies on the effects of violent digital media, wondered how so many experts could sign off on a brief that contradicts what, in his opinion, 25 years of research clearly shows. He administered a study examining the credentials of all who signed the Millett brief. His conclusion is that experts who say violent video games are harmful to teens in a different amicus brief have published much more evidence supporting their claims than have experts signing the amicus brief arguing that there is no correlation.

"We took what I think is a very objective approach: We looked at the individuals on both sides of the debate and determined if they actually have expertise in the subjects in which they call themselves experts," said Bushman. "The evidence suggests that those who argue violent video games are harmful have a lot more experience and stronger credentials than those who argue otherwise."

Is it possible there are actually positive effects to playing violent video games?

In a recent interview with CBS 11 news in Dallas, economist Mike Ward from the University of Texas at Arlington discussed his study that showed that the more time children spend playing games, the less time they have to get into trouble.

"Video games not only cost money, but they also cost time," he said. "It takes a lot of time to beat the game, and so all those hours you're playing the game are hours that you're not getting into trouble."

Although the study doesn't directly debunk other analysis that playing violent video games leads to aggressive behavior, it does indicate that playing any sort of game, violent or not, leads to a reduction in crime.

There are also potential visual and sensory benefits to playing action-oriented, violent games. Studies with adults have shown that violent video games can improve several aspects of visual perception and visual attention. One recent study out of Duke that was published in the journal *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics* showed that the benefits of action video game playing extend to other senses by demonstrating "enhanced multisensory perception and integration."

Given the problems with proving a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior, is it possible that a link can ever be proven?

A recent Dutch experiment has come close to proving a causal link, according to Bushman. Again, noise blasts were used as the measure of aggression.

In the study, a group of 14-year-old boys played either a non-violent or violent video game for 20 minutes. After playing, they then performed a competitive task, and the winner was given the ability to send a noise blast to the loser's headphones, and they could choose the intensity on a scale of 1 to 10. The kids were warned that levels 8, 9 and 10 could cause permanent hearing damage, even though in reality they would not. The boys that identified with the violent characters chose to blast their opponents with levels they believed would cause permanent hearing damage.

This type of research, however, is exactly the kind that the ECA's Halpin thinks doesn't prove anything. "Exclusionary studies amount to little more than hitman research," he says. They have "less than no value, to my mind. They harm the impact that truly valuable studies will have going forward by creating bias on both sides. It's unfortunate that politics and funding play such a significant part of what directs most of these matters, but then again, you can certainly see what motivates them as a result."

What do most parents think?

According to a June 2011 poll of 502 American parents with kids age 3-17 conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 42% "never" allow children to play M-rated material, while 48% "sometimes" allow it. What's more, parents with children 13 and under are more than twice as likely as those with kids 14 and older to "never" allow their children to play M-rated games. Of the parents who "generally" or "sometimes" allow their children to play M-rated games:

- 61% say it's because their children know it's just a game and not real
- 52% say they monitor or play the games their children play
- 52% say they read the info on the package and decide if their child can play
- 46% say they believe their children can handle what's in the game without it affecting their behavior or attitudes

In a purely unscientific survey, we asked parents ourselves recently via Twitter and Facebook if there was an age younger than 18 at which they'd allow their kids to play violent video games. The result was an overwhelming no, with only a couple parents offering a lower age such as 17. We also looked at the comments on M-rated games on CommonSenseMedia.org, and found a few parents who were willing to stretch the limits as low as 13 years old for M-rated titles that they themselves deemed to be on par with what "kids would hear at school or in an intense PG-13 movie."

Keep in mind, though, that those surveyed and concluding results are not necessarily good representation of the entire population. They do, however, provide a quick snapshot of the interests of parents who are actively engaged in their kids' video game activities.

What can parents do about violent video games?

For those parents that do want to protect their kids against violent video games, there are many tools in place to make safeguarding children against exposure simpler.

- For starters, the video game industry has been recognized as a better self-regulator than the music and movie industries, thanks to its rating system. Using guidelines clearly displayed on the front and back of every video game box, the ESRB provides an overview of a game's content. Summaries include age-appropriateness ratings and descriptors that outline any questionable content contained within. While participation in the system is voluntary, practical reality demands that commercial game makers employ it, as major retailers refuse to stock products which don't sport these ratings. A recent FTC survey further showed that video game retailers did a better job at limiting minors' access to this content than did the music and movie businesses. For more information on ESRB ratings, turn to .

- Today's consoles also include built-in tools known as parental controls which allow parents to restrict access to games that carry specific ESRB ratings, monitor play habits and restrict playtime to set hours. To learn more about parental controls and how they work, see .

- Parents can also work closely with their kids to reach an agreement on ESRB ratings that are appropriate for them, since it's likely that consoles (video game systems) located at friend's houses will not carry the same content restrictions as their own. Nor, for that matter, will other parents share the same viewpoint as to which software is appropriate for children's consumption. As a starting point for conversation, turn to .

Although it seems like the issue of whether or not exposure to violent video games has a negative effect on kids should be cut-and-dried, it's a complex and oftentimes convoluted debate. Concerns revolve around issues such as direct cause-and-effect and research methodology, including studies that even present arguments in favor of violent video games for kids. As it turns out, this is far from a simple issue to resolve, even for the most knowledgeable and informed of experts.

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In the end, for parents overwhelmed with concerns about video games, it may help to know that literally tens of millions of people play games regularly and safely every day. Certainly, significant worries do exist, but they don't have to be reasons to dismiss video games completely out of hand. Case in point: Despite the obvious dangers, many perfectly well-adjusted parents don't let the possibility of identity theft, robbery or kidnapping deter them from participating on social networks like Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn.

Where video games and kids are concerned, education and engagement is always key, and by simply reading this book and learning more about the subject, you're already on the right path. But it's also important to understand that when it comes to games and other cutting-edge technologies, you and your kids have legitimate reason to feel like you are speaking a different language at times. As you'll see shortly, in some ways, you very well may be.

CHAPTER 3:

SPEAKING GAMERS' LANGUAGE

One author with excellent advice for parents and teachers is Marc Prensky, an educator who argues persuasively for the role of games as learning tools. His book, *Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning!* is full of good advice and strategies for parents when dealing with video games.

One of Prensky's most insightful observations is that the modern digital culture has its own citizens, culturally distinct from the pre-digital population. He calls them Digital Natives. Many parents, however, are Digital Immigrants—visitors to a foreign land with a language all its own.

Similarly, even if you have Twitter and Facebook accounts and refuse to be parted from your BlackBerry or MacBook, it's safe to say that, unless you are also a gamer, you may have some communication gaps with the game players in your family. Misunderstanding can therefore occur regardless of whether or not you're a stranger to the digital world. Learning to communicate and comprehend some of the cornerstones and values of the "gamer language" that members of your household employ will prove very useful in resolving these conflicts. We'll look deeper into effective communications in the next few chapters.

Ultimately, communication between gamers and non-gamers is critical to finding harmony within families as well as helping kids interpret the sometimes controversial or confusing messages that certain video games can send. The good news is that you can make a difference. Are you ready to try a different approach?

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LEARN

Prensky believes that the skills needed in a rapidly changing technological world are precisely the skills being learned by video game players today. Most importantly, enthusiasts are learning to think on multiple levels, and they do it voluntarily.

In *Everything Bad is Good for You*, author Steven Johnson points out that video games are "hard." They require players to grasp and interpret unstated rules, make order out of many interlocking "fractal" goal-reward structures, focus deeply on short-term challenges as they simultaneously pursue long-term strategies, and use intuition to understand the way the game works.

No wonder kids get bored at school, where the information is offered in linear bits and facts and theories, where the motivation is weak or missing, and the reward is usually to avoid failure and punishment.

In contrast, that same student may be playing *Angry Birds* on the bus to and from school,

meeting fun and interesting challenges that require an intuitive understanding of basic physics while also enjoying healthy stress relief. After getting home, maybe he or she plays a little *Minecraft*, and finds him or herself exploring, solving puzzles and interacting with others. Finally, after doing homework, perhaps they check in with their friends from all over the real world in massively multiplayer online title *World of Warcraft*, cooperatively playing and using complex strategies to accomplish in-game goals, thereby gaining a sense of accomplishment, teamwork and camaraderie.

As you can see, this same child who struggles in school is thriving in the digital world, learning and applying many of the same skills that they can't grasp in the classroom. In most school curricula, the challenges, motivations and pure enjoyment felt from task completion clearly cannot compare to that provided by video games.

WHY "REAL LIFE" MAY BE PART OF THE LANGUAGE BARRIER

While you may be speaking a slightly different language than these individuals as a Digital Immigrant, or merely as a non-gamer, you too can learn to listen and to communicate with the Natives. As you converse with them, you might be surprised at what you can learn while simultaneously easing the tensions caused by cultural and language barriers.

For example, if you speak to the gamers in your life, you can quickly find out that they naturally draw clear lines between reality and fantasy. But that doesn't mean that saying something like "you need to participate more in real life" will have the same meaning to them as it does to you.

For example, video games are clearly not part of "real life"—or are they? Yes, games are a form of fantasy entertainment. However, it is also clear that video games are a very real part of the real life of today's Digital Natives, in the sense that they occupy so much of players' time and imaginations. Moreover, when kids play games together in real life, or in multiplayer games where participants are often playing with dozens or even thousands of other live participants, the gameplay itself may be fantasy, but the actual human interactions are very real. In the case of multiplayer gaming, they can also lead to lifelong friendships or even to romance and marriage.

It might be helpful to consider what "real life" is today, compared with what it was just a few years ago. Many perfectly well-adjusted and productive modern adults spend a great deal of time sending emails, engaging in videoconferencing, updating and reading Twitter feeds, and checking in on Foursquare. Considering the hundreds of millions of people who also play games on social networking sites like Facebook—including 43-year-old women, the most common players of social games, according to software maker PopCap—the fact that young people find enjoyment in similar activities should come as no surprise.

Moreover, games aren't just for kids. Today, major companies use games in advertising and branding, while others such as IBM, Cisco and Hilton Hotels even use games for training managers and corporate leaders. What is "real life" then in today's world except a great deal of digital activity for business and leisure? How radically different is that from what kids do when they play, learn from and enjoy their game experiences?

Looking at this "real life" example, it's clear to see that although the language between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants differs, the hopes and desires remain very similar. Learning to empathize and identify with the gamers in your life can help families ease tensions and better incorporate video games as a positive part of their everyday lives.

CHAPTER 4:

THE BENEFITS OF VIDEO GAMES

In addition to understanding the many real concerns that today's parents have with video games, it's also worth considering the benefits and positive aspects that contemporary interactive entertainment choices provide.

Certainly, many popular titles today are M-rated and intended for discerning adults, given the average age of today's gaming audience. But the vast majority of games can be played by a broad range of ages and still manage to be fun and engaging without resorting to foul language or violence.

"Games can definitely be good for the family," says the ESRB's Patricia Vance. "There's plenty of selection. Oftentimes I think parents feel that they're not because video games in the media are portrayed as violent, and hardcore games tend to get the lion's share of publicity. But parents also need to be comforted knowing that E for Everyone is by far largest category [of software]. Nearly 60% of the almost 1700 ratings we assigned last year were E for Everyone, which means there's a huge selection of games available that are appropriate for all ages."

In fact, most video games do have quite a few redeeming qualities—even those with violent content. All games can and do have benefits for players, and in a number of different and sometimes surprising ways.

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

A recent study from the Education Development Center and the U.S. Congress-supported Ready To Learn (RTL) Initiative found that a curriculum that involved digital media such as video games could improve early literacy skills when coupled with strong parental and teacher involvement. Interestingly, the study focused on young children, and 4- and 5-year-olds who participated showed increases in letter recognition, sounds association with letters, and understanding basic concepts about stories and print.

The key for this study was having high-quality educational titles, along with parents and teachers who were equally invested in the subject matter. That way kids could discuss and examine the concepts that they were exposed to in the games. Also interesting is the value that video games are proven to have even for very young players. A study by the Education Department Center further found that low-income children are "better prepared for success in kindergarten when their preschool teachers incorporate educational video and games from the Ready to Learn Initiative."

Older children such as teens and tweens can benefit from gameplay as well. Even traditional games teach kids basic everyday skills, according to Ian Bogost, associate professor at the Georgia

Institute of Technology and founder of software maker Persuasive Games. "Look at *World of Warcraft*: You've got 11-year-olds who are learning to delegate responsibility, promote teamwork and steer groups of people toward a common goal."

Games that are designed to help teach are having an impact on college-age pupils as well. Following a recent 3D virtual simulation of a US/Canadian border crossing, wherein students assumed the role of guards, Loyalist College in Ontario reported that the number of successful test scores increased from 56% to 95%.

EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS FOR ADULTS

Surprise: Adults can learn something and benefit from video games, too.

As mentioned earlier, research underway by the Office of Naval Research (ONR) indicates that video games can help adults process information much faster and improve their fundamental abilities to reason and solve problems in novel contexts. In fact, results from the ONR study show that video game players perform 10% to 20% higher in terms of perceptual and cognitive ability than non-game players.

Like Dr. Ezriel Kornel explains on WebMD.com, playing certain video games (e.g. *Brain Age* or *Guitar Hero*) can also improve hand-eye coordination, enhance split-second decision making and even, potentially, boost auditory perception. Just playing isn't enough, though, says Dr. Kornel. The key is that you have to be improving each time you play, because in order to improve you have to be learning.

"Anytime the brain is in learning mode," Kornel says, "there are new synapses forming between the neurons. So you're creating thousands of connections that can then be applied to other tasks as well."

Someday, a video game might even save your life, as games are already benefitting students and practitioners in the medical field too.

A study published in the February edition of *Archives of Surgery* says that surgeons who regularly play video games are generally more skilled at performing laparoscopic surgery.

In addition, according to Dr. Jeffrey Taekman, the director of Duke University's Human Simulation and Patient Safety Center, "serious games and virtual environments are the future of education."

Besides offering medical students the ability to practice on patients (which is much safer in the digital world), simulations offer health care providers several upsides. Chief among them, Taekman says, are the capability to make choices, see results and apply information immediately.

Beyond allowing for greater scalability and group collaboration than traditional classrooms, every decision made in a virtual world, he continues, can be tracked and benchmarked against best practices, then standardized or archived for others' review. "The traditional textbook will soon become passé," he suggests. "Gaming platforms will offer an interactive way for students to learn and apply information in context."

IMPROVED MULTI-TASKING

Other carefully-designed studies have also shown that action video games can improve several aspects of brain activity, including multitasking. According to studies by Daphne Bavelier, a professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester, video gamers show real-world improvements on tests of attention, accuracy, vision and multitasking after playing certain titles.

"If you think about it, the attentional and working memory demands of video games can be much greater than other tasks," says Michael Stroud, a professor of psychology at Merrimack College. "Consider *Pac-Man* as an example. In *Pac-Man*, you must navigate your character through a spatial layout while monitoring the separate paths of four additional objects (the ghosts), while keeping the overall goal of clearing the small pellets in memory, as well as keeping track of the remaining large pellets."
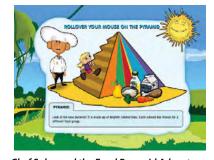
"Think about how this may apply to skills such as driving," he continues. "When you drive your car, you are faced with a constantly changing environment in the road, not to mention several other distractions that compete for attention that reside in the car. At the same time, you are attempting to navigate through the environment to reach a goal."

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Games with broad appeal that are easy to grasp can additionally help many families play together, and better bridge the gap between generations. Consider a title like hip-wiggling simulation *Just Dance*, which can have young kids dancing alongside their grandparents.

There are also many games that have positive social messages that encourage families to be a force for good. In a series of experiments published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers found that participants who had just played a "pro-social" game in which characters must work together to help each other out as compared to those who had just played a "neutral" game (e.g. *Tetris*) were more likely to engage in helpful behaviors. Examples included assisting in a situation involving an abusive boyfriend, picking up a box of pencils or even volunteering to participate in more research.

So-called "serious games," specifically designed to teach and inform, are also having an impact on the world. Titles like the United Nations' *Food Force* teach kids about real-life issues, humanitarianism and the practical challenges facing governments and private organizations today. In the game, children must complete six different missions that reflect the real-life obstacles faced by the World Food Programme in its emergency responses.

Chef Solus and the Food Pyramid Adventure

Other games, like Nourish Interactive's online *Chef Solus and the Food Pyramid Adventure,* teach kids about the benefits of healthy eating habits, while still more highlight pressing geopolitical and social issues, e.g. the *Global Conflicts* series.

Upsides can even extend into the physical world. Consider Facebook game **Ecotopia**. In summer 2011, players of the popular social game met a challenge from its creators and planted 25,000 trees in the game world in 25 days, leading the game's developer to plant 25,000 trees in real life.

CAREER BENEFITS

Future career choices for today's tots will no doubt be influenced by technology in a way that is difficult for many parents to imagine too. Skills learned and honed playing home console and video games, as well as mobile gaming apps, will undoubtedly be very valuable to students in the workforce of 2025.

As mentioned earlier, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) has proclaimed that kids need more, not less, video game play. They argue that video games hold the potential to help address one of America's most pressing problems—preparing students for an increasingly competitive global market.

"The success of complex video games demonstrates that games can teach higher-order thinking skills such as strategic thinking, interpretative analysis, problem solving, plan formulation and execution, and adaptation to rapid change," the Federation announced in a 2010 report. "These are the skills U.S. employers increasingly seek in workers and new workforce entrants." Games are increasingly being used to educate and instruct workers around the globe by governments, trade bodies and the world's largest corporations as well. From Cisco Systems' *The Cisco Mind Share Game*, which facilitates network certification, to the US Department of Justice's *Incident Commander,* in which emergency responders practice coordinating disaster relief efforts, the number of practical examples continues to grow. In fact, a recent study by the Entertainment Software Association found that 70% of major domestic employers have utilized interactive software and games for training purposes, and nearly eight out of 10 plan on doing so by 2013.

Going forward, in addition to polishing your resume and interview skills, who knows? You may even want to brush up on your button-mashing abilities.

ENCOURAGING COORPERATION & TEAMWORK

Many games today also emphasize the cooperative aspects of gameplay, in which two or more players need to work together in order to reach a common goal. For instance, games like *Lego Star Wars* or *Kirby's Epic Yarn* are enhanced by having players cooperate to solve in-game puzzles.

Massively multiplayer games such as *LEGO Universe* and *Lord of the Rings Online* further offer added depth, atmosphere and enjoyment by allowing players to band together and work as a

team in order to complete certain quests or defeat especially tricky opponents. Game industry analysts such as DFC Intelligence actually predict that video game revenue will reach nearly $70 billion by 2015, thanks in large part to these online, cooperative, subscription-based games that can be played together. Small wonder top titles like *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Titan* (the next MMO from Blizzard, the company that created *World of Warcraft*) continue to resonate so strongly with millions worldwide.

Even the way that games are made can encourage teamwork. At Washburn University in Kansas, students study the game development process as a way to build teamwork and collaborative skills.

"It taught me to work in a group," said Washburn student Adam Bideau of the program in a recent interview with the *Washburn Review*. "Video games are not created by just one person and they require you to work well with others. You have to pool everyone's talents together in order to produce the required product."
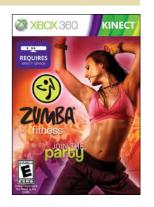
BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Researchers from McGill University's Department of Psychology have created and tested computer games that are specifically designed to help people enhance their self-acceptance. The researchers drew on their experience playing repetitive computer games and devised novel counterparts that would help people feel more positive about themselves.

Even games that aren't specifically designed to do so can still help kids feel a sense of achievement, based simply on the basic principles involved in what makes a good game. Through puzzles, exploration and discovery, players learn to succeed in ways that some researchers say our brains actually prefer. Most games are designed to introduce a concept, such as jumping, and then provide players with an opportunity to master it. Players are then free to explore and utilize and achieve success with this new skill, growing in self-confidence all the while.

PROMOTING EXERCISE

All parents know that kids need a healthy combination of physical and mental exercise. Happily, today's motion-controlled games for Microsoft's Xbox 360 Kinect, Nintendo's Wii and Wii U, and Sony's PlayStation Move help kids get both kinds of workouts at the same time.

Better yet, people of all ages are finding them a more approachable way to stay physically fit. While many shy away from exercise because they see it as an activity that isn't enjoyable, organizations like the American Heart Association now cite, and even recommend, video games as a fun and entertaining way to

enjoy physical activity.

Upsides of active play are considerable too. A study reported in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* of 39 Boston middle-school children who played with six different interactive gaming systems found that the games "compared favorably with walking on a treadmill at three miles per hour, with four out of the six activities resulting in higher energy expenditure."

Organizations supporting individuals of all ages and interests are additionally using active games to help get people up and moving. Nursing homes, cruise ships and even after-school programs all now employ active video games in some form to help stimulate both the mind and body.

The good news: People seem to be enjoying active play more than ever. Healthy diversions such as *Wii Fit* and *Zumba Fitness* continue to be some of the most popular and best-selling games year in and out.

GROUP AND SOCIAL PLAY

Video games can also have some very important effects on family relationships, and deserve to be thought of as something that can—and should—be played together.

It's always seemed obvious to families that activities like playing board games, make-believe, or even making music together could strengthen the family bond. But many parents view video games as a solitary, sedentary, time-wasting activity, when the truth is that video games have in fact emerged as a viable option for family game time that can potentially offer great benefits to families who are willing to enjoy them together. You won't be alone if you do decide to take the plunge either. According to the ESA, 45% of parents play computer and video games with their children at least weekly, an increase from 36% in 2007.

Families that embrace playing video games as part of their everyday life are likely to find themselves enjoying a greater sense of cohesion and communication than families who still view video games as an idle, meaningless and solitary pursuit. For information on planning your own family gaming sessions, see .

Moving, thinking, cooperating, helping, learning, empathizing, growing, seeing the world from other perspectives… video games can help kids and families do all these things and more. So talk to your friends, do the research and seek out games that your family likes to play and that you as parents are comfortable with, then consider making play a part of your regular routine. Chances are, you won't just have a great time—you'll also make lasting memories and connections with your kids while doing so.

Armed with the facts, you may feel that you and your family are ready to dive headfirst into the vast and wonderful world of gaming. However, as you'll see in the next chapter, it's a good idea to set a few ground rules before taking the plunge.

We'll examine each of these questions in-depth more below, and have provided a worksheet and questionnaire at the end of this book (see <u>Appendix U: Discussion Guide and Checklist</u>) which includes these questions and more to help your family establish its own guidelines.

What role will games play within our household?

Are games expected to be family affairs, where the whole clan is involved? Or are they alright to be enjoyed as solitary pursuits, where the gamers in your life can escape from other elements of the daily routine? Before you answer these questions, consider that there is always room for balance. How often have you spent hours reading your favorite books, blissfully alone and privately lost in the story? Needless to say, there is a place for solitary engagement as well as for family fun. Perhaps the answer to this question isn't all or nothing, but rather some balance between group engagement and personal downtime. Of course, in some families, kids play together, in which case there is room for even more interaction, and today's games offer a great opportunity for the whole family to be involved. However you choose to allow games to be consumed though, remember to always do so in moderation.

What benefits would we like to see come from play?

Current research suggests that video game players are actually learning and experiencing a lot of positive things during play sessions. Douglas Gentile, a researcher from Iowa State University, writes that there are at least five ways in which video games affect players simultaneously: Amount of play, content of play, game context, structure of the game, and the mechanics of gameplay. Each of these aspects can have positive benefits.

As detailed earlier, in addition to the obvious eye-hand coordination improvements gained through sustained play, studies show that video game players are actively increasing their critical thinking abilities, learning to become problem solvers and in many cases building skills in areas such as resource management, financial planning and team building while spending time behind the controller.

Video game play is also healthy for the imagination, and it gives players a sense of accomplishment or mastery, something as special to your kids as whatever was especially important to you when you were young. Being good at video game playing is socially acceptable, and in many cases celebrated, among young people today. And as they grow and move into careers and families of their own, many kids will continue to enjoy video game play while others may stop playing altogether.

What are our family's top worries and concerns?

There are always dangers inherent in our kids' activities, and it's easy to worry when our kids spend a lot of time doing something. When playing sports, there is the danger of injury. If children

read too much, they might damage their eyesight, or become anti-social. If they play video games, won't they become violent or addicted?

Whatever your concerns, it's best to identify them clearly. Whatever it is you most fear about video games, the suggestions in this book can help you better avoid or cope with their occurrence—if you are willing to get involved.

Where should game play happen?

Do you prefer to see video games played in public spaces like your living room, where you can actively monitor usage, or is it alright for kids to play alone in their rooms? We recommend restricting all computer, video game and cell phone usage to common areas. However, if you are comfortable with your kids playing in their own rooms or on different levels of the home (e.g. in the basement playroom), you may want to follow some of the suggestions in this book to keep lines of communication with them open. Doing so will help alleviate worries and ensure that you can more effectively guide them and enforce house rules.

What kinds of games or content are acceptable?

Game content varies from very safe and cartoonish to very edgy, violent and even frightening. As such, it's imperative that you be acutely aware of the types of titles your children are interested in playing and consuming, or potentially exposed to via friends and family members. The need for active parental involvement in the research, purchasing and play processes, as well as establishment and maintenance of a healthy and balanced home life, cannot be understated. Only by making a personal commitment to—and taking a direct, informed and ongoing role in—pursuing these endeavors can you ensure that video games exert a positive influence.

Note that some kids who are in emotional turmoil and confusion may turn to inappropriate games, or play games excessively, even to the point of exhibiting signs of addiction. With communication and engagement you should be able to help any child in such a situation, identify the problem before it gets out of hand, and, as needed, effectively recommend professional help. The more you talk to your gamers about how they are consuming specific games, and assume a proactive role in understanding these titles and how they're played, the more you'll be able to determine if some kinds of content are acceptable or not.

Is online play okay?

Online gameplay is very common today, and it can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. It's also important to note that "online" doesn't just refer to gameplay that's happening on the computer. Nearly all of today's home console systems, portable handheld gaming devices, and smartphones offer some sort of connected, online experience.

One obvious concern about online play is safety. There are certainly dangers associated with

online predators—people who may try to make contact with kids and victimize them—and "cyber bullies," people who tease, taunt and bully others online and via various forms of social media. Although online predators are rare in online games, such people do exist. Cyber-bullying is somewhat more common, but there are steps you can take to help your kids cope with this problem. For more on these and other common safety issues associated with online gaming, see <u>Chapter 10: The Dangers of Online Play</u>.

Players may also get too involved in the online social structure of a specific game, wanting to play—in fact "needing" to play—a lot more than you might find appropriate. That is because, once they become involved with other real players online, they often form a society within the game, and your gamers are now part of that online society. They want to stay involved, and in some cases, they have accepted responsibilities within that society (often by way of participation within in-game organizations consisting of large groups of players called "guilds"). This is not an altogether bad thing, but it can be a problem when your gamer says something along the lines of "I can't go out to dinner tonight, Mom. I have to raid with the guild." (Translated into plain English, "raid with the guild" means "I have to fulfill a role as part of a group effort by a large number of my friends, who are counting on me to help them accomplish a sizable task that none of us could accomplish alone… It's really important to me.")

Once again, communicating with players is the best way to know what's going on and protect your kids. Even though these problems—and other notable concerns such as identity theft, harassment and sharing of inappropriate content—do exist, they are still rare, and hardly a reason to stop your kids from enjoying online play. However, for your own peace of mind, knowing what's going on with your kids as relates to the Internet and educating them about hazards to look out for will help.

Another potential drawback to unsupervised online play is that many games, especially free to play online games, provide opportunities to purchase items and services using real-world money. This means that children could use your credit card to make purchases without your knowing it. Education is important: To minimize potential pitfalls, take time to familiarize yourself with how such games operate up-front, and discuss these principles with your children before allowing them to play online. Clear communication and setting boundaries over what is acceptable and what is not can prevent the unauthorized and unexpected use of your credit, and the real threat of cutting off the game entirely should be sufficient to prevent kids from abusing their privileges. Today's home consoles and smartphones also have password-protected systems in place to protect against these types of purchases, as well as prohibit usage entirely or limit it to only authorized times.

On the flip side though, there are also many benefits to online play. There is the social aspect, in which players learn from each other, take on responsibilities toward each other, and also learn to share experiences and even tangible "goods" with each other. Players can also learn to work as

teammates, each assuming specific roles as groups join forces to accomplish common goals for the benefit of all. In some cases, they even learn leadership skills. Online game players may further broaden their outlook and meet amazing people that they never would have encountered any other way through the hobby, much to their lasting lifelong gain.

At what age is video gaming appropriate?

Because video games have much to teach, especially in this modern era, there's really no reason to prevent younger children from playing them. The key is to find age-appropriate games. In some cases, younger children will have older siblings who are playing more mature games already. In these instances, it may be difficult to prevent the younger ones from being influenced—and even wanting to play—some of those games. Again, with supervision and communication, this may not become a major problem, but it always helps to take an active interest in children's interests and play habits. That way, you'll be better equipped to steer them towards alternate games that they will like—games more appropriate for their developmental or educational level. Whatever the age at which kids begin to play though, insofar as young gamers are concerned, it's important to set boundaries as relate to time limits, play habits and in-game content. For more advice on establishing ground rules, see Chapter 7: Guidelines for Healthy Gaming.

CHAPTER 6:

USING VIDEO GAME RATINGS

By now, you should have a good grasp on the importance of background research and becoming an educated parent. So let's take a look at one of the key tools at a parent's disposal, which is attached to every store-bought video game: The ESRB rating.

In 1994, largely in response to political pressure over what was seen as a rising tide of realistic violence in video games, the video game industry created the Entertainment Software Rating Board, commonly known as the ESRB.

The ESRB has created a system that works much like the MPAA system's does for movie ratings to rate video games for age appropriateness based on content such as violence, language and sexual themes. There are seven ratings categories, which are printed on the outside of every game box sold at retail with the exception of the RP (Rating Pending) category which is found on promotional and marketing materials prior to a game's release. On the front of the box, parents can find a highly-visible symbol, which provides the general age rating category determined by the ESRB. On the back of the box, parents can find content descriptors which provide an indication of the types of content in the game that factored into the rating assigned.

But the most comprehensive ESRB ratings information is available on the ESRB website—**www.esrb.org**. Here parents can find "rating summaries," which provide a brief but detailed explanation of the game and the content that contributed to its rating, including specific examples. Those equipped with Internet-ready mobile devices can also surf to the organization's mobile website, **m.esrb.org**.

The ESRB has made it very simple for tech-savvy parents to access more detailed rating summaries with a handy smartphone app as well, which allows parents to simply take a picture of the game box in order to be provided with additional information. The app is available as a free download for **iPhone**, **Android** and **Windows Phone** devices. You can access the application by searching for "ESRB" on your device's app store or marketplace to download it directly to your device.

From the ESRB website (**www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp**), here are the seven rating categories and symbols:

EARLY CHILDHOOD: Titles rated **EC (Early Childhood)** have content that may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Games in this category contain no material that parents would find inappropriate.

EVERYONE: Titles rated **E (Everyone)** have content that may be suitable for ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/ or infrequent use of mild language.

EVERYONE 10+: Titles rated **E10+ (Everyone 10 and older)** have content that may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.

TEEN: Titles rated **T (Teen)** have content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling, and/or infrequent use of strong language.

MATURE: Titles rated **M (Mature)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.

ADULTS ONLY: Titles rated **AO (Adults Only)** have content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.

RATING PENDING: Titles listed as **RP (Rating Pending)** have been submitted to the ESRB and are awaiting final rating. This symbol appears only in advertising or promotional materials created prior to the official rating's assignment.

In addition to the symbols, which are printed on the front of each box, specific content descriptors are also printed on the back of each video game package.

ESRB CONTENT DESCRIPTORS:

Alcohol Reference - Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages

Animated Blood - Discolored and/or unrealistic depictions of blood

Blood - Depictions of blood

Blood and Gore - Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts

Cartoon Violence - Violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters— may include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted

Comic Mischief - Depictions or dialogue involving slapstick or suggestive humor

Crude Humor - Depictions or dialogue involving vulgar antics, including "bathroom" humor

Drug Reference - Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs

Fantasy Violence - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life

Intense Violence - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict— may involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death

Language - Mild to moderate use of profanity

Lyrics - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use in music

Mature Humor - Depictions or dialogue involving "adult" humor, including sexual references

Nudity - Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity

Partial Nudity - Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity

Real Gambling - Player can gamble, including betting or wagering real cash or currency

Sexual Content - Non-explicit depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including partial nudity

Sexual Themes - References to sex or sexuality

Sexual Violence - Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts

Simulated Gambling - Player can gamble without betting or wagering real cash or currency

Strong Language - Explicit and/or frequent use of profanity

Strong Lyrics - Explicit and/or frequent references to profanity, sex, violence, alcohol or drug use in music

Strong Sexual Content - Explicit and/or frequent depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity

Suggestive Themes - Mild provocative references or materials

Tobacco Reference - Reference to and/or images of tobacco products

Use of Drugs - The consumption or use of illegal drugs

Use of Alcohol - The consumption of alcoholic beverages

Use of Tobacco - The consumption of tobacco products

Violence - Scenes involving aggressive conflict. May contain bloodless dismemberment

Violent References - References to violent acts

HOW DOES THE ESRB ASSIGN ITS RATINGS?

ESRB ratings are assigned by a panel of trained game rating experts who review taped footage of video games and deliberate as to appropriate rating assignments.

"Companies all submit games to us in multiple forms," says ESRB president Patricia Vance. "They first have to fill out a very extensive written submission form about what's in the game spanning all the categories of content that we know parents are interested in. They talk about frequency, they talk about the types of depictions and the intensity of the depiction. But along with the written materials (including scripts and lyric sheets) there's also a DVD that gets submitted that captures all of the pertinent content in the game, both from a ratings standpoint and within the context of overall gameplay."

Companies must be forthcoming with the content of their game, since it's impractical for the ESRB to rate games by trying to play every minute of every game released. "It's up to the publishers to fully disclose all of the pertinent content that they've described in the written form and really put it on a DVD so that our raters can actually experience what a gamer may experience," says Vance. "There's no incentive not to provide us with all the content. First of all, from a consumer standpoint, if the rating is incorrect, we're misinforming consumers. And that's their customer ultimately, so that's not good. We also have an enforcement system, so we playtest games after they ship to make sure all the pertinent content has been disclosed."

And if companies do omit something, the ESRB can carry a heavy hammer, with the power to fine companies up to $1 million and impose corrective actions that can include re-labeling or even recalling product if deemed necessary.

IS THE ESRB ENOUGH?

The mission of the ESRB is to help parents know what kind of content is in the games that they or their children purchase. The organization doesn't make any judgments on a game's fun factor or difficulty, but only as to whether or not the content is appropriate for certain age groups.

ESRB ratings aren't perfect, however, and they really are meant to be just one part of the puzzle, as the organization itself admits. Vance believes that "moderation is key in all media, whether you're watching television or you're on the Internet, and certainly with kids, your role as a parent is to ensure that your kids are getting a balanced diet, as relates to media or the food they eat."

As she explains, "You need to ensure that there's enough different variety of stimuli that's healthy for a child growing up. Kids need to get outside and they need to socialize in real life, not just in the virtual world. And I think it's all about moderation. To me, the biggest risk with games is ensuring that kids are getting a balanced diet."

Vance also has additional suggestions when it comes to doing your homework. "The tip that we always recommend to parents is that it really boils down to three things. One is to check the rating and make sure that the game is appropriate for your child. The second thing is to go beyond the ratings: Make sure that you're familiar with the content, above and beyond what our ratings indicate. Obviously, our rating summaries are a great resource for parents to find out what's actually in the game above and beyond the rating information on the box. But also be certain to check the box over, look at the screenshots and read the product description. You can go to many different websites and find trailers of the games too, so you can really visualize and identify what actual content is in the game. Also read reviews. There are a lot of different sources for parents, so be sure to go beyond the ratings. And then the third and final tip is to check out the parental controls offered by your consoles and handheld devices."

CRITICISMS OF THE ESRB

It may come as no surprise, then, that the most important failure of the ratings system occurs when parents don't pay attention to what their kids are purchasing or playing—in other words, when they're not sufficiently involved. Many M-rated titles are actually purchased by parents for their children. With increasing numbers of young parents playing video games, it's also possible that they are purchasing M-rated titles to play themselves and bringing these titles into the household, but ultimately kids gain access to them as well.

While critics claim that younger children are easily gaining access to M-rated titles on a regular basis though, it's a much-debated allegation. According to the Federal Trade Commission, video game retailers actually do a better job at restricting minors' access to mature content than music and movie vendors.

Other critics claim that some information should be included about simulated criminal activities on game boxes, specifically in instances where young players can engage in criminal actions without consequences. Another problem some see is that the rating system is voluntary, and doesn't necessarily apply to games obtained from the Internet or other non-retail sources.

The organization has recently taken steps toward addressing this latter concern with a new process designed to review and rate downloadable games, such as those offered by online services like Xbox Live, PlayStation Network and WiiWare. However, this solution has opened the agency to new criticism, since ratings are established based on information submitted by the publisher in response to a special multiple-choice questionnaire, and submission of a DVD containing disclosed content. Even though content is eventually reviewed by an ESRB staffer after release, many still perceive the process as an opportunity for developers to "game the system" to achieve ratings that they find more desirable.

Despite the many theories as to why some kids are still able to access content that the ESRB has determined is unsuitable for their age group, regardless of method, major console manufacturers

including Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft have all instituted measures to help safeguard children. Each manufacturer's systems now include parental controls that allow parents to restrict access to inappropriate games. To find step-by-step instructions on how to access and configure these tools, see Appendix C: How to Setup and Use Parental Controls.

WWW.ESRB.ORG

CHAPTER 7:

GUIDELINES FOR HEALTHY GAMING

Having previously considered the issues that are important to you about which video games you find acceptable, and when, where and in which contexts play is appropriate, it's time to set some guidelines for how they can be used in your home. Creating and clearly communicating these rules to your children will be crucial to establishing and maintaining harmony in day-to-day family interaction.

While the specifics may differ between parents and households, note that some ground rules always remain constant. When establishing and enforcing gaming guidelines, one cannot underscore the importance of three core principles—empathy, balance and moderation—as well as the omnipresent need to do one's research. Likewise, though sticking to the script can frequently prove trying and difficult, and once in a while we all have to color outside the lines, it helps to establish routines, and stick to them. Take heart, even when virtual times seem tough: Soon enough, the principles and values you've worked so hard to instill will become second-nature.

Above all else, never forget the importance of keeping lines of communication open. Dialogue is a two-way street, and the best relationships stem from frank and honest discussion. By creating a culture of openness and understanding, being sensitive to kids' needs and taking a moment to step back, breathe deeply and discuss issues in depth with a cool head, you'll do your family a kindness. Allowing you and your children to engage in more effective discourse, and enjoy a healthier relationship when it comes to games and gaming habits, a positive home environment can help parents and kids alike better comprehend the importance of playing by the rules.

Here are some suggested tips on how to begin building a safe, fun and enriching video game household:

SET CLEAR LIMITS AND EXPECTATIONS

Earlier, we talked about the importance of setting time limits on gameplay. But just as important as setting time limits is the need to enforce them, and make sure that everyone agrees to the rules up-front. Begin by having a frank discussion with your children and explaining what is expected of them. Make it clear that homework must be done, grades kept up and the lawn mowed (or whatever other chores they regularly perform completed around the house) if video games are to remain part of the daily routine. Kids need to not only understand that playing games is fine as long as it's within set boundaries, but also that is a privilege that can be revoked if they don't maintain a sense of responsibility in their lives.

Explaining personal responsibility can be difficult. But it may help to discuss your own obligations and put issues in context by asking sprouts to imagine what life would be like if you played video games all the time instead of doing what you do to maintain the family, whether it is earning money or keeping up the household. Remind them that they have responsibilities too, and that video games are not their primary job in life, but rather their leisure-time activity.

You may also wish to look at setting more specific limits as well:

• **Off Hours**—In addition to setting daily time limits, you may want to designate certain times of day as "out of bounds" for game playing, such as during periods typically reserved for important activities like homework or family dinners. Play should also cease at least one hour before bedtime to give children time to settle down and enjoy restful sleep.

• **Acceptable Games**—You may also want to limit kids to games that you have determined are appropriate for their age group, or individual developmental level. This is especially relevant for younger children. Such decisions are entirely subjective, and will vary from one household to another, but it should always be possible to find games that are appropriate for any age group. You may get some pushback from your children, especially older ones, who want to play certain controversial games that they've heard about or that their friends are already playing. Consider the merits of their arguments and even research the games they are mentioning. You may find that they are acceptable once you understand their given subject matter, context or execution. Or you may find specific reasons to tell them why they can't play these games, as well as discover equally entertaining alternatives that you're more comfortable steering them towards instead.

• **Online Safety**—Depending on your level of comfort, restricting access to the Internet, and online multiplayer connectivity, could be a consideration. Many PC and video game systems offer tools that can limit or block online access, while others allow you to confine play to only preapproved friends, bar strangers from contacting your child or mute or disable chat features entirely. If your children are going to play games online (or even participate on social networks such as Facebook), sit down with your kids and set ground rules and make agreements about online safety. Go over the safety tips in this book and make sure that they understand how to play safely. Moreover, keep an open mind and encourage them to come speak with you if anything seems strange or confusing in their online experience. Your best deterrent is to keep lines of communication wide open with your kids. Most problems can be circumvented if you're aware of them, and catch wind of warning signs early enough.

ENCOURAGE SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Some games are very social, while others are played in isolation. It's not always obvious which ones involve other real-world players and which ones do not, so it's a good idea to ask around, and, as ever, research the subject. But in any case, people need to have physical interaction with other people, so if your children tend to spend a lot of time alone playing games, be sure to also work with them to find activities that interest them that include other parties.

Another great solution is to invest in a game system that allows active family play. Nintendo's Wii and Wii U, Microsoft's Xbox Kinect and Sony's PlayStation Move are all systems designed with active, physical gameplay in mind that can be enjoyed by every family member. You may even find that these games help to bring people from the unlikeliest age groups and backgrounds together. They are fun and engaging and appropriate for all ages, and are sure to be the life of any family game night or get-together.

USE THE DESIRE FOR GAMES AS A MOTIVATOR

Most kids who play video games are never satisfied. They'll master one game, but already want to buy new ones long before reaching the end credits. Kids know that games cost money, so you can use their desire for more games to motivate them to earn money by getting a job or doing chores around the house. With a positive attitude, kids will see it as a fair trade where everybody gets something from the deal and they have earned their game while you have acknowledged the game's value to them. If cost is a consideration, you can also use discount, rental or free online game solutions as a source of motivation, with playtime and rewarding new experiences always more important than how much you spend. You can also save money on purchases as well by buying used games at GameStop, using a game lending service like GameFly, or even finding local game deals on Craigslist or via independent retailers or flea makets. For more information on how to stretch your gaming budget further, see Appendix F: 8 Ways to Save on Video Games.

GET INVOLVED FIRSTHAND

Instead of standing on the sidelines wondering what the heck your children are up to, talk to kids about their games. Be curious. Ask them what they are doing and how they do it. Once you get them chattering away about a game, you'll be surprised at the myriad details they will offer on how they play. Many parents find their children less than communicative in their day-to-day dealings, especially when they are teenagers, but discover that if they can get them to discuss the latest game they are playing, they'll talk up a storm.

Getting involved is also your opportunity to discuss your concerns. When a kid tells you all about a game, you can ask what it means to them. "Don't you feel bad when you blow that guy away with the rocket?" "Why do you need to get to the top of that building?" "Why are you fighting these people?" With younger children, ask them questions that reveal their ability to

distinguish fantasy from reality. For instance, "Do you know that it's OK to do that in a game, but that you could hurt someone if you did it for real?"

If you really want to get involved, let go of your inhibitions and ask to try games yourself. Ask kids to show you how to play. You might think that you're the world's worst player, but you might also be amazed at just how much fun some of these games can be. And your children will definitely appreciate that you gave titles a try. Despite reservations, you may find out that game playing can be engaging and enriching, especially when you share it with your kids, and a great way to bond with them over a shared activity that they really enjoy.

HAVE AN OPINION

In his book *Killing Monsters*, Gerard Jones suggests that parents are the single most important role models in a child's life. Parents can influence children not only by how they behave in their lives, but also in how they react to the types of entertainment a child is enjoying. Because children will often choose types of entertainment that push limits and go counter to what parents think is appropriate, Jones contends that a parent's response is sometimes more influential even than the source of entertainment itself.

He also suggests that parents do not need to like everything their children like. "Effective modeling can certainly involve telling children what we don't like," he writes. "We can get so caught up in the debate about whether entertainment is 'harmful' that we forget our right to an opinion." Jones goes on to state that honesty and clearly stated opinions model decisiveness and moral courage. "It's far more useful for a child to see a parent calmly stating an opinion than dithering in worry. The kids, of course, will learn from their parents' example and start declaring their own tastes with equal strength."

ENCOURAGE AND AFFIRM

Also in *Killing Monsters*, Jones suggests that parents should affirm who their kids are, trust their desires, pay attention to how they are using their fantasies and encourage them to tell stories. He advises that parents give them the tools to take control, help them distinguish fantasy from reality, allow them their own reactions, intervene carefully when necessary and help them make their fantasies work positively in their lives. Each of these bits of advice is accompanied by a very good discussion and, often, with real-life examples. For parents interested in understanding the role of fantasy entertainment including video games in the lives of their children, *Killing Monsters* can be very helpful.

DELVE DEEPER

In *Don't Bother Me Mom, I'm Learning!* Mark Prensky suggests that parents can engage in a much deeper level of learning and exploration with their kids. Once you have established some sort of dialogue with gamers, you can use the video games themselves as an educational

opportunity—for both of you.

Prensky suggests that you ask players to think about what they are learning from the games they play. You can also examine with them the experiences of the game and how they relate to other useful skills. As an example, Prensky suggests that you can help kids appreciate the value of self-evaluation—something they learn in games but may not have applied to their other activities. Because they are regularly using learning principles of self-evaluation in their game playing, they can become more effective learners, less intimidated by outside measures such as tests, and more self-directed and confident.

Prensky also suggests understanding what kinds of games your kids like and using those games to spark more learning in various areas, depending on the game. His website, **www. gamesparentsteachers.com**, lists many current games and the possible areas of interest they offer. We list several top resources that can further help your efforts to expand kids' horizons in Appendix D: Online Resources for Parents as well.

Finally, Prensky suggests working with your kids' teachers to integrate what they can be learning at home with what they are doing in school and to let the teachers know how you are working with your kids.

BECOME A MEDIA ANALYST

A media analyst, in this context, is someone who examines and critically considers the media they consume and the media that their kids consume. Not only parents, but kids can become media analysts too.

Media is everywhere in our lives today. We consume it, and it influences us. Television programming and news, movies, music, art, books and comics, video games and, increasingly, Internet websites and blogs all contend for our attention. In fact, some experts describe our culture as an "attentional economy" because we have limited time to focus on anything in particular and we have to decide where to "spend" our attention. Time is limited. Our choices sometimes seem unlimited.

Imagine that you have a limited amount of "attention points" to spend in the same way that you might have a limited amount of money to spend in the supermarket. When your food budget is limited, you pick more carefully what you buy, making sure to have the staples and the most important items before you start piling luxury items into your cart. You probably also consider which are the healthiest foods and how to create the most balanced diet. Likewise, in an "attentional economy," some of your attention points have to be spent on the necessities of life, whether it's at your job, at school or just making sure the dishes get done. The rest is up to you.

You become a media analyst when you recognize that you are making informed decisions about where you spend your attention points the same way you make careful decisions about spending your money on goods and services. In many ways, it's almost like a game itself.

There are different ways to understand media. One way is to read reviews and articles about

products. You may find ratings useful, especially for television, movies and video games, although ratings systems will not tell you everything you might want to know about a product, and certainly not any positive value the media may offer. Relying entirely on ratings and reviews, while quick and convenient, may not provide you with the information needed to be a true media analyst.

Harvard professor and author Kimberly Thompson on the **KidsRisk website** suggests that consumers learn to "deconstruct" the media they consume. She suggests asking the following questions, which were developed by kids at the Boston YWCA Youth Voice Collaborative:

- "Who made this media product?"
- "What motivated the producer (selling a product or idea, education, entertainment, etc.)?"
- "What are the main messages?"
- "What values and preferences come with the messages?"
- "How might other people interpret this message differently?"
- "How does the producer attract and hold your attention (appealing to your emotions, shocking you, and so on)?"
- "What information does the media producer omit and why?"

By far the most important part of being a media analyst if you have young children is to examine the media with them. This means discussing and questioning the media, explaining how you see it and asking kids what they are getting from the kinds of media they enjoy.

What do you gain from becoming a media analyst? The obvious answer is that you can help protect your children from negative influences and, where they are choosing media that has controversial material, you can be there to help interpret that material in healthy ways. The less obvious answer is that, by looking critically at the media you and your children consume, you also make more conscious choices about spending your attention points. You and your children are also far more likely to gain knowledge and understanding by thinking about media rather than just approaching it as a way to kill time. Active participation with active reflection makes the experience we gain from our media, including video games, far more rewarding and rich.

PROMOTE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Physical exercise is important to health, and, with some exceptions, traditional video games do not offer much physical activity. As is perfectly normal, you'll want to encourage kids to engage in physical activities, and sometimes they may resist, as games can be very compelling. ("Come on, Mom, I'm in the middle of a quest. I can't stop now.") To offset potential problems, consider making agreements with your children that they will monitor their play time, but also be open to being a little bit flexible in terms of the arrangement as well. Realize that games are sometimes

very important to players, and allow some room for negotiation, as long as kids follow through on their agreements.

One argument that may go a long way toward motivating kids to keep in shape is that healthier people make better game players. Professional game players who compete in highly charged tournaments actually keep in shape just like athletes. They call themselves "cyber athletes." The top-ranking competitive game player in the world today, Jonathan Wendel, who goes by the handle Fatal1ty, plays games for hours each day, but he also runs, plays sports and works out daily. Why does he keep in top physical shape if all he's doing is pressing buttons and moving a mouse around? "Playing at the level I play requires more than just eye-hand coordination," he says. "I need split-second reflexes, stamina for long tournaments and the ability to make smart decisions. I think of myself as an athlete, just like any other athlete, and being physically fit and healthy gives me a huge advantage over any opponent who is not in good shape." Tell your kids what champion gamer Fatal1ty says and maybe they'll be inspired to get in shape, too, if they want to be the best players.

Finally, as alluded to before, it is now possible to play games and get a workout at the same time. Today's game systems all feature games that use physical action. In the case of Microsoft's hands-free interface Kinect, the slogan "you are the controller" is accurate. You move your body to play the game. Even if much of a gamer's entertainment time is spent on more sedentary experiences, playing an active game for 20-30 minutes can prove a surprisingly refreshing workout. Doing it a few times a day might turn out to be a healthy alternative, and fun too.

• • • Tips to Avoid Video Game Injuries • • •

Video games are frequently criticized for being too violent or antisocial, for being possibly addictive and, at times, sexually inappropriate. Less commonly, you may hear that video game playing can cause physical problems such as eye strain, carpal tunnel syndrome and repetitive motion injuries. This latter possibility is increased with games that involve physical activity, such as those powered by the Wii, Kinect and PlayStation Move. Physical issues arising from video game play are easily corrected, at least in theory, by taking breaks, using good ergonomics, keeping fit and, in some cases, by doing simple exercises. For instance, the website **Medicine Online** recommends that players take periodic breaks at half-hour or hourly intervals and do some simple stretches for the fingers, wrists, shoulders and neck. Further recommendations include looking away from the screen at intervals, improving posture and paying attention to symptoms such as pain in joints, eye irritation, headaches and so forth. To prevent eye strain, they suggest focusing the eyes at varying distances every 15 to 20 minutes.

With newer motion-based gaming systems, it's a good idea to warm up and stretch a little before beginning any strenuous or repetitive activity, just as you would before playing sports. While there is certainly a difference between actually bowling at the local lanes and bowling on a video game system, the repetitive motion and wide swinging of the arms could cause small injuries in people who are not normally active. It's best to prevent such injuries by doing light stretches and warm-ups

in advance, or even playing a game that guides you through the warm-ups before getting into the more competitive action of the game.

All of these suggestions can help alleviate physical problems associated with game playing, but they do require discipline on the part of the player. They require the game player to monitor time while playing and to take frequent breaks or set aside warm-up time before actual play, neither of which most gamers are likely to remember to do without practice and, in many cases, outside motivation in the form of a family member or some sort of reminder system. Of course, typical video gamers won't be much inclined to take preventative measures until they actually develop symptoms, so again, if we are talking about children, it may be up to the parents to suggest—or enforce—healthy game-play habits.

Marc Rizzaro, a sports physiotherapist, has studied problems associated with video game playing, such as tendonitis in the thumbs and wrists, plus a variety of neck, upper and lower back problems due to bad posture. He suggests that the most important ways to prevent problems from occurring are staying healthy and fit, strengthening forearms and fingers by stretches and moderate amounts of squeezing a tennis ball or "stress" ball, avoiding slouching and employing healthy ergonomics. "Use the 90-degree rule. You can avoid most problems if you keep knees, hips, hands and elbows all at 90 degrees, with wrist support if you can. Avoid looking up at the monitor, keep wrists flat and not flexing downward, and have good back support." Rizzaro also suggests taking periodic five-minute breaks and avoiding a sedentary lifestyle.

One other piece of advice worth keeping in mind is that the most skilled game players play relaxed. Tension in the hands, back, neck or arms makes you play more poorly. To be the best, players need to learn to relax when playing, both physically and mentally, and when players are relaxed, they are less prone to injuries and other unpleasant effects. While simply relaxing when playing is no substitute for healthy game-playing habits, it will certainly make the player better at the game while reducing potential negative physical side-effects.

Going one step further, the best gamers—the ones who compete on the professional circuits—treat themselves as any other pro athlete would and exercise regularly, keeping their bodies and minds in top shape. People who play a lot of video games should definitely consider including regular stretching and exercise as part of their lifestyle. Of course, Nintendo's Wii was a game changer in the world of video games, introducing active gameplay that can get the whole body moving. Now, with Microsoft's Xbox Kinect and Sony's PlayStation Move, there are plenty of purely exercise-oriented games and workouts to help keep players fit while they're positioned in front of the TV as well.

CHAPTER 8:

RESOLVING VIDEO GAME CONFLICTS

Video games are not without controversy, and managing the expectations and behaviors of game-playing family members can sometimes be a challenge. Notably, such challenges are similar to those that parents faced in the "television generation" where kids had a strong interest in, and identification with, their favorite shows. Telling them, "No, you can't watch this show now because you didn't finish your homework," generally prompted argument, bargaining or tantrums. And how many times have parents told their kids to "turn down that music" over the past few decades?

Likewise, disruption of a gamer's play time or experience can lead to conflicts and, in some ways, video games are actually harder to manage. That's because, unlike television shows and albums, which generally top out at around an hour each, game sessions can often last for many hours if nothing is done to limit the time invested in them. The very notion of stopping "in the middle of something" is foreign to most gamers, who only stop at specific predetermined times in a game (e.g. preset points where games can be saved), or when they are just too tired to continue or their online friends are also ready to pack it in for the time being.

One reason for this is that video games challenge the mind as much as they challenge the reflexes. The mental involvement in the game is powerful and compelling. It's a matter of solving a very large puzzle by solving a series of smaller ones that each lead to more puzzles. The sheer cognitive load of many video games demands focus and mental involvement far greater than that of non-interactive media and entertainment choices such as watching television or listening to music. Perhaps the closest analogy is when you're reading a great book, and you just can't put it down—except in interactive outings, you're literally playing the role of the hero, and actively shaping every minute of the adventure. With online games, add in the fact that you are playing with friends live in real-time, and it's like watching the "big game" going into overtime. You can't leave now, can you? Certainly not.

Conflict between family members is a common, but largely avoidable, problem in mixed households (households with gamers and non-gamers). As you may have observed firsthand, there is a tangible separation taking place, where some people may be deeply involved in an activity that other members of the family cannot understand or relate to. In many cases, this leads to antagonism, anger and argument in various forms.

Disagreements over video games, like any other form of household conflict, can prove painful and tedious, and no two are ever successfully resolved the same way twice. But in order to defuse the most common standoffs, we advise that you employ the following strategies:

1. Think Like a Gamer
2. Be Understanding and Flexible
3. Seek Common Ground
4. Enforce Consequences

Here's how to make them work for your family, put all those pesky squabbles behind you, and restore peace and quiet (at least, outside of the usual racket caused by all those bleeping head-stomps and exploding spaceships) to your home today.

Step One: Think Like a Gamer

Our attitudes about video games, which may be based in part on their pervasively negative public image, often affect how we respond to game-related conflicts. Sometimes, all it takes to get on the same page and communicate more effectively is a shift in perspective.

Case in point: Instead of telling kids, "Why do you spend all that time doing nothing? You should be doing something constructive," consider what you would say if the games they were playing *were* constructive. Instead of insinuating that "those games are going to rot your brain and make you lazy," figure out how you can get them to play games that you can feel good about. Because you're not thinking like a gamer, you may see your children's gameplay as a complete waste of time, and lament the fact that they enter their solitary world and seem to tune you out. But this does nothing to alleviate the problem, and may actually exacerbate it by making you appear more antagonistic.

Likewise, when someone in our family seems to disappear and we don't know what they are doing or why, it's natural to be concerned. How we respond to our concerns can spell the difference between conflict and successful communication. Ask yourself: What actions do we typically take, and what attitudes are behind those actions? We can be upset, angry or even determined to put a stop to this behavior. Approaching the situation with such confrontational attitudes will, almost inevitably, result in more conflict and it is likely that the game player will become defensive and even rebellious.

Similarly, sometimes you may see gamers doing things that seem violent or antisocial. Rather than make judgmental statements, a better alternative might be to say something along the lines of, "I don't think I could do what you're doing. I think it would upset me. But then, I'm not a game player. What is it like for you? Do you ever feel bad about what you're doing?" Or you might ask, "Why is it OK to do these kinds of things in a game, but not in the real world?" This will seem like a really dumb question to a lot of gamers, and they might look at you and say, "Duh—it's just a game, dude," or something similar. But this is a good time to laugh, because from the gamer's point of view, the answer isn't just extremely obvious. In a way, they are sharing a point of view

with you—specifically, that game playing is not serious in the same way that the physical world is. In a digital world, they're telling you in very simple terms that there's no harm done.

Why should you take a more open-minded approach instead of simply going in and laying down the law right off the bat? Curiosity along with nonjudgmental communication helps establish rapport between you and the game player. Using that rapport, you can comfortably and capably express your personal feelings or concerns without any negative, generalized video game baggage. Moreover, you may come to understand more about the appeal of video games from the player's point of view, and you might even start to recognize the positive aspects associated with some of these games. With all this newfound knowledge comes more informed and meaningful dialogue, and you and your game-adoring loved ones will find it easier to discuss and debate issues, create compromises and strike a balance between play and other aspects of everyday life.

Step Two: Be Understanding and Flexible

There will be times when you just have to be firm and put your foot down. But even then, you still need to understand what is going through the video game player's mind. Video games are, after all, very absorbing, and video gamers, even with the best of intentions, not always aware of the time it takes between agreement to do something and actually doing it. In other words, when a gamer says, "in a minute," they might mean a minute, but more often they mean a half an hour or more. There are some legitimate reasons for remaining flexible that have to do with the investment that players make in their games. For example, there are times when quitting right on the spot may cause them to lose an hour or more of previous effort. If the gamer makes a sincere effort to quit at the first available opportunity though, it should be possible to stop within 10-20 minutes at most. If they can't find a good place to stop in that length of time, then you may have to remind them of their commitments. However, in most cases, an extra 10 minutes or so should be sufficient to wrap up play and bring current gaming sessions to a close.

With healthy people playing video games, such loss of time awareness is common and nothing to worry about. To alleviate associated issues though, you may want to consider making agreements with players ahead of time and setting limits. You might also consider making these time limits somewhat flexible and allowing for the possibility of renegotiation. In video games, there are frequently moments when, from the gamer's point of view, it's just not "a good time" to stop, such as when in the middle of a major conflict with in-game opponents, or while traveling between predetermined save points. Use your judgment as to whether it's really critical that they go to bed at 10:00 PM versus 10:15, but always set an outside limit and make it clear that they need to wrap up their activities within a set timeframe. For instance, they can commit to finding a "good place to stop" at 10:00 and finish that process no later than 10:15. After that, they will just have to stop, or come up with a really convincing reason why not.

Because parental styles do differ, negotiation and flexibility may not feel comfortable to all. We nonetheless suggest them because, with otherwise healthy players, compromise and agreements are both possible and can be an effective source of conflict resolution.

Step Three: Seek Common Ground

In some cases where there is tension around video game playing, there may be other, more troubling issues that affect the situation—emotional issues that promote angry or antisocial behavior. Even when more severe problems exist within a family environment, however, curiosity is a good way to break into the gamer's world. Similarly, when depression or traumatic events may lead someone to escape into video game play and isolate themselves from the family, it might require more work to establish rapport, but it also can open up the gamer to reveal and admit the larger and more significant problems. Focusing on the video game as the problem, on the other hand, does nothing to find the real source of the dilemma.

Understanding that extensive video game playing and lack of responsiveness may be a symptom rather than the cause of the problem further gives you a perfect opportunity to open doors and allow gamers to express their real feelings. Focusing on the video game with curiosity, and sharing the player's reality, actually allows you both to focus on something that is, in reality, neutral. With this shared focus, you give space for the gamer to express him or herself in what is a comfortable environment for them.

Along the same lines, curiosity is often a good approach to communication in general, whether with gamers specifically or children of any interests. It can lead to many discoveries and revelations that we miss when our ideas and beliefs are absolute and rigid. When it comes to communication between gamers and non-gamers or authority figures, curiosity can rapidly help bridge gaps, salve wounds and open doors that would otherwise be closed on both sides. The importance of keeping an open mind cannot be understated.

That said, curiosity without action won't lead to any answers, of course, so the next step is to ask the gamer. For instance, you might say, "I know I've been on your case about your game playing, but I just read this interesting book about video games, and it got me thinking that maybe there's more to playing games that I thought." What questions might you ask, once the gamer has wiped the shock off their face and begun breathing again?

True empathy means really wanting to know more about the games that your family members like, why they like them and what they are thinking about when they play. Knowing what they are thinking can offer a big clue to what they are learning, how they are interacting with these titles, and what, if any, misconceptions you may have formed about the games. Here are a few questions to ask about any game:

- "What can you tell me about the game you're playing?"
- "What are you thinking about when you are playing?"
- "What is it specifically that makes the game so compelling?"
- "What decisions do you have to make?"
- "What are your favorite parts of the title?"
- "Who is this game meant for?"
- "Do you think I could play it?"

Gamers might think it's weird that their parent or spouse has suddenly taken an interest in what they are doing, particularly if there has been conflict over the issue. But if the curiosity is genuine, most gamers will be more than happy to tell you all about the game. Pretty soon, your head will be swimming with concepts; ideas; names of items, characters, skills and locations; buttons; decisions; statistics; goals; rewards; strategies and more.

If the gamer starts telling you which buttons to press and how to play, ask them to tell you instead what the game is all about and what strategies they use, or how they are able to complete the goals of the game. You really want to know what they are thinking—the cognitive side of game play. The "how to play" aspect of many games today is so complex that, without actually spending time doing it, you would get little out of an explanation of which buttons do what. Knowing what the gamer is thinking, what decisions and challenges they face, and how they attempt to solve problems or resolve conflicts is much more revealing than knowing what buttons to push. Often, because so much of what they do is subconscious, gamers may even surprise themselves when they try to describe what they are doing.

Step Four: Enforce Consequences

The common thread in all these steps revolves around being receptive to viewing video games as a legitimate pastime and attempting to put yourself in the gamer's shoes. Once you can learn to empathize with someone and see things from their perspective, you'll no longer feel like adversaries, but instead be able to tackle conflict like teammates, both with similar goals.

But if, after making a concerted effort to accommodate gamers' thoughts and needs, you're still finding that games are causing conflict, perhaps it's time to make more drastic steps. The simplest and most direct solution is to simply turn off or remove the offending game, or disconnect the game system from the TV. (Although doing so without allowing the player to save their game first, thereby losing minutes or hours of painstaking effort, may inadvertently provide added punishment that you didn't intend.) Note that it's imperative that you have a solid reason for taking this drastic step, however, and have clearly spelled out your reasons for doing so first, as well as outlined clear criteria for earning the item(s) in question back.

If problems persist, taking away or restricting other activities that gamers enjoy, such as phone time or trips to the movies, may be another effective way to help ease conflicts. For example: If problems arise from game playing, perhaps the gamer's bicycle or their right to visit the mall with friends gets taken away for a week.

Alternately, Dr. Bill and Martha Sears, parenting experts and pediatricians who recommend a number of different ways to help shape children's behavior, also point out that it's easier to grant privileges than it is to take them away. So instead of using video games as an "inalienable right," parents can use the opportunity to show children that any game time they want will need to be earned. You could even make a game of the process itself, allowing kids to rack up playtime by performing chores around the house, scoring well on their report cards or assisting the family with various errands or projects.

Note that should games need to be denied, it may help to come up with a number of extracurricular activities to help engage your displaced gamer, who'll suddenly find themselves with plenty of extra free time on their hands. Consider planning some forays and field trips outside of the house to help them find other ways to occupy themselves. With luck, you'll never need to take such drastic steps, but it's good to be prepared just in case.

Speaking of advance preparation, planning and preventative measures are also vital in handling one of the trickiest and most common sources of video game conflict of all—the many different aspects of dealing with online play. We'll explain why in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 9:

A GUIDE TO ONLINE GAMES

"While online computer exploration opens a world of possibilities for children, expanding their horizons and exposing them to different cultures and ways of life, they can be exposed to dangers as they hit the road exploring the information highway."

—A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation

Many games are played on computers and console systems by enthusiasts alone or with small groups of friends playing together IRL ("in real life"), or IRW ("in the real world"), as some gamers would put it. But there has also been a proliferation in recent years of games played with large groups of friends and strangers in the virtual world.

Some online games offer small-scale interactions in scenarios that "match make" players (pair them together, based on like criteria, e.g. similar skill levels) in connected encounters. Many more also feature an online component that allows random competition or collaboration with others who are not physically present. Internet multiplayer services such as Microsoft's Xbox Live and Sony's PlayStation Network can further allow players to find each other through the network and share in collaborative or head-to-head play in a variety of games. Social interaction in these types of games tends to take a backseat to actual gameplay, but in general, there are many opportunities to make friends, engage in voice or video chat, issue play invites and otherwise interact socially to some extent.

Large-scale multiplayer games, known as massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)—which exist and evolve 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on the Internet whether you're connected or not—can additionally involve thousands of players directly interacting. The most popular MMO in the US and Western world is *World of Warcraft* (known affectionately by its fans as *WoW*), which at latest count has more than 12 million players globally.

MMOs are virtual worlds accessible via online connection that run all day, every day year round. They never sleep, and there is always something going on. These games contain a lot of "content," meaning graphics, characters, encounters, items, tournaments, events, challenges and more. (Much of which constantly changes due to developers' ability to always be updating and adding new material.) They also provide sophisticated tools for communicating with and finding other players, such as the ability to issue invites to form groups, or options to chat or "emote" (i.e. wave, dance, curtsy, etc.) via canned animations. A large part of most MMOs revolves around direct social interaction, and many players become members of organized groups who share

resources and team up to adventure together. In many games, these are called "guilds," but such player groupings can also go by different formal or informal descriptors (corporations, alliances, factions, etc.) depending on the title in question.

Guilds are generally led by a small group of players who organize events and set the rules and goals for the group. Being a guild leader is actually a very challenging job, and studies have shown that the skills needed to run a large guild are similar to the skills needed to succeed in modern business. However, given their collaborative nature, participation in guilds inherently involves interaction with other players, including friends and/or strangers.

• • • More About MMOs • • •

Massively multiplayer online games, or MMOs as insiders know them, are among PC and console gaming's best new offerings. Virtual worlds that exist 24/7 on the Internet, these sprawling cyberspace universes let as many as several thousand fans connect and play games online simultaneously.

Fantasy, sci-fi, superhero and free kids' MMOs are just the beginning, allowing distant friends or relatives the world over to chat, interact in real-time or adventure alongside fellow enthusiasts. Enjoying them is easy too. Some can be played in your Web browser, while others require you to download dedicated software or own a video game system such as the PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360. As a general rule, to play, you'll need the game (packaged in a box or as a digital download), a credit or prepaid card, and a modem or high-speed broadband Internet connection.

Like single-player games, MMOs can be purchased at retailers nationwide or enjoyed as free downloads. But unlike solo experiences, you're never alone—socialization is one of the core tenets of play.

Dealings with fellow players may be limited to conversation and simple item swaps or as complex as joining forces with dozens of like-minded heroes to slay an evil wizard or stop an invading army. Play differs accordingly every time you login, granting these titles much more longevity than solo counterparts.

One needn't control a muscular swordsman or space-age mercenary either: From strategy games to trading card games and even children's titles, variety is the spice of virtual life today. Whether you're looking for swashbuckling high-seas excitement, leisurely sports simulations or sci-fi thrills, there are endless choices.

PRICING

Some massively multiplayer online games and virtual worlds are completely free to play, though optional payments can be used to gain access to new areas, purchase virtual goods or enjoy special power-ups and item upgrades.

Other popular MMOs require you to pay a monthly subscription fee, often $10-15. While they may seem more expensive than standalone games, endless replay value and online words that change and evolve whether you're logged in or not often offer more bang for the buck.

Both options have their upsides, with plenty of choices for players across the board.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY
• Game software, available via retail purchase or direct download
• High-speed Internet connection
• Credit Card or Prepaid Card

SAMPLE MMOS

FreeRealms—Sony's spin on kid-friendly MMO/virtual worlds is available on the PC, Mac, and PlayStation Network. Players can explore an enormous land, make friends, and take on cool jobs like "go-kart racer" and "pet trainer." Gameplay also spans multiple genres, including sports, simulation, racing, and activities, i.e. social networking, so there's something appealing for everyone.

Club Penguin—Popular online universe *Club Penguin*, owned by Disney, lets players control cartoon penguin avatars in a virtual world populated with online games and activities. Disney is especially vigilant about promoting online safety in its virtual words, and *Club Penguin* is a good example of a safe, fun and sanitary environment that is well-moderated by real people to ensure kids' enjoyment.

Moshi Monsters—*Moshi Monsters* is a Web-based game that features otherworldly, fuzzy creatures. It offers numerous mini-games to play, and many of them provide opportunities to learn math, science, and geography—a plus for inquisitive children. Best of all, its supporting community is large and friendly, and even offers tips for kids who are troubled by online issues like cyberbullying.

HINTS AND TIPS
• Game worlds are always expanding. Check back regularly for new quests, items and areas to explore.

• Guilds, corporations or other in-game player groups are a great way to make new friends. Join one today.

• Excitement and adventure are available anytime. You're free to login day or night.

• Don't be afraid to experiment. It's your world—explore and adventure at your own pace.

• If you don't like combat or diplomacy, try crafting—many games let you create and sell virtual items.

• Never give out personal information online, or share details on birthdays or vacations. You never know who's watching.

• Parental controls can help you limit whom children can interact with online.

• If you have questions or concerns, ask game creators. Supervisors are constantly observing the action to make sure things run smoothly.

• Warning: Administrators can't be everywhere at once, or account for everyone's good behavior. As in real life, some players may lie, steal or cheat.

• • •

One of the most difficult issues that arises from playing MMOs is the interdependency of players, and the expectations they have of each other. For instance, a group may set off on an adventure (a "quest" or "mission") together that is meant to take perhaps an hour. But such experiences rarely conform to time restrictions, and three or four hours later, the quest may still be underway.

Players also often have well-defined roles within any given group. For instance, ask your gamer kids the difference between a "Tank," a "Healer" and "Scout." In short, if your kid is involved in one of these online multiplayer adventures, they may think they are letting their online friends—who can become as real as any real-world friends they have—down. So when they say, "Mom, I can't stop now. I'm in the middle of something," it might mean that they don't want to disappoint someone. How you handle such situations will depend largely on the individual circumstances, and how often the problem occurs, which is why it's especially important to communicate with online players.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

According to a U.S. Senate resolution naming June as Internet Safety Month, 35 million U.S. children from kindergarten through grade 12 have Internet access, and 80% are online at least one hour per week. Globally, children spend an average of 1.6 hours per day online, according to the Norton Online Family Report.

Unsurprisingly, concerned parents are trying different tactics and strategies in an effort protect their children online. More than 90% of families have some rules in place about their kids' use of the Internet, and encouragingly, nine out of 10 children say that they follow they follow these rules. Looking to establish your own guidelines where online play is concerned? The following tips can help you set some basic regulations:

GET TO KNOW YOUR VIRTUAL CHILDREN

Online games, especially MMOs, are often what players make of them—and both characters and situations tend to take on a life of their own. Hang around sometime and watch your child play the game… You'll get a good sense for whether the avatar (a.k.a. digital double) they're role-playing as tends to behave like a noble hero or shady rogue, giving insight into your child's online gaming habits. When they're not on the computer, you might also consider checking your desktop or laptop's history so you can see what they've been up to online.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO SPEAK OUT

Almost every online game is supervised by community support staff. Should someone be harassing your child or playing unfairly, don't hesitate to complain. These overseers are there to moderate and maintain game balance, after all, and make sure everyone's having a good time. Instances of cyber-bullying should always be reported to in-game and/or real-world authorities.

KEEP AN EYE ON OVERSPENDING

Some online games can be expensive to maintain, whether because of new add-ons, or the allure of purchasing in-game items with real-life money. As a result, you won't just purchase the product one time in most cases—you'll also have to pay a monthly fee for the right to play and may need to continually purchase items to keep the experience fresh and engaging. Make sure you know exactly what you're getting into before letting your kids run wild, as monthly fees can add up. It also pays to make sure that your online game has safeguards in place to prevent kids from racking up a hefty invoice.

GUARD YOUR LOVED ONES

Some games allow player-vs.-player (PVP) combat. This is just what it sounds like: People are free to assault one another. While slain characters can often be revived (typically with experience or wealth penalties), it's a hassle most children—especially younger ones—don't need to contend with. Rather than see them victimized by older, better-versed and less scrupulous players, stick with titles which either don't allow PVP melees or confine them to specific areas.

BEWARE OF STRANGERS

That pretty young elf magician? We hate to say it, but she could really be a he—and, in an extreme case, possibly a sexual predator. Keep abreast of whom your child is associated with, and consider using friend or buddy lists (confined to users you pre-approve of) whenever possible to restrict communication with those you're suspicious of. Under a best-case scenario, your child would be able to form a regular gaming group with friends from school or after-hours activities that they've actually met and interacted with.

EMBRACE CHANGE

Many games let you pick new characters and change your name or general attributes when you tire of the alter-ego you're currently playing. And just as many also offer multiple servers—virtual hubs where gamers can connect and go adventuring—to host the action. Should your child attract unwanted attention from less desirable elements, sometimes simply changing their identity and/or moving onto another server and group of players can alleviate the problem. It's like starting your life over anew.

TALK TO YOUR KIDS

Inevitably, some people you encounter in a simulated social environment (as at any intramural activity, party or similar event) are going to be prone to behaving badly, using foul language or picking on weaker individuals. Discuss the merits of avoiding such troublemakers with your child, and explain the downsides of copycatting their actions. Reaffirm that there are plenty of ways to enjoy superhero titles and spacefaring outings without resorting to detestable means.

SEPARATE FANTASY FROM REALITY

Online games can be addictive. And not everyone is able to set boundaries for themselves. For example, the 28 year-old South Korean man who died after a 50-hour play marathon or Shanghai gamer who killed a friend that absconded with his virtual supercharged saber. If you notice your child is becoming too involved in a title to the point that they're neglecting their homework and responsibilities or behaving oddly in general, step up and take action.

ENFORCE CURFEWS

As mentioned before, MMOs are available 24/7/365, and there's always something new and interesting going on. Therefore the temptation four your child to login at 3 AM instead of getting a good night's sleep may prove too much to overcome. Be watchful for signs of such behavior (hint: the bags under their eyes are a good start). And, for that matter, think about keeping your family PC or console in a location that can't be accessed without your knowledge.

CHAPTER 10:

THE DANGERS OF ONLINE PLAY

Interestingly, recent research has shown that while parents like to focus on time and search limits, of equal concern to them should be the fact that children have their own standards of online behavior. As such, it's imperative that you also consider other important issues such as making sure kids don't bully or harass others, pass along embarrassing photos or engage in gossip about their peers. Many parents simply default to attempting to regulate the act of going online. But it's becoming increasingly clear that policing the details of what is happening during the time that kids do spend online is just as important, and that more parents need to take an active part in doing so.

The key takeaway here: Many additional issues outside of traditional game-related concerns can arise from online play and the ability to interact with fellow players over the Internet. In this chapter, we'll look at several of these issues and present some tips and resources that can help you deal with them and better educate your children on how to play safely online.

Because online games are populated by other people—and not just the people you'll see around town, but in towns all over the world—there are a great variety of expressions, attitudes and behaviors represented within these games. Your children will be exposed to individuals of all ages, ethnicities and economic backgrounds, and of different upbringings. Obviously, this is a positive: Play can be a wonderful way to broaden kids' horizons. But you will also want to be actively involved with your children's play habits online and understand what they are doing and, to some extent, who they are doing it with. After all, you never know just who's who out there in a sea of virtual hand-drawn or 3D avatars, and every society has its own cultural values and norms.

Of course, you also have to trust your children. If you have followed the guidelines in this book and regularly communicate with your kids about their game playing habits, your tots will probably be smart and safe, and able to thoroughly enjoy their experiences online. Still, it's important to get to know the places where they want to play, including making a point of not only researching these online playgrounds, but also personally visiting and scouting out each location. (A goal made easier by the near universal availability of free trial accounts.) Just remember that—as in real-life—the individuals that they play with on the Internet, and who shape their online experiences and interactions, may act differently if they know that a parent is present.

Ultimately, regardless of how well-adjusted kids are, or to what extent you're familiar with the online landscape, it bears noting: Dangers are present. But like the real world, the virtual world can also be a perfectly safe, fun and enjoyable place if you know the hazards to watch for. Possible trouble spots include:

SEXUAL CONTENT AND FOUL LANGUAGE

Online games are seldom about risqué or troubling themes. In fact, many are based on innocent everyday topics such as food or fashion, or, when story-driven, generally focus on issues of good vs. evil. In the case of massively multiplayer online games, players can also freely role-play to discover their own preferences within the game world, at the same time forging bonds with friends through shared experiences which all take an active hand in shaping. However, there may be areas, situations, encounters, scenarios and references presented in certain games that may be more explicit that you are comfortable with, and there will, in all likelihood, be some salty language in those that support chat sessions.

Prohibiting exposure to controversial dialogue or themes is obviously a personal preference, as everyone's definition of "controversial" differs. It's also tricky to enforce such guidelines, as any game in which players can communicate in real-time can suddenly and unexpectedly play host to the odd four-letter word. But if you are concerned about exposing your kids to such content and experiences, there are many websites and games specifically dedicated to younger kids, where they are far less likely to encounter such situations. Quite a few other alternatives also offer parental controls that let you restrict levels of online interaction, eliminate chat options entirely, or feature auto-scrubbing features that filter out instances of inappropriate behavior or cursing.

For a list of kid-friendly online games that make a good starting point, see Appendix I: Top 10 MMOs/Online Virtual Worlds for Kids.

ONLINE ARGUMENTS

The Internet provides myriad forums on every conceivable topic on which we can discuss and debate issues. This leads to a lot of robust discussion, and, given human nature, a lot of colorful arguments, oftentimes with crude humor and foul language to match. Online arguments are common, and even healthy to a degree: If we didn't have opposing viewpoints on matters, the world would be a far less interesting place. But if the arguments become time-consuming and/or devolve into personal attacks and insults, they can be very upsetting for a child.

To ensure an optimum experience, encourage your child to engage in online discussion and debate, but let him or her know that there is a limit. It's just not worth getting overly worked-up over an online conversation, especially as some players deliberately set out to antagonize others for their own personal amusement. Should a particularly frustrating situation be encountered, encourage him or her to walk away from an inflammatory post and wait for ten minutes or so before responding—although posts that resort to personal insults are rarely worth responding to.

If a particular message board or community becomes a source of chronically inflamed arguments, your child should take a break from that community for a few days, a week, or more. Chances are, a cooldown period will make him or her see things in perspective. Online arguments are massive time and energy sinks: When it comes to disagreements over politics and social

issues or just a debate over which video game system is cooler, it's exceedingly difficult to change someone's mind over the Internet.

CYBER-BULLYING

Cyber-bullying is one of the most troubling online issues that kids face today. A child who is being cyber-bullied will find him or herself the victim of teasing, taunting, and put-downs over email, online websites, instant message services, text messages, and other online means. Even though no physical contact is involved, cyber-bullying can be every bit as devastating as traditional bullying, even moreso because it's not difficult for a tormentor to make his or her attacks anonymous and challenging to police and stop. Being a target of cyber-bullying can erode a child's physical and mental health.

By definition, cyber-bullying involves one minor (or minors) harassing another minor (or minors). If an adult becomes involved in sending threats or harassment to minors online, it is considered cyber-stalking and can invite serious legal repercussions.

Though it's tempting to immediately delete all offending emails, text messages, etc., they should be saved up in case they're needed as evidence down the road. Sometimes, cyber-bullying ceases once the antagonist gets bored, which is why it's also important to not respond to or retaliate against the harassment as well.

Some bullies are especially clever about disguising themselves. But most don't realize they can be tracked via their IP (Internet protocol) address and/or the latter half of their email (which identifies which provider they used, for example "@dogs.com" or "@cats.com"). If the bullying is severe, contact the bully's Internet provider. They may be able to revoke or restrict online privileges.

Using these means, help your child try and narrow down the source of the bullying. If confronted in real life, some cyber-bullies fall apart, as they no longer have the power of anonymity.

If the bullying becomes especially prolonged and/or troublesome, get in contact with your child's school, the parents of the bully, or the police. Always contact the police if threats of physical violence are involved.

It's also important to remind your child about the necessity of online etiquette. It's unfortunately not uncommon for a victim of cyber-bullying to become a cyber-bully him or herself.

IN-GAME FRAUD

Believe it or not, certain in-game objects—rare items, hard to obtain magic spells, even powerful characters—sell for hundreds or thousands of dollars in actual real-world currency. In 2010, gamer "Buzz Erik Lightyear" even spent $330,000 on a Crystal Palace Space Station in virtual world *Entropia Universe*. With so much money involved, con men are everywhere: Make sure your children don't share their hard-won gold pieces or special freeze rays with someone

they don't know. Shady individuals aren't an uncommon sight, and don't mind stealing from the unsuspecting. Never give out personal information, passwords or private data online either; you never know who's listening in.

IDENTITY THEFT

Kids are especially vulnerable to identity theft online, as they innocently chat or go about their simulated business. That's because many online games are inherently social, and invite players to connect and interact with one another in what they may not realize are all too public forums.

Even casual comments such as "today's my birthday," offhand remarks that reveal their location ("it's really hot today in Dallas!") or simple asides ("can't wait to go on vacation to Disneyland next week") can provide criminals with a wealth of valuable information. (Including data that can make them aware of children's favorite hangouts and daily routines, or provide insight into when you're not home to guard your kids or possessions.) The problem being that, as you may notice from the 2D or 3D digital doubles which represent players on-screen, everyone is literally always in character, and nothing is as it seems. Just because that friendly Night Elf claims to be a fellow 12 year-old girl and likes to spend hours chatting about music, TV shows and cute boys with your tween, don't be fooled. While it may sound absurd to say so, there's always the offhand chance that they could be a 37 year-old ex-con from Peoria.

Although an extreme example, it nevertheless illustrates a point. Paranoia pays in online realms, and because you don't always know who's eavesdropping or tuning in, you can never be too cautious with guarding personal info. Talk to your kids before granting access to online games make sure they understand the importance of keeping the real and virtual worlds separate, and not divulging details about themselves or your family. If you're still concerned, a variety of tools such as parental controls and buddy lists can let you block online access or limit kids' interaction to only pre-approved individuals.

ADDICTION

Video games can be exceptionally alluring for kids, says Kimberly Young, PsyD, clinical director of the **Center for Internet Addiction** and author of *Caught in the Net: How to Recognize Signs of Internet Addiction*.

As she explained to WebMD.com, that's because otherwise perfectly normal and intelligent children who are unhappy at home or unpopular at school can oftentimes assume the roles of more empowered fictional characters, making virtual life more appealing than their real one. But when playtime and habits cross over into the realm of the unhealthy or extreme, children can be subject to the hazards of addiction.

According to the **Computer Addiction Service** at Harvard University-affiliated McLean Hospital, these are some of the psychological and physical symptoms of addiction:

- Inability to stop the activity.
- Incessantly craving more computer or console time.
- Feeling empty, depressed or irritable when not at the computer or console.
- Neglect of family and friends.
- Lying to employers and family about activities.
- Problems with school or job.
- Carpal tunnel syndrome.
- Dry eyes, migraine headaches, and backaches.
- Failure to attend to personal hygiene.
- Sleep disturbances or changes in sleep patterns.

If you're concerned that your child or another family member is exhibiting signs of addiction, don't dismiss reservations or simply chalk behavior up to "phases," Young advises.

Instead, actively monitor behavior patterns and keep extensive notes on areas of concern including:

- When the individual plays and for how long
- Specific games played and the reactions that they provoke in the player
- Overall play habits and the manner in which games are consumed
- Attitudes exhibited before, during and after gaming sessions
- Problems that result from gaming, including how, when, why and to what extent they arise and persist
- How the party in question reacts to time limits
- Interactions with friends, family members and employers

Documenting the severity of the problem is vital, Young says, as is reaching out for aid from qualified healthcare professionals, as problems tend to intensify, not diminish over time if left untreated. Happily, a growing number of medical practitioners and treatment centers are actively working to address these concerns, and stand ready and on-call to provide aid should issues arise.

SEXUAL PREDATORS

There are many ways to help protect children from falling victim to sexual predators. But the first and foremost is, as always, to communicate openly and honestly with them about the possible dangers such individuals present, and identify ways that they can recognize and avoid these criminals.

The FBI's **Parent's Guide to Internet Safety** offers a wealth of useful information, as do many other sites, such as **www.safekids.com**, **www.kidshealth.org**, **www.connectsafely.org** and **www.wiredkids.org**. We highly recommend that you check out these resources. WiredKids is

especially good to share with children because it is very kid-friendly.

In addition, here are a few basic guidelines to share with your kids that can help them avoid predators when they are online, whether via a video game, chat environment, instant messenger, or social network like Facebook, MySpace or Twitter:

- Never arrange a face-to-face meeting with someone you meet online.
- Never respond to sexually explicit communications. Use the Block feature of the game or site to prevent any future contact.
- Never respond to messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or harassing.
- Never upload (post) pictures of yourself onto the Internet or an online service to people that you do not personally know.
- Never give out identifying information such as your name, home address, birthday, school name, or telephone number.
- Never download pictures from an unknown source, as there is a good chance that they could contain sexually explicit images.
- Never tell people publicly online where you're presently located, headed for soon, or planning to visit in the future.
- Be aware that whatever you are told online may or may not be true.

These guidelines are especially important to consider with younger children. However, it's also important to remember that most folks in online chat environments and video games are normal people who are often seeking legitimate friendships. Many people have met online and become friends in the real world. To go overboard and reject all possible friendships because of possible dangers may deprive your children from forming very meaningful relationships. In the end, striking a safe balance between openness and caution comes down to communication, education and setting clear boundaries.

Also worth keeping in mind: Adolescents in particular are moving away from being under the total control of their parents and beginning to explore more adult aspects of life, including sexuality. The best way to prevent them from falling prey to sexual predators or from obtaining false and misleading sexual messages is to educate them regarding the potential dangers and warning signs up-front, and keep lines of communication open. Although there are technologies that may allow you some degree of control over what content and individuals kids are exposed to, none are absolute. Teaching and empowering kids to make good, intelligent and responsible decisions is the best tool parents have at their disposal for offsetting potential online hazards.

Ultimately, while the dangers of sexual predation may not be as common in video games as they are in other Internet arenas, taking the same precautions when going online is advisable. Kids who are there to play in a game world often find overly personal approaches from strangers to be a "turn off," but some of the online sexual offenders can be quite clever and can gradually establish relationships with kids. Again, informed kids and informed parents, working together, are the best defense.

CHAPTER 11:

LET'S PLAY! PLANNING A FAMILY GAME NIGHT

Now that you've taken a deeper look at, and familiarized yourself with, many of the top issues and concerns about video games facing parents and kids today, you're ready for the most important lesson of all: Have fun!

Among today's most exciting and cutting-edge forms of entertainment, games are a great way to connect with kids, and make lasting memories, while experiencing a positive activity that the whole family can enjoy. The best way to begin: Start planning your own family game night.

"Playing video games with your kids makes them see you as a person, not just a parent," says Chasity Hicks, the Oklahoma mother of three we interviewed earlier. Her household's gaming habits offer a great example of the many types of family-friendly games available today for different age ranges. She and her husband play NBA basketball simulations with their 14 year-old son; dancing game *Dance Central* and motion-powered outing *Kinect Sports* with their 11 year-old daughter; and virtual pet simulator *Kinectimals* with their 6 year-old. "We still get all the benefits of spending time together and having a great time while doing it." She also likes that games can be educational, help with hand-eye coordination, and provide a physical workout.

Don't be afraid to look silly in front of your children either, says Mary Heston of Wired Moms, herself a mother of four kids ranging from 13-21 years of age. "Dancing games are really fun for the entire family, and definitely provide lots of laughs for the kids when Mom and Dad get up there to shake their groove thing." Heston's family plays games on nearly every console available, and even participates in a family fitness challenge using active, exercise-oriented "exergame" *Wii Fit*.

The key for families is obviously finding the right kind of games to play together. "I know a lot of parents who don't let their children play any type of video games, but I think that just like a lot of other things, it can be a good thing if monitored and limited," says Hicks.

"As parents, it is important for us to find things in common with our kids and build those connections," agrees Heston. "Playing video games together is a great equalizer."

That said, those looking for a little Friday evening fun can forget *Monopoly*, *Scrabble*, chess, checkers and *Old Maid*—at least, the versions that don't run on an Xbox 360 or iPad. Easier to enjoy, and clean up after, today's family game nights belong to video games. Following are some tips that can help get you started building your own.

ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES

- **Console—**Although handhelds like the Nintendo DS, Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation Portable/Vita support wireless networking, they're best reserved for killing time while software loads. Instead, stick with set-top systems when planning a family game night. The Nintendo Wii and backward compatible Wii U (which runs original Wii system software) have the greatest selection of family-friendly offerings to date, but consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 also sport a healthy range of choices that everyone can enjoy. Motion control accessories including Microsoft Kinect and PlayStation Move further offer compelling family play opportunities that can be cooperative or competitive, depending on your preference.

- **Controllers**—It never hurts to have a few extra gamepads lying around—preferably one for each player, plus a couple of back-ups. Make sure you look carefully at each before buying, however. Many sport added features like time-speed, slow-motion, or rapid-fire functions that can give users an unfair advantage. And don't forget to have a good supply of batteries or chargers on-hand as well.

- **Snacks**—Cheese. Crackers. Alright… even carrots, celery and juice. Just have something nearby to nibble; you're sure to work up an appetite jabbing wildly away on the controller or hopping around the room while hooting and hollering at the screen—and each other. Rather than junk food though, we always advise serving up a healthy range of snacks. In a pinch, a range of diet, non-fat or low-fat alternatives can also help shave pointless calories.

- **Pen and Paper**—For keeping track of scores. For many, gaming is all about competition—the longer you play, the more you're rewarded with points, victories, collectible items and so forth. Keep a running tally, so you can see how everyone stacks up. Even if you're all working together, chances are there will be something worth keeping track of, even if it's just the number of times Dad accidentally trips over the dog.

PICKING THE RIGHT GAMES

First, ask yourself what's appropriate: Are titles featuring cartoon violence, toy weapons or simulated combat kosher? Then think about what type of games make sense: Collections of frantic, bite-sized mini-games; teeth-gnashing head-to-head puzzlers; fist-pumping sports simulations; or grand-scale strategic engagements? Afterwards, you'll also want to consider which control schemes you prefer, i.e. titles played on traditional gamepads, or motion controlled amusements that require you to get up and moving. Once you've picked the evening's contenders, and set some limits, here are a few genres that make great choices for group play to consider:

- **ACTION/ARCADE**—Butt-bounce your way through titles together via cooperative play options. Alternately, go head-to-head against loved ones in fast-paced, whimsical affairs from pumpkin tosses to turkey shoots.

- **CARD/CLASSIC**—Virtually all your favorite board and card games are available in electronic form. Better yet, these titles remain as playable and addictive now as they did decades ago when first invented.

- **MUSIC, RHYTHM AND DANCING—**Burn calories while strumming along or busting a groove to today's top pop, rock and rap songs. Such offerings—which may require the use of plastic instruments or dance mat controllers—let you literally jam to radio's greatest hits, or shake a leg along with the beat. Many popular music and dance games offer a great mix of competitive options and cooperative routines, and some even allow for up to 20 players to play at once.

- **PARTY**—Crazy, competitive, and whimsical experiences specifically designed for the enjoyment of large gatherings are common fixtures at family gatherings. These titles typically offer a collection of different mini-games, and require family members to perform many different quick, hilarious activities in order to score points.

- **PUZZLE**—Test your brainpower and reflexes against one or more opponents; the quicker you form set shapes or clear screens of blocks, the harder rivals must work to catch up.

- **RACING**—Quench your need for speed zipping along fantasy or real-world courses at maximum velocity. Most of today's racing options allow up to four players to compete simultaneously on one screen (still more can play online), and many even provide the use of zany weapons (turtle shells, bombs, banana peels) as well.

- **SPORTS**—Baseball, football, basketball, hockey, tennis, golf, wrestling… If you can name it, there's a virtual rendition. Fans will find all sorts of zany, arcade-style spoofs up for grabs in addition to pro-level simulations.

RULES/REGULATIONS

Finally, a few important guidelines worth keeping in mind for any family game night:

- Good sportsmanship pays. Gaming isn't about sour grapes. After all, everyone's ultimately a winner.

- Play nicely together. Set up a system so everyone takes turns, and gets to experience titles for an equal amount of time.

- Praise kids' performance. Win or lose, any time they give it their all, it's a job well done.

- Encourage teamwork. Join forces to surmount obstacles or shut down opponents.

- Avoid trash talk. If nothing else, it'll keep kids from sassing you after kicking your sorry butt in a rematch.

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APPENDIX A:

Video Game Glossary: Common Terms

Achievement—Although it began as a specific term for special goals that can be completed on Xbox Live-enabled games in exchange for virtual badges, achievements now can be earned in many different types of games. Players earn special call-outs (e.g. virtual trophies), and in some cases points, for reaching certain goals in a game. In Xbox Live games, **Achievement Points** count toward a player's **Gamerscore**.

Apps—App is short for "application," and refers to any piece of software, but primarily means software that can easily be downloaded and run on an iPhone, iPad or any other mobile device. Apps can be free to play, or cost a small amount ranging from $.99 and up. Some also support online connectivity and in-game purchases.

Avatar—The character a player controls in a game, or the personification of the player in a game's world.

Backward Compatible—When a game system can run games or use accessories created for an older system, the new system is considered to be backward compatible with the old system. Note that backward compatibility can apply to a system's software, hardware, or both. A system may be considered backward compatible even if some older software will not run on the newer system. For example, even though some Xbox titles will not work on the Xbox 360, the 360 is still generally backward compatible with Xbox software.

Beta—A pre-release, nearly feature-complete version of a video game that's more advanced, from a development standpoint, than an **alpha** version. In many cases, a developer releases **beta code** through a **beta test** to identify bugs before a game's final release. Beta tests can be **public** (open to everyone) or **private** (open to a select group of invited testers). Anyone taking part in a public or private beta test is a **beta tester.**

Blu-ray disc—The high-capacity disc format used by Sony's PlayStation 3. Also used to refer to the discs themselves, which can contain movies or video games.

Boss—A notable enemy, usually one possessing much greater power than other foes in the game. A boss is typically found at the end of a game level.

Buddy List—A buddy list, or **friends list**, is a predetermined list of people that a user can interact with. Players who employ them are often notified when those featured on the list are actively online, so that they can seek buddies out and request their participation in online play.

Bug—A programming flaw that causes a piece of software to function incorrectly. Bugs, or **glitches**, are supposed to be identified and fixed during **beta testing** and **quality assurance**, but some bugs inevitably wind up in most commercially-released games.

Casual Game—An easy-to-learn game targeted at and/or played by people without extensive video game experience. The idea of casual games emerged as a marketing concept used to describe titles targeted at people who do not typically play popular console or PC games. There is no hard criteria regarding what makes a game casual or not, but in general, casual games tend to be simple action, puzzle, card or strategy games played on a PC or mobile device and are often downloadable for free or for a small fee. Generally, the more accessible and mainstream-friendly the game, the more likely it is for categorizing as casual.

Casual gamer—Someone who plays **casual games** and/or someone who plays games only occasionally.

Cloud Computing—Cloud computing refers to the practice of storing and running programs on remote servers, which are streamed back to users' desktops or video game consoles over the Internet, rather than housed and run locally. In the case of **cloud gaming**, users effectively beam games down to their PC or TV on-demand, rather than having to download/install them and handle the bulk of processing on their home desktop or dedicated console system.

Controller—Any external device used to control a video game.

Console—Typically refers to a home video game system that hooks up to a television, such as the Nintendo Wii and Wii U, Microsoft's Xbox 360 or Sony's PlayStation 3. Portable systems including the Nintendo DS or 3DS and PlayStation Portable or Vita are also sometimes referred to as consoles as well.

Cooperative—Adjective for a game, mode or quest that allows or requires two or more players to work together towards the same goal.

Developer—A person, creative team or company that creates video games. Note that the same company may be both the **publisher** and the developer of a game.

Digital Distribution—The purchase and/or delivery of a game or other piece of content via a computer network.

Easter Egg—A hidden message, object or feature found in a game that is generally unnecessary, unrelated and otherwise outside of the course of normal gameplay. Common examples of Easter eggs include messages from game programmers to fans and relatives, pictures of development teams and inside jokes.

Educational Games—Games that explicitly focus on educational topics or methods, such as *My Reading Tutor* and *Mario Teaches Typing*. Educational games are not a genre in and of themselves, and games of practically any genre can have educational value.

Entertainment Software Association—Industry trade group representing the largest video game makers in North America.

Entertainment Software Rating Board—Industry ratings group established by the Entertainment Software Association in 1994. Games are submitted by publishers and rated by an anonymous, independent panel of trained reviewers that judge a game based on its content. See **ratings** for a description of ESRB ratings and content descriptors. While the ESRB rates most games released commercially in North America, it does not rate all games. ESRB game ratings do not carry the force of law. ESRB ratings are only for games released in the United States and Canada. Other regions have their own rating bodies and systems, including: Japan's Computer Entertainment Rating Organization (CERO), Australia's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), and Europe's Pan-European Game Information (PEGI).

Episodic Games—Bite-sized, value-priced games released serially in parts, like TV shows, episodic games can be purchased individually or by the season.

Franchise—A set of games, often with similar names, that share one or more key characters, settings or styles of play. Used interchangeably with **series.** Franchises are generally named after a unifying character or the name of the first game in the franchise.

Facebook Games—Also known as **social games**, games that are playable on Facebook's social network are typically free, and usually contain multiplayer elements. Whether it's asking friends to cooperate in a task or just being able to tell others easily about achievements, Facebook games are designed with social play in mind. Developers have flocked to create Facebook games en masse recently because of the vast number of Facebook users who are potential game players.

Flash Games—One type of game available on the Web involves the use of a programming language called Flash. These games can be played in most standard Web browsers that are "Flash enabled," and often involve lengthy and detailed animations.

Free-to-Play Games—Many new games are completely free to play right from your desktop or Web browser. So what's the catch? Often, these games are driven by in-game advertising or entice players to purchase subscriptions or virtual items within the game world via optional **microtransaction**.

Gamer—Anyone who plays games.

Gamertag—Online nickname used by members of Microsoft's Xbox Live online multiplayer service.

GameStop—North America's largest video game retailer.

Gaming—The act of playing a game. Also used as a general catch-all term for the video game hobby. Can sometimes be a source of confusion, since gaming also refers to the gambling industry.

Grief—A practice where other players intentionally try to ruin the experience of other players in a multiplayer game. Types of grief include attacking lower-level characters without obvious reward and using in-game chat channels to communicate antagonistic messages. Players who cause grief are called **griefers.**

Grind—The overly repetitive activities often required to advance in a game. Most often associated with leveling up in role-playing games.

Guild—In an MMO, organized groups of players who share resources and team up to adventure together are called guilds, although they may also go by other names such as corporations, alliances and factions. Guilds are generally led by a small group of players who organize events and set the rules and goals for the group. Given their collaborative nature, participation in guilds inherently involves interaction with other players, including friends and/or strangers.

Hack—Any unauthorized modification to a game or piece of hardware. Hacks often change the nature or abilities of the game or product in question. Can also be used as a verb for the process of creating a hack. A person who creates a hack is a hacker. Do not confuse hacks with **mods,**

which are generally authorized or encouraged by the game's creators, or **cracks**, which allow illegal copies of games to be run.

Independent (Indie) Games—Indie games are developed and published by small, independently funded teams or bedroom coders. Typically able to tackle topics, play styles, and themes that retail games can't, they're often among today's most innovative and unique offerings.

Leetspeak—A loose patois of English and Internet shorthand used by online game players for quick communication inside and outside of games. Some common leetspeak terms/phrases and their definitions:

> **camper:** A player that camps out in an advantageous position on a game map.
> **FTW:** For the win.
> **gg:** Good game.
> **gibs:** A general term for any in-game death. Short for giblets, i.e. what an exploded character generally looks like.
> **leet/l33t/1337:** Short for elite. Used as a term of admiration for an impressive in-game display.
> **lol:** Laughing out loud.
> **newbie/noob/n00b:** A relative newcomer to a game; often used derisively to describe an ignorant player. "You don't know where to find heal spells? What a n00b!"
> **owned/pwned:** A particularly savage defeat in a game. You totally got pwned by that rocket launcher.
> **ROFL:** Rolling on the floor laughing.

iOS—Referring to the operating system used by Apple devices such as the iPhone, iPad and iPod touch, iOS is an abbreviation often used to indicate that games (apps) are playable on some or all of these devices.

Kinect—A camera-based system from Microsoft that uses infrared sensors to track players' body position and movements, allowing them to control on-screen activity through physical motion. The Kinect camera add-on for Xbox 360 includes a built-in microphone, and allows up to two players to use their bodies to control games simultaneously.

Massively Multiplayer—Virtual worlds that exist online around the clock, massively multiplayer online (MMO) games allow thousands of players to collaborate or compete together.

Machinima—A form of computer animation that uses a real-time virtual environment, such

as a game development engine, to create a non-interactive movie. Typically, machinima is distinguished from in-game animations such as cutscenes, even though the same tools are often used in both. Pronounced "muh-sheen-eh-mah."

Microtransaction—A small, online purchase facilitated through a specialized digital distribution system, frequently made from inside games themselves, e.g. when a player pays $0.99 to instantly obtain more resources and power-ups, or speed up a building's construction. Many companies earn considerable profits by selling value-priced in-game items, and optional microtransactions are the most common way that **free-to-play** games make money.

Mini-Game—A small, self-contained game included as a part of a larger game, with its own distinct gameplay.

Mods—A "mod," or modification, is an optional add-on typically created by someone other than the game's creators that changes featured settings, characters, weapons, vehicles and/or gameplay options. It is possible for mods to contain mature material, and since they're not rated by the ESRB, parents need to take extra care if allowing their kids to access them.

Motion Control—Refers to any video game or game system that requires users to employ physical movement in order to control the on-screen activity. Popularized by the Nintendo Wii, most console and handheld systems now contain some sort of gyroscope, accelerometer or motion-tracking device to allow for some range of gesture-based gameplay. Microsoft's Kinect camera system requires no controllers at all aside from the players' body. The Nintendo Wii uses gyroscopes and infrared sensors to track the placement of the controller. Sony's PlayStation Move combines a little bit of both of these systems, utilizing a camera and an ultra-precise controller. Even today's handheld systems such as Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation Vita utilize some form of motion controls.

Online Play—The component of any computer or console game which involves connecting to the Internet, often to enjoy play head-to-head or alongside other individuals online.

Pixel—Short for picture element. The smallest distinct part of a digital image; a single point in the image grid. Monitor resolution is measured in pixels.

PlayStation Move—Sony's motion-control add-on for PlayStation 3 is known as PlayStation Move, and consists of a camera as well as wand-like controllers with different colored spheres on the end of them that look a bit like ping-pong balls.

PlayStation Vita—The successor to Sony's PlayStation Portable, the PlayStation Vita handheld system incorporates touchscreens, motion controls and high-definition graphics to create a powerful handheld system.

Point of View—How a player views a particular scene in a game and/or the physical perspective from which they do so.

Producer—The person in charge of managing a game's development team and ensuring that the game is released on schedule. Producers are usually employed by the game's **publisher**. The responsibilities of the producer can vary greatly depending on the company and the product being produced. An **executive producer** may oversee a number of games and production teams for one company.

Profile—A collection of settings and/or player information that can be shared between play sessions or among other gamers. Profiles can be exclusive to a specific game or piece of hardware or shared online.

Publisher—The company responsible for the financing, manufacturing and marketing of a video game. Also often responsible for a game's distribution.

Quality Assurance—A phase of game development where the game is evaluated and checked for any remaining bugs before shipping to the manufacturer. Quality assurance is often called **playtesting,** which is performed by a **playtester.**

Ratings—An evaluation of the age-appropriateness of a video game's content. In America, games are given the following ratings by the **Entertainment Software Rating Board**, an offshoot of the **Entertainment Software Association**.

> **EC (Early Childhood):** May be suitable for ages three and older.
> **E (Everyone):** May be suitable for ages six and older.
> **E10+ (Everyone 10 and Older):** May be suitable for ages ten and older.
> **T (Teen):** May be suitable for ages 13 and older.
> **M (Mature):** May be suitable for ages 17 and older.
> **AO (Adults Only):** Should only be played by persons 18 years and older.
> **RP (Rating Pending):** Submitted to the ESRB and awaiting final rating.
> **Content Descriptors:** ESRB ratings also come accompanied by specific content descriptors that detail specific potentially objectionable content in the game.

Resolution—The number of **pixels** contained in an image or screen. Note that the resolution of which a system or computer is capable, the resolution of which a screen is capable, and the resolution for which a game is programmed may all be different.

Sandbox—A type of gameplay that provides players with a broad variety of tools and allows them to determine their own objectives. Sandbox may also refer to so-called "open-world" games, in which players are free to progress and explore sprawling landscapes at their own pace.

Scrolling—The direction in which a two-dimensional game progresses. The most common types of scrolling are **side-scrolling** (left-to right or right-to-left) and **vertically- scrolling** (top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top). **Auto-scrolling** games or portions of games scroll the playfield without direct player input.

Single-player—A game designed to be played by a single person.

Social Games—Free to play and designed for play on social networks like Facebook, social games can be enjoyed right from your Web browser. Using your social network account, you can play thousands of new releases in all genres, including card games, board games, and strategy games. Most are designed with multiplayer elements (online high-score tables, achievement sharing, collaborative goals, etc.) in mind, and financed by offering players optional **microtransactions**.

Tester—A paid member of the game development team who examines and helps eliminate **bugs** and other programming errors in the game. Not to be confused with a **beta tester,** who is usually a member of the public and usually unpaid.

Troll—A message board poster who posts provocative claims and statements designed to generate a hostile or angry response. This behavior is referred to as **trolling.**

Unlockable—Hidden content or items that are unlocked through specific in-game actions. Unlockables are usually not essential to play and/or complete the game, but are added as a bonus for players who complete difficult tasks.

User-Generated Content—Some games allow players to customize nearly every part of the gameplay experience, including the ability to create their own characters, missions and levels. When players do this and share these creations with others, the results are known as user-generated content. User-generated content can be a great way to extend the life of a game, but parents need to be careful because this type of content is not regulated by the ESRB.

APPENDIX B:

List of Video Game Genres

This list of genres is by no means exhaustive, but it represents a look at the many types of different video game choices available.

Action: Games that emphasize combat and fighting. Play usually involves working through distinct levels to reach boss battles. Historically, action has been used as an incredibly broad catch-all category for any game that involves combat.

> Differs from **adventure:** Action games focus more on combat and hand-eye coordination.
> Differs from **platform**: Action games focus less on jumping puzzles and navigating complex passages.
> Differs from **fighting**: Action games focus on a succession of battles simultaneously with multiple opponents that are interwoven with exploratory sequences, rather than a series of distinct one-on-one fights.

Action-Adventure: Games combining elements of both the action and adventure genres. The line between action and action-adventure is often very thin, usually depending on the relative importance of combat (action), puzzle-solving (adventure) and statistical character development (role-playing).

Adventure: Games which focus on problem-solving and puzzles with little to no action.

> Differs from **role-playing:** Adventure games have little to no statistical character development or leveling up involved.

Extreme Sports: Games featuring representations of unconventional action sports; games that require, or encourage, the execution of tricks.

Fighting: Games that focus exclusively on one-on-one, two-on-two or three-on-three combat using melee moves or weapons meant for use in close-quarters, typically in arenas of limited size.

Flight Simulation: Games that represent a realistic simulation of airplane physics, sometimes with an emphasis on combat.

First-Person: Any game where the player views the action through the eyes of the player character for most or all of the gameplay.

Massively Multiplayer Online: Any game featuring a large number of players interacting in a persistent world through online communication with other players.

Music and Rhythm: Games which focus on keeping time with music, whether through button presses on a standard controller, playing a plastic instrument or manipulation of a special controller such as a dance pad or microphone.

Party: Games that focus on short, simple mini-games which are designed to be played by multiple players.

Platform: Games focusing on jumping or navigational challenges. Often include elements of action games.

> Differs from **action**: Platform games focus more on jumping and navigating complex passages than on combat.

Point-and-Click—An adventure game in which your character is displayed on screen and control is primarily mouse-driven.

Puzzle: Games that involve abstract puzzle-solving exclusively.

Racing: Games featuring time-based competition between characters or vehicles.

Real-Time: A game in which action does not stop for the entry of commands.

Role-Playing: Games in which you assume the role of a character or group that must solve problems, interact with non-player characters and engage in combat, with statistical character development paramount.

> **Action Role-Playing:** Role-playing games with an emphasis on real-time exploration and melee combat.

> **Tactical Role-Playing:** Turn-based role-playing games emphasize character positioning, movement and attack range on a clearly delineated battlefield.

Shoot-'Em-Up—Jargon. Games defined by their frenetic pace, emphasis on ostentatious weapon-based combat and massive body counts. Also, games that usually involve flying or driving a vehicle and shooting everything on screen other than yourself.

Differs from **first-person shooter:** Shoot-'em-ups don't use a first-person perspective.

Sports—Games featuring representations of real-world sports.

Stealth—Action games that emphasize conflict avoidance and encourage the use of stealth tactics, including hiding and observing enemies from afar.

Strategy—Games emphasizing tactical management of resources and territory against a human or computer-controlled opponent or opponents.

Simulation—When used alone, describes a game whose sole or main purpose is to simulate real-world processes, often without a final goal or explicit purpose.

Survival Horror—Adventure or action-adventure games focused on generating fear and suspense, often with limited resources provided to the player character.

Text-Based—A game in which input and output are largely limited to text. Text-based games can have graphics, but they are usually secondary to the text itself.

Third-Person—Used to describe games or situations played from a perspective removed from the character. The action is generally viewed from above or behind a character via either a user-controlled or fixed camera.

Turn-Based—A game that pauses the action periodically to allow for the input of commands. Common genres: turn-based strategy, turn-based role-playing.

Vehicular Combat—Action games featuring the explicit use of vehicles.

Differs from **racing:** Vehicular combat focuses more on destruction rather than quick navigation of a course.

APPENDIX C:

How to Setup and Use Parental Controls

Like movies and TV shows, video games span a multitude of genres and cover a lot of controversial ground. That means there is the potential for very young kids to run into game content featuring sex, drugs, and explicit references—game content that's far removed from the likes of *Sesame Street: Cookie's Counting Carnival.*

If you're a parent or a guardian, you might not want your young charge stumbling across material that's unsuitable for them. Fortunately, most modern video game systems have tools known as parental controls that can help ensure that kids can only access games that fall under a certain ESRB rating, or let you limit or block access to the Internet and gaming systems themselves. Here's how to activate the parental controls on today's most popular video game devices.

How to Setup PlayStation 3 Parental Controls:

1. Turn on your PlayStation 3 and browse to the main menu. If a game or movie is in the disc drive and automatically loads, just press the **PS button** (located in the middle of the controller) to return to the main menu. If the system asks if you should quit game or movie playback, choose yes.
2. Scroll over to and select the **Settings** option on the PlayStation 3's main menu.
3. Scroll down and select **Security Settings** (hint: a keyhole icon sits nearby).
4. Navigate to and select the **Parental Controls** settings option.
5. Enter your system password if prompted, or the default password (0000) if no password has previously been configured.
6. Choose system restriction levels that correspond with the ESRB video game content ratings that you're comfortable letting your child access. The lower the number, the stricter settings become. The following options restrict content to:
   - "2" – "EC," or "Early Childhood"—games suitable for children aged 3 and up.
   - "3" – "E" or "Everyone"—games suitable for players aged 6 and up.
   - "4" – "E10+" or "Everyone 10 and Up"—Games suitable for players aged 10 and up.
   - "5" – "T" or "Teen"—games suitable for players aged 13 and up.
   - "9" – "M" or "Mature"—games suitable for players aged 17 and up.
   - "10" is "AO" or "Adults Only"—games suitable for players aged 18 and up.

Hints and Tips

• You can also block access to online browsing and play. Select **Internet Browser Start Control** and turn it "On." This will block access to an Internet connection and thus, online play will be disabled.

• The default passcode for changing security settings is "0000," which won't take long for a clever kid to figure out. You can change the passcode by selecting the **Change Password** option. When setting your four-number code, don't make it a birthday, anniversary or something equally memorable and easily guessable.

• Bonus info: You can also use the PlayStation 3's parental controls to restrict kids' access to Blu-rays and DVD movies that have MPAA ratings.

How to Setup Xbox 360 Parental Controls

1. Turn on the Xbox 360.
2. Access the **My Xbox** option from the Main Menu.
3. Flip through the tabs until you reach the **Family Settings** page.

The Xbox 360's **Family Settings** option can be completely turned off, or turned on and customized across a number of different functions. To change the settings of each function, turn your **Console Safety** setting to "On."

• The **Ratings and Content** setting allows parents to regulate which games children can access according to their ESRB video game rating. Those whose ratings are cited as restricted will require a passcode to access. You can select **Game Exceptions** to allow a game to bypass these restrictions. Movie and TV ratings can also be set in a similar fashion, but the console warns that not all are encoded with ratings. Content without a rating attached is treated as **Unrated Content**, which parents can also choose to allow or block. Parents can additionally choose to block anything that is marked as having **Explicit Content**.

• The **Family Timer** lets you set gameplay time limits on a daily or weekly basis, e.g. restricting play to one hour per day or blocking subsequent access for 24 hours, unless you choose to allow children additional playtime. Using a passcode, you can extend time limits if you'd like to grant kids' more time to play. Don't forget to set the clock to the appropriate time zone and current time before using it.

How to Setup Wii Parental Controls

1. Turn on your Wii video game system.
2. Point your Wii remote at the circular **Wii icon** in the bottom left-hand corner of the main menu, and select it.
3. Choose **Wii Settings** (indicated by the wrench icon).
4. Point your Wii remote at the **right arrow icon** and press the A button to flip to page 2.
5. Select the **Parental Controls** option.
6. When prompted, enter your four-digit pin number code (remember it!) and a secret question and answer for added security (hint: don't pick a birthday or other easily predictable password).
7. Choose **Game Settings and PIN**.
8. Select **Highest Game Rating Allowed** to restrict the games that kids can access by ESRB video game content rating.
9. Select **Confirm**.
10. Select **Other Settings**.
11. You can set "Yes" or "No" to restrictions on Wii Points spending, Message Boards, the Internet, the News channel, and online play.

How to Setup Nintendo 3DS Parental Controls

1. Access **System Settings** from the Main Menu (wrench icon).
2. Tap **Parental Controls**. Choose a four-digit PIN and a secret question/answer in case you misplace it.
3. Select **Set Restrictions**.

You can restrict game access based on a game's ESRB video game **Software Rating**.

You can also restrict access to the **Internet Browser**, the **Nintendo 3DS Shop**, the **Sharing of Audio, Video, and Images** as well as **Online Interaction**, **StreetPass** wireless networking, **Friend Registration**, and **DS Download Play**.

The Nintendo 3DS also allows you to restrict the **Display of 3D Images**, which Nintendo recommends doing for gamers aged six and under so as to prevent temporary or permanent eyesight damage.

How to Setup PSP and PSP Go Parental Controls

1. Select **Settings** from the PSP's Main Menu.
2. From there, select **Security Settings**.
3. Choose **Parental Control Level**.
4. Enter your PSP or PSPgo system password if prompted.
5. Use the arrow keys to choose your preferred parental controls level. As on the PlayStation 3, you can restrict game access to software based on a game's ESRB content rating. Numeric values represent the degree of strictness, with lower numbers presenting tighter restrictions (e.g. 1 is more restrictive than 10). You can also restrict movie access based on a film's rating from the MPAA. The following options restrict content to:
   - "2" – "EC," or "Early Childhood"—games suitable for children aged 3 and up.
   - "3" – "E" or "Everyone"—games suitable for players aged 6 and up.
   - "4" – "E10+" or "Everyone 10 and Up"—Games suitable for players aged 10 and up.
   - "5" – "T" or "Teen"—games suitable for players aged 13 and up.
   - "9" – "M" or "Mature"—games suitable for players aged 17 and up.
   - "10" is "AO" or "Adults Only"—games suitable for players aged 18 and up.
6. Select **Internet Browser Start Control** to restrict access to the Internet browser and Wi-Fi wireless online access in general, which also toggles a child's ability to play games online.
7. Select **Change Password** to create a PIN number passcode, which allows you to restrict or allow access to questionable game and video content. Four zeros ("0000") is the default.

How to Setup PC Parental Controls

It's no exaggeration: Kids today can practically navigate their way around a computer before they can successfully learn to walk across a room without stumbling. That's why it's important to think of Macs, PCs and the Internet as extensions to the real world: Wonderful places and people abound online, but there are also a lot of unsafe playgrounds.

No parent can keep their kid out of mischief 24 hours a day, so PCs and Macs have optional safeguards in place to limit browsing options. Parents can even set timers that will disallow access to the computer at certain times of day. Here's how to setup parental controls and keep your kids safe online.

How to Setup Parental Controls in Windows 7

To Set Time Limits:

-Access the **Control Panel** through the **Start** button. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, click **Set Up Parental Controls for Any User**. If you're prompted for an admin password, type it in.
-Select the account you want to set up controls for.
-Click on **Enforce Current Settings** under **Parental Controls**.
-Select **Time Limits**.
-You'll be presented with a grid. By dragging your mouse across certain hours and days, you can restrict computer usage. A blue square means that hour is blocked.
-Click **OK**.

To Restrict Program Usage:

-Access parental controls by clicking on the **Start** button and opening the **Control Panel**. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, click **Set Up Parental Controls for Any User**. Type in the admin password if you're prompted for it.
-Click on the profile of the person whose access you want to restrict.
-Click on **Enforce Current Settings** under **Parental Controls**.
-Click **Block Specific Programs**.
-Click **[User's Name] Can Only Access the Programs I Allow**.
-Select the programs you want to allow.

To Restrict Games by Content:

-Access parental controls by clicking on the **Start** button and opening the **Control Panel**. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, click **Set Up Parental Controls for Any User**. Type in the admin password if you're prompted for it.
-Click on the profile of the person whose access you want to restrict.
-Click on **Enforce Current Settings** under **Parental Controls**.
-Click **Games**.
-Click **Yes** under **Can [User's Name] play games?**
-Click **Set Game Ratings** under **Block (or Allow) Games by Rating and Content Type**.
-Select the content types you want to block under **Block These Types of Content**.

To Restrict Games by Age Rating:

-Access parental controls by clicking on the **Start** button and opening the **Control Panel**. Under **User Accounts and Family Safety**, click **Set Up Parental Controls for Any User**. Type in the admin password if you're prompted for it.

-Click on the profile of the person whose access you want to restrict.

-Click on **Enforce Current Settings** under **Parental Controls**.

-Click **Games**.

-Click **Yes** under **Can [User's Name] play games?**

-Click **Set Game Ratings** under **Block (or Allow) Games by Rating and Content Type**.

-Under **Which Ratings are OK for [User's Name?]**, click a ratings level.

How to Setup Parental Controls in Windows Vista

Parental controls can be setup in Windows Vista in order to control a child's access to programs, games, and the computer in general. The person setting up the controls will need an Admin account on Vista.

To Setup Parental Controls:

-Click the **Start** button, access the **Control Panel**, and click **Parental Controls**. Enter an Admin password if you're prompted for one.

-Click on the account for which you want to set Parental Controls.

-Under **Parental Controls**, click **On**. From there, you can adjust specific settings. Some of these include:

• **Web Restrictions:** This allows you to restrict websites and ensure that your kids only visit age-appropriate sites. You can also indicate whether or not you want to allow downloads on that specific account.

• **Time Limits:** Set the days and hours during which your child is allowed to log onto the computer with his or her account.

• **Game Ratings:** You can block certain games, or filter them according to their content rating.

• **Program Limits:** This setting helps you block and allow which programs your child is allowed to access.

With Windows Vista, you can also monitor how your kids spend their time on the computer:

-From the **Parental Controls** panel, click on a child's profile.

-From there, click on **View Activity Reports**. You'll be whisked to a listing of the last sites your kids visited, the latest files they downloaded, the games they've recently played, the applications they've accessed, and more. If you've blocked sites using Internet Explorer's Content Adviser, you can also access a report of which blocked sites your child tried to visit.

How to Setup Parental Controls in Windows XP

You can restrict access to certain Internet-based content using **Internet Explorer's Content Adviser**.

To do so:

-Select **Internet Options** in the **Tools** menu.

-Click on the **Content** tab then click on **Enable**.

-You'll be taken to the **Content Adviser** properties window. From there, you can adjust the level of offensive content you want displayed on websites. Using a slider, you can tone down instances of offensive language, nudity, sex, and violence.

-Under the **General** tab, you can block all access to certain sites.

-You can also choose a password with which you can protect your settings. The password will need to be turned off via the Content Adviser, so don't lose it!

How to Setup Parental Controls for Mac (OS X 10.5.X Snow Leopard)

Apple's Mac parental controls allow parents to set time limits on computer usage, restrict access to certain content and apps, control incoming and outgoing emails, and can also be used to control which iChat friends may be contacted. To setup controls on OS X 10.5.X:

-Select **System Preferences** from the **Apple** menu.

-Click the **Parental Controls** icon in the **System** section.

-Click the **Lock** icon in the bottom-left corner. You will need to provide an Admin username and password.

-Click **OK**.

To Restrict App Usage:

-Select the account you're managing from the left menu.
-Click the **System** tab.
-Click on **Allow Only Selected Applications** and pick from the list of apps as needed.

To Restrict Content:

-Click the **Content** tab in the **Parental Controls** menu.
-You have the option to block profanity in the Mac's dictionary, if you like. Place a check in the appropriate box.
-Internet content can be unrestrained (click the **Allow Unrestricted Access to Websites** button) or the browser can attempt to filter out adult websites automatically. Needless to say, this option isn't foolproof.

You can also customize access to certain websites with the **Allow Access Only to these Websites** option. This option also populates a list of well-known kid-friendly sites, and can be added to as necessary.

To Restrict Email and iChat Access:

-Click on the **Mail & iChat** tab. This option lets you manage who your child can send email to, and whom they can receive from.
-The **Limit iChat** box lets you prevent your child from contacting any iChat user who isn't on an approved list.

To Set Time Limits:

-Click on the **Time Limits** tab in the **Parental Controls** menu.
-To limit weekday use, go to the **Weekday Time Limits** section and click the **Limit Computer Use to** box.
-Use the slider to set time limits between 30 minutes to 8 hours every weekday.
-To limit weekend use, repeat the same actions in the **Weekend Time Limit** section of the menu.

To View Parental Controls Logs:

-Click on the **Logs** tab in the **Parental Controls** menu.
-You can use the drop-down menu to view websites and applications that were accessed within the past several months, or at any time during the machine's active history.

APPENDIX D:

Online Resources for Parents

If you're a parent or child's guardian and your kid loves playing video games, you'll want to make sure you know everything about the pastime. Here are some online resources that provide helpful information for parents.

WEBSITES FOR PARENTS

Readily available via the Internet, all of the below sites provide the info you need to make informed video game purchases, keep abreast of breaking news and trends, or determine which titles are appropriate for your children.

FamilyFriendlyVideogames.com
This site reviews games and apps, highlighting games that are fun for families and kids of various ages. The site places special emphasis on games that are fun for families to play together, and offers an easy search function allowing families to find games by platform, gameplay style and age appropriateness.

Get Game Smart
Get Game Smart educates parents on how to setup parental controls, set time limits for healthy playing, and offers tips on how to help kids deal with cyber-bullying. The Microsoft-owned resource also instructs kids on how to report sites with inappropriate content.

GamerDad: Gaming With Children
GamerDad's website is in blog format and offers a warm personal touch, helping parents who love games share their pastime with their kids, as well as providing hints and tips for healthier gaming habits.

Common Sense Media
Common Sense Media helps parents choose games that are suitable for children by offering detailed game outlines and recommendations. The site also reviews movies, apps, television shows, books, and music.

Parents' Choice
Parents' Choice reviews media that's appropriate for children, and aims to educate parents about the benefits of video games.

Children's Technology Review
CTR keeps parents up-to-date with what's going on in the world of kid-oriented media. The site includes information on activities like "AppCamp," a summer program that teaches children how to develop their own games and apps.

Edutaining Kids
Edutaining Kids features extensive lists and articles that outline the best games and systems for families. It also reviews games that are appropriate for teenagers.

GamerPops.com
Written from the perspective of a couple of dads who are gamers, GamerPops looks at games through the eyes of parents who are themselves huge video game fans.

Family Friendly Gaming
Meant for Christian families, Family Friendly Gaming aims to help parents select titles that are morally appropriate for their children. This site presents readers with a monthly online magazine, and places a heavy emphasis on the Christian aspects of games.

The Media Awareness Network
This website (based in Canada) educates parents on the benefits of sharing game time with their kids.

Plugged In
Plugged In reviews games, movies, and television shows and makes special note of whether or not said entertainment choices are appropriate for kids, teens, and/or adults.

What They Play
IGN's What They Play site features complete game summaries that outline how a game is played and break down the reasons behind the game's assigned ESRB rating. The website also suggests things to watch out for in popular M-rated mature games.

FOR REVIEWS, PREVIEWS, DEMOS, VIDEOS AND SCREENSHOTS:

g4tv.com
GameRevolution.com
GameSpot.com
GameSpy.com
GamesRadar.com
IGN.com
GameTrailers.com

FOR VIDEO GAME RENTALS:

GameFly.com
OnLive.com
WildTangent.com
GameMine.com
GameHuddle.com
Redbox.com
Blockbuster.com
Gamerang.com

FOR INFORMATION ON PARENTAL CONTROLS:

Microsoft Xbox 360 Family Settings
http://www.xbox.com/en-US/Live/Family

Nintendo Wii Parental Controls
http://www.nintendo.com/consumer/systems/wii/en_na/settingsParentalControls.jsp

Sony PlayStation Knowledge Center
http://www.us.playstation.com/support

Microsoft Windows Family Settings
http://windows.microsoft.com/en-US/windows-vista/Protecting-your-kids-with-Family-Safety

Parental Controls and Online Child Protection: A Survey of Tools and Methods
http://www.pff.org/parentalcontrols

Guide to Online Safety Technology
http://www.GetParentalControls.org

FOR ONLINE KIDS SAFETY:

OnGuard Online (FTC) - http://onguardonline.gov/index.html
Web Wise Kids - http://www.webwisekids.org/
ConnectSafely - http://www.connectsafely.org/
Get Net Wise - http://getnetwise.org/
WiredSafety - http://www.wiredsafety.org/
SafetyClicks (AOL) - http://www.safetyclicks.com/?icid=sc_esrb
SafeKids - http://www.safekids.com/
The Online Mom - http://www.theonlinemom.com/

APPENDIX E:

Top 10 Best Game Franchises for Kids

Picking a video game for kids can be difficult—mostly because there are so many great options. But thanks to these popular franchises, all of which are proven to provide hours of fun for the entire family, you'll have no problem figuring out what game to play next. Just ask the millions of everyday players just like yourself who've made them such enduring hits.

The LEGO series—LEGO games are available on almost every modern game console, and it's not uncommon for a LEGO game or two to usher in the birth of a new console. *LEGO Star Wars III: The Clone Wars* was available for purchase at the launch of the Nintendo 3DS, for instance. But *Star Wars* isn't the only popular movie franchise to receive the LEGO touch. Other LEGO-fied franchises include *Harry Potter, Pirates of the Caribbean, Indiana Jones,* and *Batman.* Unsurprisingly, LEGO-style games are more lighthearted than their source material: Defeated enemies crumble into blocks. Many of them also offer simultaneous multiplayer options, making them ideal for family play.

Pokémon—Don't let Pikachu's cute mousy mug fool you. *Pokémon* is one of the most intense game series ever released, and it has a thoroughly devoted fan base that extends across a huge age group. Combined, *Pokémon Black* and *White* sold two million copies in two weeks, and that's in the United States alone. What makes *Pokémon* so compelling (besides its cast of mythological monsters) is that the trading card game (TCG)-based gameplay experience can be as easy or difficult as you choose to make it. Young kids can play through the main quest without many issues, but older players can devise drawn-out battles with friends that border on scientific.

Super Mario games—Mario is one of gaming's oldest and most recognizable characters (in an earthly sense, that is; in-game, he's still spry enough to bust up some turtles), and he's among the field's most popular. That's because his signature games (side-scrolling and 3D platform-hopping arcade experiences set in candy-colored worlds of cartoon whimsy) are typically excellent. *New Super Mario Bros.* was a hit on the Nintendo DS, and *New Super Mario Bros Wii* remains one of the system's best-sellers. The latter is particularly suited for family play, as it offers a simultaneous four-player option. What's more, Mario games don't coddle the player, though more recent ones offer hints, suggestions, and other options for younger gamers who might be having a hard go of things.

Battle of Giants series—Ubisoft's *Battle of Giants* games involve modifying and pitting huge monsters together in battle. Some of these beasts include dinosaurs, dragons, and giant insects.

It's not a particularly deep series, but it's undeniably fun to build up toothsome beasts and command them to rip upon one another. The "giant monster" aspect of the series pretty much sells itself.

Star Wars series—The appeal of the *Star Wars* franchise extends across two generations. And regardless of what fans of *Episodes IV, V,* and *VI* think of the prequels, Jar-Jar, Anakin Skywalker, and the Jedi pantheon are huge hits with kids. Most modern *Star Wars* games are based on the prequels, especially the hit animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. The franchise has produced some solid titles (e.g. popular MMO *Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures)*, and they're definitely more forgiving than the *Star Wars* games from the era of the NES and Super Nintendo.

Pac-Man games—*Pac-Man* is another timeless game character and franchise whose original premise (run through a maze while escaping from pursuing ghosts and eat, eat, eat) is irresistible for kids and adults alike. The *Pac-Man* titles are easy to learn, addictive, and have received very compelling and affordable upgrades in recent years thanks to online distribution channels like the Apple App Store, PlayStation Network, WiiWare and Xbox Live Arcade.

Animal Crossing games—Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* games can be regarded as a more lighthearted take on *The Sims* franchise. Players build up their own towns, meet neighbors, fish, plant, and pay off the mortgage on their homes. If nothing else, that last task will prepare any kid for what's to come in his or her adult life. Overall though, *Animal Crossing* games are cute, colorful, and a lot of fun to re-visit over and over—even for grown-ups.

Raving Rabbids series—The unstable Rabbids from the *Raving Rabbids* series initially hailed from the *Rayman* games –another long-running franchise. While the *Raving Rabbids* games, mostly mini-game collections and action-adventures, have been released in multiple genres and across multiple systems, one thing has remained constant throughout: The crude, nutty antics of the Rabbids themselves are a huge draw for kids and tweens.

Super Monkey Ball games—*Super Monkey Ball* games are a compelling exercise in dexterity wherein the player must guide a rolling monkey in a ball to safety by tilting and manipulating the environment around him. It's simple stuff, but pretty engaging for the whole family: The series has been around since 2001.

Sonic the Hedgehog games—Sonic's fan base is pretty divided these days, but he still has a dedicated following that's composed primarily of tweens. The gameplay in Sonic games (which usually focuses on running, bounding over platforms and collecting rings at breakneck speed) is easy to grasp, and the large cast of colorful mammals who populate Sonic's world is a big draw for younger audiences.

APPENDIX F:

8 Ways to Save on Video Games

Good news: Video games are fun, and a great way to connect and play with your family.

Bad news: They cost money—some of them significant amounts of it.

Happily, despite the fact that many of today's games are expensive, you can still indulge in gaming without winding up in the poorhouse. In fact, the sheer availability of affordable alternatives is one thing that makes video games an ideal family activity.

What's more, the video game industry is extremely competitive. Games distributed at retail have to compete with free-to-play online games and downloadable titles that are available for mere pennies. Bearing this in mind, it's easier than ever to fit gaming into your budget. Here are some handy tips that will help you keep more cash in your pocket.

Evaluate Your Desires and Buy Accordingly—Before you splurge on a game, you should take a second to think about what it is that you *really* want. Obviously, there is no replacement for some titles: Only Mario is Mario. But if you just feel like a good, solid role-playing game, take a look at the digital market first. Look up reviews for RPGs published on PlayStation Network, Xbox Live Arcade, and WiiWare. Consider a retro blast from the past on the Virtual Console or one downloadable from GOG.com. Even the App Store has some great RPGs for five dollars or less. Of course, if you want something long and involved—e.g. *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*—retail is your best bet.

Buy Used Games—GameStop's used games market is staggeringly huge, but smaller video game retail establishments also have a lot of used titles on hand, and they're often willing to let them go for discounts that go beyond a couple of bucks. Old sports games can be real bargains: Last year's *Madden NFL* game or WWE title will go for a song once the latest version hits the shelf.

Streaming On-Demand (Cloud) Games—If you have a solid Internet connection and a decent amount of bandwidth to play with, you might want to look into streaming games, also called "cloud gaming." Services like **OnLive** and **Gaikai** let you download full games and demos for cheaper than what you'd pay at retail. In addition to options for the PC, OnLive offers affordable console game streaming solutions, so even if you swear by set-top boxes, it's worth a look.

Buy Games for Special Occasions Only—This is ideal if you're a parent buying a game for a child, but it's also a good way for an adult gamer to practice self-discipline. Those of us who grew up with games and can now buy them ourselves lament our backlogs: Many parents remember buying games that they hardly ever played, let alone finished. But when we were gifted games on holidays or birthdays, we made sure we squeezed everything we possibly could out of those titles because a new game wasn't forthcoming for months. Nobody is suggesting that you should shackle your game budget forever, but why not give it a try until you've worked through the plastic mountain piled up beside your PlayStation?

Game Rentals—"Renting" a game used to mean going to the neighborhood video store and selecting a Super Nintendo cartridge to take home for three days. With Blockbuster on the ropes, game rental services have primarily switched to online distribution methods. **GameFly**, which has multiple plans that revolve around mailing out hard copies of video games, is the most successful service. Other competitors include **Gamerang** and **GameMine**, which may provide similar rent-by-mail opportunities at a slightly lower or more flexible price. Like Netflix, most online rental services offer free shipping and ship their games with a prepaid envelope that you can drop into the mailbox when you're ready to give the games back. Popular services such as Redbox are also beginning to test the game rental waters, so it's likely that families may soon benefit from enhanced competition in this emerging market.

Buy a Game That The Entire Family Can Play—Today's games have an increasing focus on online and offline multiplayer. Offline multiplayer games—the ones that corral a bunch of players on the couch at once—are well-suited for crowds. Nintendo has a certain expertise at designing multiplayer games, hence the success of *Mario Kart, Wii Sports, New Super Mario Bros. Wii, Donkey Kong Country Returns,* and many more. But don't overlook accessories from other manufacturers like Microsoft's Kinect or Sony's PlayStation Move either. They're a bit of an investment since they cost more than a single game, but the multiplayer options that supporting software offers makes the cost well worth it by helping extend replay value significantly.

Lag Behind a Generation—You can always buy up old iterations of consoles once the newer, shinier versions hit the market. The old technology won't make you the coolest family on the block, but you will save gobs of money. Need proof? Most American retailers, including Wal-Mart, Target, and GameStop, are buying up old models of the Nintendo DS from users who want to switch out for a 3DS. Now's a great time to grab a Nintendo DSi XL for yourself.

Finally, Play for Free—There is no shortage of free-to-play games on the Internet, and on the iPhone and iPad App Store. Not all of them involve looking after cows, either. Try Sony's *Free Realms* and explore a huge 3D world, or build a carnival on Facebook with *Ravenwood Fair*. You can see our list of the best free online games sites in Appendix M - Best Free Online Game Sites**.**

APPENDIX G:

10 Tips to Promote Healthy Family Gaming Habits

"The family that plays together stays together." It's usually said in half-jest, but there's a thread of truth in the saying. When a family enjoys a video game as a group, they're also learning good sportsmanship, engaging in communication, and just getting a chance to sit, talk, and open up to one another.

Most family therapists recommend that parents and kids wind down together with at least one family game night a week, though video games aren't often credited as a "healthy" family activity like *Monopoly* or *Jenga*. Coupled with good gaming habits though, video games can be a very fun and healthy way for a family to bond. Here are a few ways for your family to get the most out of video games.

1. **Set Time Limits:** When you're enjoying games as a family unit, how much time spent in front of the TV is too much? There's no hard number: Much depends on what your home schedule is like, and when free time is available (this can be especially difficult when one or more parents works in shifts). An hour and a half of game time together is generally considered a good, solid number, however, which is in the range of recommendations we discussed earlier. That way, the family has ample time to get into the game, but nobody will sink into a pit of screen fatigue.

2. **Try Multiplayer Games:** Online multiplayer games can be a lot of fun for a family if the proper resources (like multiple computers/consoles) are at hand. If that's not possible, there are lots of games that offer local multiplayer right in your living room. One extremely popular multiplayer choice is *New Super Mario Bros.* for the Wii, which allows up to four players to play at once. Others include *Cars 2: The Video Game*, *Rayman Origins* for Xbox 360 and PS3 and *Pictionary* from THQ.

3. **Use Free-to-Play Parent Accounts:** There are countless free-to-play massively-multiplayer online (MMOs) games on the Internet, and some of them encourage parents to play alongside their kids with special "parent" accounts. For a fun, educational online gaming experience that also makes a great bonding activity and way to span the distance between generations, try playing titles like *Moshi Monsters* or *Herotopia* with your children.

4. **Provide Healthy Snacks:** We're all guilty of reaching for the potato chips and Mountain Dew when we game. But when kids get involved, it's as good a time as any to practice better snacking habits. Try fresh veggies and dip, cheese, water, or fruit juice as healthy substitutes. At the very least, look for zero-calorie, fat-free, low-fat or diet options as an alternative to standard junk food and soda that pile on the empty calories.

5. **Promote Patience and Stress Relief:** Sometimes we all get upset with video games. But while a little frustration is to be expected when a game doesn't go your way, when you game

as a family, you should disallow cursing, screaming, and controller-throwing. That goes for adults as well as kids! If you do get upset, simply pause, step back and take a deep breath. Taking a temporary break won't just help you relieve stress. It'll also allow you to approach titles with a cooler head and steadier hand, and perform better while playing as a result.

6. **Engage in Cooperative Games:** Some games only provide one save file with which to store your progress, but this can be an ideal way to play as a family. With games like *Nintendogs + Cats* for the Nintendo 3DS or *Animal Crossing* for the Nintendo DS or Wii, you can all share in the process of raising a puppy or building a town. These low-stress games are also a good way to ease a non-gamer into the digital world. Other options such as the many LEGO video games or dance titles like *Michael Jackson: The Experience* let you actively play together, going on sprawling adventures or rocking the house with help from the entire clan. Whether manually taking turns passing the controller at agreed-upon times or using the dedicated "co-op" modes that certain titles offer, collaborative play can be a lasting source of entertainment that brings families closer together.

7. **Setup Parental Controls:** Virtually every video game console from this generation (and presumably all of those going forward) offers parents the chance to tap into built-in controls that can regulate play time or filter out potentially offensive content. This can be an effective way to ensure that the family only plays games at designated times or options that are appropriate for all ages. Some even offer features that can block Internet connectivity, prohibit play at preset hours and restrict access to inappropriate films, giving you complete control over when, what and how your kids play.

8. **Balance Gaming With Physical Activity:** Family game time is a blast, but don't forget to mix things up as far as family activities go. Also be sure to set aside time to hike, ride bikes, play outdoors, or start up a game of hockey or baseball. Dr. Clem Bottino from Children's Hospital Boston encourages families to play video games together, but believes there needs to be a balance with other activities as well. "I recommend one hour of physical activity—playing outside, basketball, walking, swimming… any moving activity—for each hour spent playing video games," he says. Or, as we suggested before, you might consider boosting the requirement to two hours if getting outside and enjoying nature or physical activity is particularly important to your family.

9. **Don't Play Too Late:** Dr. Bottino also warns that gaming can be an intense activity to engage in before bedtime. "Your mind should be calm and peaceful before going to sleep," he explains. "Turning off your game at least one hour before bedtime can help maximize restful sleep."

10. **Consider Active Gaming:** Playing video games isn't strictly a sedentary activity. Families can really get up and moving with motion-sensing "active game" titles that engage the whole body, including games like *Just Dance* and *Dance Dance Revolution*, and games that utilize the Wii Balance Board or remote, PlayStation Move and Microsoft Kinect. Even better, many active games are very easy to learn, which makes them ideal for introducing non-gamers to the pastime.

APPENDIX H:

10 Online Safety Tips

At first glance, the Internet seems like a vast, untamed frontier. That's not a bad comparison. The 'net is a wondrous and hugely useful tool for learning and entertainment, but it can also be a pretty rough place for a kid to dwell if they don't stay within certain boundaries.

Simply forbidding your child to go on the Internet is not an option: The Internet is an extremely important reservoir of knowledge, and is as relevant to our daily lives as books, computers, TVs, radios and phones. Instead, parents should work to instill safe browsing habits in their children as soon as possible. When we prepare our kids for the outside world, we tell them not to accept gifts from strangers, and to look both ways before crossing the street. In the online world, the same common sense rules apply.

1. **Never share information with strangers online:** This is one of the most important keys to remaining safe on the Internet (and a good bit of advice for adults too), especially in the age of social networking. Parents should warn their children that personal information such as names, addresses, ages, hometowns, birthdates, schools, etc. should never be given out to strangers through email, chat clients, status updates or any other means.

2. **Spend computer time together:** By spending time together online researching topics, pursuing leisure activities and playing games, parents can gain greater insight into their child's browsing habits and favorite Internet hangouts. These shared moments also promote trust and understanding, improving communications between you and your sprouts.

3. **Try kid-friendly Web browser add-ons:** Firefox add-ons like **KidZui** and **Glubble** can be installed to make Internet activity safe and fun by offering kid-safe Web browsing as well as parental controls and usage or activity reports. These free downloadable add-ons are easy to find, simple to use, and give parents peace of mind while their kids are on the Internet. Switching back to regular browsing is as simple as inputting a password. For top suggestions, see Appendix T: Tools for Keeping Your Kids Safe Online.

4. **Establish set times for online usage:** For very young children, it's a good idea to establish specific predetermined times during which computer usage is permitted, preferably when parents can keep an eye on what's happening on their desktop. As a general rule, kids and young teens shouldn't be on the computer during the wee hours and/or when the rest of the family is asleep—doubly so on school nights. Most Windows and Mac operating systems allow you to set controlled hours during which certain users are permitted to use the computer. If said user tries to gain access during a forbidden time, he or she will be barred and logged out automatically.

5. **Know the games your children play:** There are a great deal of free online games and virtual worlds on the Internet, but not all of them are appropriate for kids. Get to know what your child is playing, and familiarize yourself with the game's safety rules (most online virtual words have a "For Parents" section that outlines moderation policies). Some online games even let parents hook up their own accounts to their kids' accounts so that adults can moderate playtime.

6. **Talk about safe online spending:** Many of the aforementioned free games offer special items and exclusive levels for a small fee (this is primarily how most virtual words fund their projects). Talk to your kids about online spending, and make sure they understand that they need your permission before making purchases. It goes without saying, but don't just hand over your credit card!

7. **Use parental controls and friends lists:** Most computer operating systems, consoles and Internet browsers offer easy-to-use parental controls that can restrict a child's computer usage, block or limit online connectivity and help keep them away from unsightly content. Check your computer's control panel and your browser or console system's Settings and/or Preferences menus for more details. Buddy or friend lists can also restrict whom your child is allowed to chat and play with, letting you confine online interactions to friends and family members only.

8. **Never let kids meet online acquaintances unsupervised:** The Internet is remarkable in that it lets us make friends with exciting people from all around the world. Occasionally, the luckier ones amongst us get to hold a real-life meeting with the buddies that we make online. These meetings are a thrill, but they should never happen without a third party at-hand to supervise and make sure everything turns out safely—and that advice extends to adults meeting online friends for the first time, too.

9. **Investigate unexpected gifts or attention:** Online shopping lets us order cool stuff from around the world. We can even automatically send gifts to friends using websites like Amazon.com. But if your child suddenly starts receiving packages from unfamiliar addresses, and/or if he or she gets gift boxes from online stores without first consulting you about a purchase, it's best to look deeper into the source.

10. **Above all else, communicate:** Talk to your child about his or her Internet adventures. Discuss the websites he or she likes to visit, ask about the friends he or she makes, and address any questions or concerns he or she may have. After all, when it comes to the online world, and online safety in particular, there's no such thing as a boring or fruitless conversation.

APPENDIX I:

Top 10 MMOs/Online Virtual Worlds for Kids

From fantasy games to car games, war games and sci-fi- or superhero-themed outings, today's virtual worlds offer endless choice. Here are ten popular massively multiplayer online realms that any kid would love to make his or her own. Note that although they may be free to play, most provide options to buy special in-game items and bonuses with real world money via online purchases known as "microtransactions."

NeoPets—*NeoPets,* currently owned by Nickelodeon, is a browser-based world wherein kids adopt a cute mythical monster, feed it, play with it, and even battle it against other monsters. The *NeoPets* community is huge and has an extensive fan base that is invited by the website to contribute stories and artwork. *NeoPets* is also one of the very first kid-oriented virtual words to hit the Internet: Back in 1999, it launched as a relatively crude (but lovable) HTML-based site.

NeoPets

FreeRealms—*FreeRealms* is a free 3D virtual world where players create a character, and then are able to explore a vast game world with many different types of gameplay. With so much variety in terms of how you can play, players are bound to find activities they like, such as searching for lost treasure, playing a trading card game or even just checking to see how their in-game friends are doing.

Wizard 101—A magic-themed fantasy game**,** *Wizard101* is one of the most popular free online multiplayer games. Players can go on adventures, decorate a castle or engage in raising virtual pets. There's also a healthy dose of dueling against legendary creatures along with a magical collectible card game and fully-narrated storyline to enjoy.
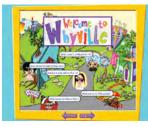
Wizard 101

Club Penguin—*Club Penguin* is one of the most popular online game worlds for kids, with equal emphasis placed on safety and fun. Players create a colorful penguin avatar to participate in a variety of activities with friends, and can also use filtered chat features. Live moderators are always on-hand as well to make sure there's no one around to ruin the experience for anyone.

FusionFall—*FusionFall* is a somewhat dystopian virtual world (nothing quite at PG level, though) wherein players must fight to free the planet from an alien menace. What makes the game especially compelling, though, is that it features characters and locations made famous by Cartoon Network's colorful cast. Throughout the game, you'll meet Dexter, the Powerpuff Girls, Ben10, and more of TV's top children's stars.

WhyVille—*WhyVille* is a virtual world that emphasizes education, though there's also plenty of fun to be had, of course. Users learn about science, art, and geography. They can also start their own business and "sell" user-generated "Face Parts" from which other players can assemble their in-game avatars.

WhyVille

Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures—This massively-multiplayer online game lets players take the role of a Jedi or a Sith. Participants choose a side (now's your chance to try the Dark Side just once), battle threats, play mini-games, and interact with characters from the popular *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* cartoon show. When the galaxy pauses to breathe, players can also decorate their houses with furniture and accessories.

Webosaurs—*Webosaurs* is a virtual world that lets kids use a dinosaur as an in-game avatar. That's pretty compelling on its own as a gaming concept, but the title also offers lots of games and activities to play through. *Webosaurs* is another online game that prioritizes player safety through safe chat methods and constant moderation.

Moshi Monsters—In *Moshi Monsters*, you adopt a pet monster and work to complete puzzles to earn Rox, the game's currency. With your Rox, you can visit different parts of town to purchase items to customize your monster, decorate your room or even plant a garden to attract pets for your monster. The game continues to increase in popularity, boasting in 2011 that a new player signed up every second.

Moshi Monsters

MapleStory—*MapleStory* is a 2D side-scrolling fantasy MMO game that has maintained considerable popularity in North America since 2005. Players explore dungeons and fight monsters either alone, or while teamed up with friends. It's an ideal world for tweens and young teens who want a little more combative action than what's typical for most kid-oriented MMOGs.

APPENDIX J:

Best MMOs for Parents and Older Kids

For parents and older kids looking for a massively multiplayer online (MMO) experience, here's a list of popular virtual worlds that you may enjoy.

FREE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE (MMO) GAMES

Many virtual worlds and massively multiplayer online games are completely free to play, yet still compete with the best that retail games have to offer. Several offer optional in-game bonuses, power-ups and items to buy if you want a time-saving boost, though value-minded shoppers needn't spend a cent.

From fantasy to sci-fi, war and even kids games, all offer a great way to play online alongside fellow gaming fans.

- **The Lord of the Rings Online**
- **Champions Online**
- **Dungeons & Dragons Online**
- **Quick Hit Football**
- **Need for Speed World**
- **Free Realms**
- **Runescape**
- **Wizard 101**
- **Heroes in the Sky**
- **Guild Wars**
- **Runes of Magic**
- **Magic: The Gathering—Tactics**

Free Realms

Need for Speed World

PAID AND SUBSCRIPTION-BASED MMOs

Today's most popular MMOs are widely-played for a reason—they offer endless ways to adventure or interact with thousands of everyday fans just like yourself in an array of dazzling and inventive virtual worlds. Millions of satisfied subscribers can't be wrong, so why not don a superhero's cape, blast off into space or journey to a fantasy kingdom and experience the best that these titles have to offer yourself? The following list will get you started in no time flat.

- **World of Warcraft**
- **DC Universe Online**
- **Aion**
- **EVE Online**
- **Star Wars: Galaxies**
- **Test Drive Unlimited 2**
- **City of Heroes**
- **EverQuest II**
- **Star Wars: The Old Republic**
- **Rift**

World of Warcraft

APPENDIX K:

Types of Gamers to Avoid

Gaming, much like all competitive activities, relies on the willingness of participants to play by the rules.

Under optimal circumstances, any title—be it an athletic simulation, arcade outing, epic adventure or exercise in strategic conquest—can teach the basic principles of good sportsmanship.

But in certain cases, the hobby also has the potential to frustrate, antagonize and bring out the worst in enthusiasts. Even more disturbing, such issues' roots generally lie in a few bad apples who don't mind spoiling things for the bunch.

Much the same way as hecklers plague baseball, card sharks trouble casinos and attention hogs bring misery upon their team in any after-school intramural, unscrupulous joystick jocks can ruin your child's leisure time. Protect them from victimization by learning to recognize these individuals and label them for what they are: Troublemakers in every sense of the word.

Below, you'll find a list of several pesky sorts of riff-raff that are common to the computer and video game industry. Each is capable of causing widely different forms of woe, and all are best avoided entirely.

Teach your child to watch out for and avoid these unscrupulous individuals, and they'll find time spent with digital diversions that much more rewarding and meaningful.

CAMPERS

Games that support head-to-head play often let players destroy one another, with the goal being to rack up the most points through direct takedowns. Normally, it's no big issue—characters are quickly reincarnated at set spawning points, and can jump right back into the action. Collectible items operate the same way—once a player picks them up, they disappear for a predetermined period of time before reappearing for general use in the same spot again.

Campers take advantage of this fact though, and camp out near these key areas, so they can be the first to grab powerful goods or take unfair advantage of freshly resurrected opponents. They may also sit in a strategic spot the entire game, taking potshots at other players from a virtually unassailable position. If you encounter one, there's only one good solution: Choose not to play with them, which is usually easy, as other servers/maps/opponents are readily available in most titles.

CHEATERS

The name says it all. These unscrupulous individuals look for bugs (read: programming errors) and exploits in a piece of software's code, or loopholes in its design, that enable them to gain an unfair advantage. For instance, they might hang around an area where it's possible to kill the same monster over and over to easily earn increasingly rare and more powerful items. Alternately, they might find a way to sell merchants the same piece of equipment a hundred times without having it ever leave their inventory. Should you encounter evidence of cheating, immediately report it to the game's creators, so they can quickly patch the error or ban the people who've taken advantage of it.

FANBOYS

We all know the classic playground argument: Which video game, console, or developer is best? Everyone's certainly entitled to their own opinion, but the "fanboy" is a player so fanatical to one game publisher, system or concept that they're blinded to reason and, usually, belittle others' beliefs. Being passionate about, say, Nintendo or Sony is all well and good, but not when one's enthusiasm borders on obsession. Rather than deal with their intolerant outlook, tell kids to try giving them the silent treatment: They can't very well argue with you if you don't feed into their anger.

FARMERS

Massively multiplayer online games are persistent worlds which exist 24/7, 365 days a year. Players don't just play; they live alternate virtual lives, in which hours upon hours are invested. Therefore all in-game goods (be they gold pieces, magic swords, or the houses/castles in which heroes live) have a real-world monetary value, given the time commitment or luck required to obtain them. Seriously—some people even sell powerful characters via auction sites for thousands of actual real-world dollars.

Farmers are players who hang around a specific area for extended periods of time, constantly killing monsters or performing the same tasks to collect dropped loot. The point: These goods can then be sold to others for a profit, often at considerable markup. It's a detestable practice to be certain, but even moreso when you consider how they can ruin game balancing. After all, certain locations are meant to be more difficult so that players can get their bearings, and beginners get up to speed, slowly gaining in power as they learn the rules of play. Let administrators know ASAP if you suspect someone of this offense.

GRIEFERS

Think of them as the bullies of the cyberspace scene. Among the offenses they're guilty of: Taunting other players, using foul language, stabbing teammates in the back, attracting' monsters attention, distracting allies, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. In short, they live to cause grief and ruin the gaming experience for others. While publishers are working harder than ever to monitor and inhibit their activities, griefers are, sadly, to be encountered in any title with

a multiplayer component. The best way to deal with them: Steer clear or report their activities to game supervisors and let the professionals handle it.

HACKERS

Many kids and teens run websites devoted to their favorite games. And many play these titles for months on end, adding to their digital doubles' skills, wealth and power by doing so. Hackers are individuals who break into computer systems for fun, using their unfettered access to alter or trash websites, delete characters, steal people's personal information, cause havoc and even shut down entire games. Any such activities should be immediately reported to law enforcement officials—hacking is the virtual equivalent of breaking and entering. Not to mention a serious crime.

PIRATES

Developers and publishers work hard to bring everyone the finest in electronic entertainment—but some people simply can't be bothered to pay for the software they use. Known as pirates, such criminals (and make no mistake, piracy carries serious penalties from six-figure fines to jail time) remove the copy protection from games and illegally distribute them over the Internet. Using a network of FTP sites, newsgroups, peer-to-peer sharing services and Web servers, thousands of people knowingly trade illegally obtained copies of games every day. Explain the seriousness of the situation to your child, and make a point of regularly keeping an eye on what games they're enjoying. If they're playing a title you didn't purchase, and it's not classified as free to play/freeware (pro bono software), demo/trial (demonstration) or shareware (which creators legally allow to be distributed), chances are they're breaking the law.

TROLLS

Named for their mean-spirited nature, trolls are people who haunt chat rooms, discussion groups, blogs and user forums, posting comments that incite or offend. Often operating under an anonymous identity, they live to cause arguments and provoke trouble. Always remember: You never know who you're dealing with over the Internet. Advise your child accordingly, and encourage them to ask themselves if the people they're conversing or exchanging e-mail with are behaving in a reasonable manner. Trolls are easy to deal with though—simply pay them no attention and ignore their ravings. They live for drama; if none is to be had, they'll eventually seek a fix somewhere else.

APPENDIX L:

Understanding Computer and Video Game Mods

Mods are modifications to games' program code that change their look, contents and/or performance, allow users to get more enjoyment from old titles by adding new weapons, levels, characters and even play mechanics to the mix. In other words, they help keep those games families spent so much on from collecting dust on the shelf.

Of course, not all are recommendable for minors, due to their unregulated contents. Though it isn't always the case, such add-ons are typically made by amateurs operating out of their home, or small groups of individuals. Translation: Most aren't subject to the same rules and regulations (let alone ratings) as the original product from which they're derived. But just as every book, movie or television program has potential upsides and downs, so too do these electronic offerings.

In hopes of providing some perspective, here's a quick guide to the many sorts of mods available on today's burgeoning PC and set-top console scenes:

Add-Ons/Expansion Packs—Add new levels, heroes, weapons, vehicles and more to an existing game. Some are sold commercially by a game's manufacturer, others are produced by fans. All extend the life of an existing title.

Cheats—Allow players to cheat, or get ahead, at a particular title or change the play experience. Often input as passwords or codes, these functions bestow powers such as invulnerability, unlimited ammunition or extra cash. By and large benign (and just as frequently goofy, in the case of *NBA Jam*'s legendary big-headed player mode), they can, on rare occasions, also be used in a potentially inappropriate manner. For example, activating one might turn a cartoon zombie's blood from green to sickening red.

Easter Eggs/Extras/Secrets—Since the days of the Atari 2600, programmers have been hiding special goodies inside software titles. Some are fun bonuses like cool power-ups; a select few are offensive and/or pornographic, i.e. the infamous sexually-charged "Hot Coffee" mini-game found in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. By and large though, most examples in this category are innocent in nature, such as hidden endings, additional movie clips and new playable characters.

Hidden Content—As incentive to keep gamers playing long after finishing a title, many developers include hidden bonuses within programs revealed only by accomplishing certain

goals. These rewards may include additional cars, new multiplayer levels, virtual art galleries and (unfortunately), in rare cases, material of questionable value, such as violent or racy film shorts.

Patches—No game ships without a few errors in it—complex productions created by large teams, it's impossible to catch every problem before a piece of software ships. But game makers are always working to correct these errors. Patches are installable fixes that address these issues.

Remakes—On the PC, fan communities have sprung up surrounding certain classic games. Several have designed full-blown remakes of older titles, adding new visuals, sound effects and even voice-overs. Few so far should raise any eyebrows for troublesome reasons, but as content is player-generated, it's important to remember that it's also unregulated.

Skins—New sets of graphical textures that alter a character's appearance. For instance, your action hero might be provided a new spacesuit, sports stars fresh uniforms and so on. Likewise, vehicles and buildings can also be "re-skinned." But do be careful: Racy offerings abound. The last thing you want to child to see is a naked Lara Croft.

Total Conversions—Amateur or professionally created modifications that take a game of a certain type (say, a sci-fi first-person shooter) and turn it into something completely different (i.e. an anti-terrorist simulation). Such enhancements completely alter the look, feel, and personality of the product in question. Most are harmless; just beware of the occasional ultra-violent or curse-prone proposition.

Trainers—Like cheats, these are programs—created in this case exclusively by third-party sources, not game makers—which run in the background and allow you to award yourself bonuses (more lives, cash, power-ups, etc.) that give you an unplanned advantage in certain titles.

Updates/Upgrades—Given that games are labors of love, even ones already sitting on the shelf are often works in progress. Many teams never quit tweaking them; hence the existence of updates and upgrades, free enhancements which add new features (e.g. an improved user interface or faster load times) or expand on certain core elements. Many come bundled directly with patches.

User-Created Content—As a means of extending longevity, dozens of games ship with level editors or the tools their creators used to design them. This allows garage developers and everyday fans (you included) to tinker with titles and create new maps, race tracks, weapons, characters and more. Selections which fall into this category are as unique and diverse as the individuals who produce them, so make sure you stay informed about any your child intends to download.

APPENDIX M:

Best Free Online Game Sites

Thousands of games can be played or downloaded for free from, or played right within, your Web browser. Many can be enjoyed in just five minutes, making them perfect for coffee breaks. Others will keep you captivated for hours on end.

To start enjoying free sports games, action games and more, including titles for both casual and hardcore gaming fans, just visit the following sites:

• **Newgrounds.com**—Tremendous support by the homebrew development community makes this perennial fan favorite a must-see for any online freeloader. With a more marked slant towards diehard gaming aficionados than is common for the category, it offers numerous outings in genres more typically associated with traditional gaming platforms. Extensive art and film collections also offer ample distraction if you're a fan of cartoons or colorful sketches.

• **Shockwave.com**—From action to sports and puzzle games, offers something for all ages, including family-friendly offerings such as *UNO*, *Jumble Crosswords* and *The Last Airbender: Match Master—Trial of the Elements*. Although light on offerings for hardcore enthusiasts, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the 3D visuals on titles like *Crashdrive 3D* or 2D animated action provided by outings such as *Super Soccer Strikers*. There's even a cooking simulator (*Let's Get Grillin'*) available, with options to play puzzle and card games for cash prizes also presented.

• **AddictingGames.com**—Broad support for social networking elements and a wide range of genres from shooter to strategy make this a well-rounded selection. Players can even go head-to-head simultaneously, compete against friends and family on high score tables or create custom levels designed for sharing with others in specific titles. A healthy mix of branded selections and original creations should please all comers.

• **Kongregate.com**—Hosts tends of thousands of digital diversions that have generated millions of plays. Gamers can even earn achievements (collectible virtual badges) while going at it, chat amongst themselves or purchase power-ups and virtual items. The site additionally hosts simple, full-fledged massively multiplayer online (MMO) games that you can enjoy in others' company as well.

• **ArmorGames.com**—Given that its logo features crossed swords and a shield, it's no wonder this site features a wider range of games featuring classic gaming subjects like real-time strategic conflicts, alien invasions and aerial combat. Fantasy, military and sci-fi themed amusements are all present, while persistent community features offer ample reason to keep coming back for just one more play.

These destinations are just the tip of the iceberg, however. Dozens of social networks and sites from Facebook to MiniClip.com and NinjaKiwi.com all offer a wealth of free amusements as well. Numerous professionally-designed virtual worlds and MMOs such as *Free Realms*, *Wizard 101*, *Dungeon Fighter Online*, *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Eberron Unlimited* and *Quick Hit Football* also provide endless thrills at zero cost, many on-par visually and gameplay-wise with paid competitors.

The next time the urge to goof off strikes, remember. No matter how tight money may be, you can always find a ready way to rescue the princess or save the world from googly-eyed extraterrestrial invaders.

What Parents Need to Know About iPhone and iPad Gaming

It was only a matter of time: Billions of cell phones exist, they seldom leave everyone's pocket and, as such, they were destined to become the next leading portable console.

While it all seemed just a pipe dream as late as even early 2007, suddenly, that summer, Apple emerged as an unlikely champion for the cause with its iPhone and iPod touch units, helping sell thousands of thumb-waggling titles to millions of unsuspecting punters who never even considered themselves "gamers" to begin with. Now nearly everyone has played *Angry Birds* or *Doodle Jump* it seems, and with price points well below that of traditional console or handheld games, iPhone gaming is here to stay. The same goes for play on popular tablet PCs like the iPad and iPad 2, which offer compatibility with many iPhone apps, and tens of thousands of platform-exclusive diversions.

What's more, many parents are letting their kids use all of these devices at an early age, and developers are making apps that even kids as young as one can enjoy. Basically, if your child is old enough to know that your iPhone or iPad does not go into their mouth, then he or she is old enough to indulge in a little smartphone or tablet PC-based gaming. iPhone and iPad games are diverse, affordable, and a fantastic distraction for a fussy kid who's stuck with you in a long grocery store checkout line.

Here are some things parents need to know about them up-front, though:

All iPhone and iPad Games are Bought From Apple's App Store or iTunes

Unless your device is jailbroken (specifically modified to work with amateur software), games for the iPhone and iPad must be purchased through the "App Store" online storefront. Access to the store is built into these mobile devices and whisks the user to an online shop upon command. The desktop version of iTunes can be used to purchase games as well. In either case, you must setup an iTunes account on a Mac or PC (the same account and its associated credit card is used for App Store purchases). Note that larger games must be downloaded with a Wi-Fi connection instead of through a 3G network.

All Purchases are Logged by Email Invoices

Before downloading any game or app, whether free or paid, you're asked to verify your email address. An invoice is promptly sent to the buyer to confirm that a purchase was made. This can

help you monitor any unwanted or surprise purchases. You can also check your purchase history by clicking on the **View My Account** link in iTunes (located under the **Store** menu) and selecting **Purchase History**.

You Can Update and Upgrade Games for Free

When you buy a video game at retail, the product that you pay for is generally a complete package from start to finish. However, iPhone and iPad games are constantly added to and refined upon, and go through frequent upgrades and bug fixes. The App Store icon will alert you to any games that need to be updated, and it doesn't cost anything to apply the updates.

iPhone and iPad Games Aren't Evaluated by the ESRB

Games released as apps for Apple's hardware don't carry the familiar letter-based content ratings from the ESRB. Instead, Apple evaluates games and issues its own rating based on age appropriateness: 4+, 9+, 12+ or 17+. Each rating is further broken down with text descriptions. Clicking on a game's rating will display the breakdown if it's not displayed by default from the catalogue page containing the game's description.

Many Games are Free to Play, but Offer Extra Content Through Paid Microtransactions

Some of the App Store's most popular games are tailored for very young kids, who can play for free for as long as they like. However, the majority of these games also offer special bonus content, levels, and/or items via low-cost purchases priced around a dollar or so that are automatically charged to the credit card that's hooked up to your iTunes account. These purchases are called microtransactions, but they can add up to a whole lot of money in no time at all if they're conducted by a kid who doesn't understand that he or she is playing with "real" money. Apple has since put safeguards in place to help prevent overzealous youngsters from going wild, but it's a good idea to talk to your kids about getting permission before buying special in-game items.

Many Types of Game Are Up for Grabs

iPhone and iPad games are becoming more detailed and complex by the day. This means that there's lots of kid-friendly content available, but there are also lots of games that are only appropriate for mature audiences. These include titles with violence, gore, crude language, and mature themes. Keep this in mind before unleashing your child across the App Store unescorted.

There are Parental Controls

Don't fret, though. The desktop iTunes store has parental controls functions that you can use to set age limits on purchased media. You can also turn off the App Store entirely. Select Edit/

Preferences on the PC version of iTunes, or iTunes/Preferences on the Mac. From there, click on the Parental Control tab to regulate access to movies, TV shows or apps by age rating or explicit content.

Some Apps and Games Display and/or Require the Player's Location

Some gaming apps include gameplay that tracks your location, which is detectable using your mobile device's built-in GPS. A number of social networking apps based around Facebook and Twitter or general interest apps may also want to display your movements as well. Happily, GPS functionality can be turned off in the iPhone's **Settings** menu under the **Location Services** tab, which lets you prevent all or specific apps from monitoring your location.

APPENDIX O:

How to Disable In-App Purchases on Your iPhone and iPad

In 2010, FamilyFriendlyVideoGames.com's Johner Riehl witnessed as his three year-old spent time with a game called *Smurfs' Village* for the iPhone and iPad. Little did the tot (or his soon to be mortified parents) know that in his five or ten minutes of playtime he had unexpectedly purchased more than $100 worth of in-game items. (You can read the full tale on the website's Report Card for *Smurfs' Village*.)

Games like this are part of a growing trend in which companies provide free-to-play apps, but charge for items within the game. Often, purchasing these items can be very simple, and potentially very costly. But there are steps parents can take to prevent unplanned expenditures, the most direct being to disable in-app purchases. This takes away the ability for real-world funds to be spent while you're actively using any app.

To disable in-app purchases on your iPhone or iPad, first locate these settings by tapping **Settings**, **General** and **Restrictions**. To enable Restrictions, tap **Enable Restrictions** and enter a passcode. The passcode will be required to make changes to these settings. You should

then scroll down, and the first option under the **Allowed Content** heading will be **In-App Purchases**. You will want to make sure that this is setting is turned to "Off."

While visiting the **Restrictions** menu, you can also choose to restrict access to the following applications and features on your device by switching them to "Off," or regulate access to content using corresponding touchscreen menus:

- **Safari**
- **YouTube**
- **iTunes**
- **App Installation**
- **App Deletion**
- **Camera**
- **FaceTime (video chat)**
- **Location**
- **Account Changes**
- **Multiplayer Games in Game Center**
- **Adding Friends in Game Center**
- **Music and Podcasts**
- **Movies**
- **TV Shows**
- **Apps**

More details can also be found at Apple's website: **http://support.apple.com/kb/HT4213**

Luckily for the Riehl family, they were able to get the charges reversed with some quick phone calls to Apple's customer service team. But if you take the necessary steps to disable in-app purchases and other potential trouble spots, you won't have to worry about falling afoul of similar issues.

APPENDIX P:

Top 10 Social Games

Courtesy of games for social networks like Facebook, MySpace and Bebo's sudden arrival at the end of the last decade (i.e. *FarmVille* and *Pet Society*), millions didn't just discover the pleasures of gaming with others in quick, easily manageable installments that fit better with modern lifestyles. They also did so courtesy of a variety of games that spoke to more interests and backgrounds than ever—and completely free at that. Small wonder productivity at workplaces worldwide has suddenly dropped by several orders of magnitude, and your great aunt's asking you out of nowhere to help manage her herd of cartoon cows.

Playable on Facebook and other social networks, social games are free, intuitive and accessible right from your Web browser. One of gaming's hottest new trends, they feature everyday topics from food to fashion, music and art.

facebook. Here are a few of the most popular Facebook games today:

- **FarmVille**
- **Car Town**
- **Ravenwood Fair**
- **Bubble Island**
- **Restaurant City**
- **Happy Aquarium**
- **FIFA Superstars**
- **Millionaire City**
- **Pet Society**
- **Bejeweled Blitz**

FarmVille

APPENDIX Q:

Best Casual Games Downloads

Countless casual games for all ages including board games, puzzle games, card games and more can quickly be downloaded to your computer or console.

Smash hits like *Mystery Case Files* and *Diner Dash* typically cost under $20 US, and can be tried free for 60 minutes. Monthly subscriptions to sites like Big Fish Games and discount deals from publishers like Sandlot Games and PopCap also allow you to purchase titles for as little as $6.99. Several games also offer a level or two for free as a sample to let you experience them before buying.

Five top suggestions include:
- **Plants vs. Zombies**
- **Bejeweled 3**
- **Diner Dash**
- **Mystery Case Files**
- **Slingo Deluxe**

Bejeweled 3

Note that casual gaming enthusiasts fed up with paying even that much for PC, PlayStation 3, Wii and Xbox 360 titles that they quickly tire of or complete in hours flat now have numerous other, more cost-effective ways to play as well. Thank thousands of free online games, each available right now from your Web browser, which can help give your fingers a workout without leaving budgets feeling stretched.

While none are as epic in scope or technically advanced as what you'd find on dedicated gaming devices, it's hard to argue with the price… or minimal system requirements. Compatible with Macintosh and PC systems, including low-end netbook computers, endless titles in all genres are suddenly accessible on-demand over the Internet. Some sites like **Ohanarama** even offer a wealth of choices that have been designed specifically for play by families.

Five top suggestions include:
- **Sushi Go Round**
- **Zuma Blitz**
- **FIFA Online 2**
- **Super Mario Bros. Crossover**
- **UNO Online**

Sushi Go Round

To learn more about free to play online games, including top websites where they can be found, see APPENDIX M: Best Free Online Game Sites.

APPENDIX R:

A Closer Look at Gaming Trends

For any parent looking to become more involved in their family's video game choices, it helps to be in tune with the hot topics facing the industry. Here's a look at a few recent trends that gamers are talking about.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT

Once upon a time, it seemed amazing just to login and connect with friends via a chat program. But now, even the most simple or complex video game likely provides some sort of multiplayer support. Whereas single-player-focused games used to be the norm, they're now the exception, and companies are delivering lots of interesting new ways for folks to play together, either simultaneously in co-op enabled games such as *FlingSmash* or in turn-based offerings like *Words With Friends*.

SMARTPHONE AND MOBILE GAMING

These days, many of the biggest, best-selling games are also the most inexpensive. Either offered free or sold for an average price of $.99, mobile games provide the world's millions of smartphone users with vast and varied gameplay experiences—downloadable on-demand nearly anytime, anywhere. There's no doubt that even veteran industry players such as Nintendo have taken notice that the old ways of making and pricing games may need some strong reconsideration as a result.

INDIE GAMES

When video games first started achieving mass-market popularity, the companies that made them slowly grew larger and larger, acquiring each other and confirming that video games were indeed big business. By the mid-2000s, even though industry sales continued to explode, the number of companies making games was dwindling. However, with the rise of the Internet and online content delivery platforms, by 2008, the pendulum began to swing back, giving amateur coders the chance to directly connect with a fan base, explore new themes, test original concepts and make a healthy living pushing the very boundaries of gaming all the while. As a result, the future now belongs as much to homebrew hackers as much as the corporate conglomerates, and these independent developers are delivering games that are fun for players of all types, including families and casual gamers. Many are, in fact, among gaming's most innovative new releases, as they're not constrained by office politics, retailers' demands or shareholder expectations.

MUSIC GAMES

Raise your hand if you can name a single person who's never heard an instrument play, hummed a simple tune or listened to the radio? Long story short—you've just discovered the same truth game developers did in the past decade: That music is a universal language that unites us all. So while sales of *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* may temporarily be stalling out, a new breed of music game is emerging, with party-oriented dance titles like *Dance Central* and mobile games such as *Tap Tap Revenge* continuing the astronomical sales success of their instrumental forefathers.

SOCIAL GAMING

Over 750 million people around the world use Facebook regularly, comprising one of the largest prospective audiences ever for developers looking to get their games played by the mass market. A new breed of so-called "social games," designed for play on it and other social networks right in one's Web browser has arisen to take advantage of this opportunity. Featuring fun everyday themes and low system requirements, offered at no cost, and built around multiplayer features that maximize the use of your network of friends, social games continue to rise in popularity.

ACTIVE/MOTION-SENSING PLAY

Wisely doing away with complex controllers and their dizzying array of knobs and buttons, motion-sensing (a.k.a. "active") games such as *Zumba Fitness, Kinect Disneyland Adventures* and *Just Dance* are knocking down needless barriers that have alienated less tech-savvy players for decades. And like serious games, they're also helping shatter stereotypes by proving that playing games can have beneficial or even healthy connotations. Expect to see them become even more prominent as all three major console manufacturers are now putting motion controls front and center on systems like the Wii U, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT (DLC) / DIGITALLY DISTRIBUTED GAMES

We love the ability to download smaller, more cost-effective games or game add-ons right to your PC or console on-demand. It provides a great way to enjoy a quick, value-priced break here and there or extend the life of franchises like *Rock Band* or *Forza Motorsport*. Thankfully, given lower development costs for bite-sized/incremental content, higher profit margins across the board and the medium's more direct way to connect with end-users or add value to existing retail products, developers dig the concept almost as much too. One of the more exciting trends of the past five years, we anticipate that it will transform the entire marketplace shortly by furthering the decline of retail vendors, and turning physical copies of games into gateways to broader online experiences, rather than simple, fixed adventures that begin and end at what's in the box.

USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Enthusiasts love customizing their experience, game makers love having people extend the lives of their games for free, and gamers love to get to play more of the games they adore, so user-generated content is really a win-win-win proposition. And it's easier to enjoy than ever, as more and more games continue to build in the level-, character- and mission-editing toolkits that allow you to create it. In fact, entire games like *Spore* and *LittleBigPlanet* have been designed around the idea that players are able to create content that is just as compelling as the game's developers, if not more so.

CLOUD COMPUTING

One of the top high-tech trends today is the transition of data to the "cloud." In other words, files and software don't necessarily physically reside on just one machine in your home. For the game industry, not only does the technology allow for shared gameplay experiences across a number of platforms, letting you put down saved games on one device and pick them up on another later. Services like OnLive also promise to suddenly make streaming games the next big thing for players, handling intensive computing and graphics processing functions remotely, then beaming games back to your PC/TV via high-speed broadband connection right on-demand.

FREE TO PLAY OUTINGS

Meet Flash (a software backbone through which games are designed to run in your Web browser): It's the future game industry's best friend. Currently used to power tens of thousands of simple, free downloadable outings at portals like Shockwave, Kongregate, and NinjaKiwi.com, the technology isn't just inviting thousands more to get in the game given the unbeatable price of admission. It's also a Trojan horse through which developers will soon be delivering high-end, professionally-designed 3D experiences at zero cost to players, save whatever we all pay on the back-end in optional subscription fees or microtransactions. Likewise, free-to-play MMOs such as *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Eberron Unlimited*, *Dungeon Fighter Online* and *Free Realms* are also growing the gaming audience by leaps and bounds, proving that just about everyone's willing to play if it doesn't require taking a dent in the pocketbook.

APPENDIX S:

Games for Girls of All Ages

Although playing video games is often characterized as a hobby for young males, the truth is that girls of all ages play video games as much as boys. Parents may sometimes feel that it's hard to find games that are appropriate for them though, so we recently talked to 10 different young women, each a different age, to find out their favorite titles. Their comments shed light on some key ideas and concepts to consider when looking to buy games for a daughter, granddaughter, niece or any young girl.

Girls Are Looking For Connection and Wish Fulfillment

One thing that many of the girls we spoke with greatly enjoyed about their favorite games was the connections that they were able to make with family and friends. And it seems that especially as girls are entering their tween and teen years, they're using games to fulfill their dreams or live out their fantasies. Both points are worth keeping in mind when considering purchases: Look for games that help girls play roles they may not be able to play, or accomplish tasks they may not be ready to meet, in real life.

The Amount Of Pink On The Packaging Doesn't Matter

This may seem obvious, but girls are looking to play games that are fun, not because they are "designed to appeal" to them. Sure, there are plenty of games which girls like that have pink packaging and a "cutesy" presentation. But most of the games that the girls we spoke with highlighted hold great appeal for the entire family, regardless of age or gender. In fact, the 11-year-old we chatted with was even embarrassed to admit that she liked a game

"designed for girls," though we're proud of her for being able to realize she likes it, despite it making her feel awkward. The tip here is that you shouldn't buy a game for a girl just because it "looks" like it's good for girls. Do a little bit of research and make sure the game is going to be fun for her to play overall.

ESRB Ratings Are Only A Guide

More than one girl named a game that was rated by the ESRB as being above her age range. This would be alarming to us if they mentioned gory, violent games that were clearly intended for mature audiences only, but the games they mentioned have higher ratings for reasons other than actual gameplay. The takeaway here is that the most important strategy parents can adopt when selecting appropriate software choices for girls, and children in general, is to be knowledgeable about the games their kids are playing. Use ESRB ratings as a starting point, not a concrete guideline. Just as there are T-rated games that are OK for kids slightly younger (especially if they are playing with a parent), there are also plenty of E-rated games that aren't good choices for all ages.

Bearing these thoughts in mind, let's break down some specific recommendations by age. Here's what the young ladies we spoke with had to say.

Age 4 – Amelia N.

The games Amelia likes are the ones which allow her to be successful, or appeal to her sense of humor. She loves *Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Winter Games* for Wii, especially the "Dream Snowboarding" and "Dream Skiing" levels because she never has to worry about falling off the side and losing. Both Amelia and her twin brother Zach also love the *Super Monkey Ball* games for Xbox and Wii because they think the monkeys are "so silly" and they love being able to yell out "EEE EEE POO" with their parents.

Other suggested games for 4 year-old girls:
Sesame Street: Cookie's Counting Carnival for Nintendo DS and Wii
Dora's Cooking Club for Nintendo DS

Age 5 – Hannah G.

Hannah likes being silly too, but also adds her own real-life elements to her favorite games. She loves *Just Dance 2* for Wii because of how much fun it is to dance and sing along, but insists on using her dress-up clothes to change costumes between every song, just like the on-screen characters do.

Other suggested games for 5 year-old girls:
Nickelodeon Fit for Wii
Fantastic Pets for Xbox 360 Kinect
Sesame Street: Elmo's A to Zoo Adventure for Nintendo DS and Wii

Age 6 – Abby M.

Abby loves *LittleBigPlanet 2* for PlayStation 3, especially playing it with her Dad. "Whenever you finish a world, you can go to another world and another world and another world, and it doesn't stop!" she exclaims. But even though it's an E-rated game, it's still too hard for her in some parts. "I don't really like the versus parts because I'm not really so good at them." Abby also likes the interaction she enjoys with her pet with *Kinectimals* for Xbox 360 Kinect. "I can choose my pet, and I can play with it and go to different parts of the world. And, my pet is cute!"

Other suggested games for 6 year-old girls:
Carnival Games: Monkey See Monkey Do for Xbox 360 Kinect
My Reading Tutor for Nintendo DS

Age 7 – Emily G.

In addition to the dancing in *Just Dance 2* for Wii, Emily also likes the fantasy fulfillment of *Disney Princess Enchanted Journey* for Wii. She explains: "You can go to an old castle and a fairy makes you into a princess. You get to pick out your princess outfit and you can change it any time – as many times as you want to!"

Other suggested games for 7 year-old girls:
Wii Party for Wii
Disney Sing It Family Hits for various platforms
Crafting Mama for Nintendo DS

Age 8 – Noelle R.

Noelle likes to play video games whenever her friends come over and also during family game night. Her favorite game to play with friends is *Dance Central* for Xbox 360's Kinect motion-sensing camera, even though it's rated T—for teens. "There is an option where it plays back video of you dancing and it always makes us laugh. I also like to show my mom and grandparents my new dance moves and use the challenge feature to see if they can do them as well. It's a great workout

too." When playing with her family, and especially her younger brother, she loves *Kirby's Epic Yarn* for Wii. "The characters are cute and it's easy enough that my friends can play with me even if they haven't played before. My five year-old brother can play as Prince Fluff and use the 'angel feature' and we can play together. When I play with two players we like to pick who gets to 'ring the bell' at the end of each challenge."

Other suggested games for 8 year-old girls:
Nat Geo Challenge Wild Life for PlayStation 3 and Wii
Start the Party for PlayStation Move
Pokémon Black/White for Nintendo DS

Age 9 – Hanna K.

Hanna is a great example of the many different types of games that appeal to girls. She loves to play *My Baby* for Nintendo DS because she loves being able to take care of the babies. She also likes *FlingSmash* for Wii because it's easy to play: "You just wiggle the remote and you get to swing it all around and try to get the coins." And she even admits sneaking in some time on one of her little brother's games, like *Junior Brain Trainer* for Nintendo DS: She loves to solve the math problems and fill in the words that aren't spelled the right way.

Other suggested games for 9 year-old girls:
Babysitting Mama for Wii
Disney Guilty Party for Wii

Age 10 – Samara L.

True to her status as a 10 year-old tween, Samara L. likes games that would appeal to kids both younger and older than her. She really likes dogs, so she plays both *Nintendogs* and *I Love Puppies* for Nintendo DS, and also loves to play *Cooking Mama* for Wii. But she's also drawn to games that appeal to older kids as well, like *Rock Band* for various platforms, and plays it so much that her mom is starting to get sick of certain songs.

Other suggested games for 10 year-old girls:
Michael Jackson: The Experience for Wii and Kinect
Endless Ocean: Blue World for Wii

Age 11 – Emily H.

Emily's favorite games are from two of the most popular video game franchises, and they're also both rated T. But it's the reasons she likes the games that are important to consider when choosing games for girls—they appeal to her sense of wonder and fantasy. Emily understands that her choice of *World of Warcraft* for PC may be controversial, and not appropriate for all 11-year-olds. She admits that "killing Blizzard Bears or warding off enemies is always fun," but says "what us girls love the most is the enchantment…" She also loves the *Guitar Hero* series of games for various platforms. "Every girl dreams of being a singer at one point in her life. Being in a band playing all of your favorite songs is a close second. Plus, it's just fun to beat your brother at something!"

Other suggested games for 11 year-old girls:
Nancy Drew series for PC
Super Scribblenauts for Nintendo DS
Lego Harry Potter: Years 1-3 for Xbox 360

Age 12 – Lauren T.

"I know this sounds weird," Lauren admits, "but I still really like *Bratz Rock Angels* for PlayStation 2." Although that game is more than five years old, it's an interesting choice because it shows how girls like games that let them live vicariously through others. "In the game, you get to shop and to do fashion shows, and those are things I wish I could do more in real life," says Lauren. She also is a big fan of *The Sims 3* for PC because she gets "to make a dream fantasy life."

Other suggested games for 12 year-old girls:
Grease: The Game for Wii
Okamiden for Nintendo DS

Age 13 – Natalie S.

Natalie's reason for playing her favorite game should be more than enough excuse for any parent looking for incentive to play with their 13 year-old. "My favorite game is *SingStar Dance* for PlayStation Move," she says, "because it brings the whole family together." She loves playing it with a lot of people, especially her younger cousins.

Other suggested games for 13 year-old girls:
Truth or Lies for Wii
TV Superstars for PlayStation Move

APPENDIX T:

Tools for Keeping Your Kids Safe Online

A growing range of apps, software programs and widgets (downloadable bite-sized desktop applications) for PCs and smartphones let you block access to inappropriate online sites, shut out user access to the system during certain hours, or provide safeguards that allow kids to enjoy a positive online experience. You'll find just a few of the many possible options listed below.

Web Watcher – www.webwatcherkids.com – Used by government and law enforcement agencies, WebWatcher allows parents to block websites and record online and offline activity—the program even monitors keystrokes and allows parents to read all IM and e-mail messages. WebWatcher also has a feature that allows parents to securely keep track of their children's activity, even on a different computer.

Guardian Family Monitor – www.guardiansoftware.com – Guardian Family Monitor software lets families track just about everything done with a computer over the Internet. From e-mails to websites, downloads, keystrokes, chat rooms, instant messages and more, Guardian Family Monitor records all of this information and stores it for easy retrieval and analysis. The program additionally provides time-lapse video recording of the computer monitor.

IamBigBrother – www.iambigbrother.com – IamBigBrother is an online service that allows parents to examine everything that kids have done online. From websites viewed to messages sent, the digital monitoring solution further provides screen captures of e-mails if desired.

Net Nanny – www.netnanny.com – Net Nanny's Internet filter software protects kids from the things they don't need to see while still allowing them to freely search and browse online. With the parental control tools provided by this powerful filter, adults can rest easy knowing that their children's online experiences will be safe and inoffensive.

Cybersitter – www.cybersitter.com – Cybersitter allows parents to completely customize the content that they want to block or allow, and also protects against accidental clicks on malware links. This program can record Facebook chats and posts as well.

Norton Online Family – onlinefamily.norton.com – Rather than simply blocking sites, Norton Online Family encourages communication between parents and kids. This service helps grown-ups gain a better understanding of what children do online, so they can better protect and guide them. There's also an app associated with your Norton Online Family account, so you can check in on kids' activity while on the go.

Zoodles – www.zoodles.com – Zoodles is an app that provides kids with a safe environment of child-friendly games, videos and activities, and allows parents to monitor what they've been playing. Parents can set time limits and restrict access to certain games too.

Kidzui – www.kidzui.com – Kidzui is a standalone browser that's optimized for young kids. Every single site that's accessible in Kidzui has been reviewed and approved by Kidzui's editorial staff or advisory board. If you can access it in Kidzui, it means a real live person has reviewed it to make sure it's not inappropriate.

Mobicip – www.Mobicip.com – Mobicip gives parents the ability to safeguard their children's mobile activities and devices. With three layers to its filtering technology, Mobicip does more than block website addresses… The software dynamically views the entire webpage to determine if there is offensive content, even on an allowed site, based on the parent's choice of one of three Mobicip-provided filtering levels.

K-9 – www.k9webprotection.com – K9 Web Protection is a free Internet filter and parental control option that allows users to block websites, force safe search, set time restrictions, configure custom allow or lock lists, view activity reports and more.

APPENDIX U:

Discussion Guide and Checklist

In Chapter 5, we raised a few key issues for families to discuss when setting ground rules for video games. Here's a chance to use those topics of conversation as a starting point to have a deeper dialogue with your family about how and where video games are appropriate for use in the home. We've included space below for notes, and we've also added in a number of helpful questions designed to keep the conversation going—hopefully, it'll be an engaging, informative and constantly evolving one that sparks many fun and memorable family moments to come.

What role will games play within our family/home?

What benefits would we like to see come from play?

What are our family's top worries and concerns?

Where should gameplay happen?

What kinds of games or game-related content are acceptable?

Is online play okay?

At what age is video gaming appropriate?

What game ratings are suitable for each member of our family?

What should we do if we run into a problem online, such as bullying?

Should video game related conflicts arise, the best way we can resolve them is…

✔ **Checklist**

Think you're ready to play? Be sure to check this list to see if there's anything your family is forgetting.

☐ As a parent, I am familiar with all the video game systems that members of my family may use to play games or go online with.

☐ We have established guidelines and ground rules for when and where video gaming is appropriate in our home.

☐ I understand how to use parental controls, and they are setup and configured on all of our family's gaming devices.

☐ Our family knows how to read and use ESRB ratings, and has discussed which ratings and types of games are appropriate for each family member.

☐ We have a plan regarding the types of gaming experiences we want our family to enjoy, and everyone in this home and understands and agrees with it.
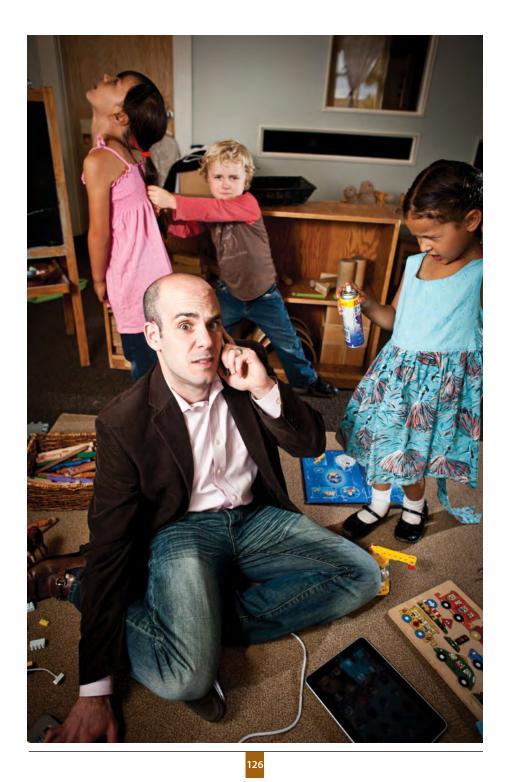
☐ We have discussed the possible dangers of online play, and all members of the family understand the importance of, and agree to abide by, set rules when playing online for everyone's safety.

☐ As a parent, I will remain actively interested in finding out more about the games my kids are playing with or without me.

☐ Our family agrees to maintain an open and constructive dialogue regarding video games, and encourages both kids and adults to actively speak up and openly discuss their feelings and concerns.

☐ All family members comprehend the importance of, and feel comfortable with, approaching each other should they encounter anything disturbing, frightening or questionable in the course of gameplay.

☐ We understand and agree that video games are just one aspect of a healthy, well-balanced life, and that it's just as important to make time for other responsibilities, including schoolwork, family time and physical activity.

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Parenting expert Scott Steinberg is the creator of the celebrated *The Modern Parent's Guide* book series and one of today's most sought-after **industry consultants**, **keynote speakers**, **corporate spokespersons** and **expert witnesses**. The host of pioneering video show *Family Tech: Technology for Parents and Kids* and a popular motivational speaker, he regularly appears as an on-air authority for all major TV networks including ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC and CNN.

Hailed as a top voice for today's high-tech generation by dozens of outlets from *BusinessWeek* to *USA Today*, *Forbes* and NPR, Steinberg has further served as a go-to pop culture and **consumer trends expert** for 400+ outlets from *The New York Times* to *Playboy* and *Rolling Stone*. A nationally-syndicated small business columnist and author, he also hosts critically-acclaimed video series such as *Rolling Stone*'s *Gear Up*, *Tech Industry Insider* and *Game Theory*.

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For more info, see **www.topparentingexpert.com**.

STAY AHEAD OF THE GAME

Nearly 40 years after their invention and a decade after exploding onto the mainstream, video games still remain a mystery to many parents, including which titles are appropriate, and their potential side-effects on kids. Now the answers are at your fingertips.

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FEATURES INCLUDE:

- Complete Guides: PC, Console, Mobile, Online and Social Games
- Using Parental Controls and Video Game Ratings
- Hints, Tips and Strategies: Picking the Right Video Games
- Common Concerns: Violence, Addiction, Health, Online Safety
- Setting House Rules and Time Limits
- Best Games for Kids, Teens and Tweens
- Essential Tools and Resources for Parents

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