



**The Good News
About Video Games**

**Let the
Kids
GAME!**



**Including
Expert Views
and Practical
Advice
for Parents**



FOREWARD

Video games are currently an \$18 billion business worldwide,¹ and their impact on our popular culture becomes more significant each year.

Most kids are perfectly comfortable with game consoles and computers, both online and off, but the whole video gaming concept can be a little intimidating for parents.

Thousands of titles are released annually; trying to keep up with them can be a challenge, even for those who write and talk about video games for a living. That's why I'm so pleased to be part of this initiative to educate parents about video games. The more we can inform and empower moms and dads, the better. Ultimately, the best (and only) judge of what's appropriate for your family is you.

Video games are similar to movies and television shows that vary widely in theme and execution, from lighthearted and cartoonlike to complex and adult oriented. The truth is that they're just as capable of making us think, laugh and enjoy positive interactions as they are of providing us with visceral thrills. The more we know, the more positive the gaming experience can be for our families – and the more opportunities we'll have to embarrass our children by appearing to know what we're talking about.

John Davison

President and Co-Founder, What They Like, Inc.

CHEAT SHEET: GAMING 101

If you're up to speed on the basics of how video games are played, feel free to skip this section. Otherwise, read on for a quickie download.

Gaming typically occurs one of two ways: on a computer or a console, a device bought and used for gaming. Games are manufactured to work with specific hardware or systems called platforms. (As cell phones become more sophisticated and boast increasingly more processing power, they will begin to emerge as a separate platform.) If you already own a computer, you're probably good to go unless you need a hardware upgrade. Some companies have started adding desirable extras to make consoles more versatile and desirable, for instance, the Sony PLAYSTATION®3 computer entertainment system boasts a Blu-ray Disc™ DVD player and up to an 80 gigabyte hard drive.

PONG. TETRIS®. PAC-MAN. SPACE INVADERS. ATARI® 2600. WHOA – WHAT A FLASHBACK!

That was then, the dawn of what was simply considered a fun, new pastime. This is now, an era in which video games are tightly woven into the fabric of most kids' lives.

Some moms and dads see the potential social and educational benefits of gaming while others aren't quite there yet. Either way, there's no denying that video games are a pop-culture force to be reckoned with – and they're most likely here to stay. Turns out, that could be a good thing, in light of recent studies and mounting anecdotal evidence that video games can have a wide variety of positive effects on players. (And lest we neglect to mention the most obvious upside: They're fun!)

But let's back up a little. Yes, researchers have tried to establish a link between violent video games and aggressive behavior. According to Christopher J. Ferguson, Ph.D., a professor at Texas A&M International University, there's just no compelling proof. And, in fact, as consumption of M-rated (Mature) video games has escalated in the United States, juvenile violent crimes have plummeted, according to federal crime statistics.² "We can be sure video games have not sparked a youth violence epidemic because there isn't one," says Dr. Ferguson.

Now, scientists are starting to explore these potential benefits:

- ✦ In one study, Dr. Ferguson found that gaming is moderately related to improved visuospatial cognition.³ In layman's terms, that's a skill that would help with tasks associated with careers from architecture and engineering to surgery.⁴
- ✦ Physical therapists are experimenting with using video games to break up the monotony and discomfort of repetitive rehabilitation and strength-building exercises.
- ✦ A recent study at the University of Rochester shows that playing action games improves vision.⁵

Experts and parents also offer plenty of anecdotal support for the positives of gaming. For instance, contrary to popular opinion, **gaming isn't isolating – it's "intensely social,"** according to Dr. Cheryl K. Olson, a professor at Harvard Medical School and co-author of *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do* (Simon & Schuster, 2008). A landmark federally funded study by the U.S. Department of Justice undertaken in conjunction with this book discovered that children find common ground in gaming. And according to a new study conducted by Yahoo!® Shine and Sony Online Entertainment LLC (SOE) in June 2008, 72% of the 414 parents who responded said their children played games online with other people "sometimes" or "all the time."

Marian Merritt, Internet Safety Advocate at Symantec, recalls that her son relied on his virtual experiences to **develop real-world social skills**, making his first attempts at phone conversations by sharing gaming tips and news with his friends.

Multiplayer games emphasize **large-scale cooperation and good sportsmanship**. Even games meant for solo play can become interactive if one child plays the game while another one cheers and offers advice.

Most games require players to **follow specific rules, think strategically, make fast decisions and fulfill numerous objectives to win**.

Sharing a group game can forge **stronger family ties**, says John Davison, co-founder of the game review website *WhatTheyPlay.com*. Case in point: With the game *Rock Band™* (Rockband.com), moms and dads introduce kids to the songs of their youth while kids hip their parents to the latest singers, sparking conversation that can last longer than the game itself. (This likely resonates with the 87% of parents responding who said they play video games with their kids in the Yahoo! Shine/SOE survey.)

For children who aren't exceptionally athletic, **cyberplay offers a more level playing field**, allowing those who are less physically gifted to compete, points out Andrew Bub, known on the Internet as "GamerDad" and proprietor of *Gamingwithchildren.com*. According to Bub, kids

POPULAR CONSOLES

NAME	MAKER	DEBUT	A.K.A.
PlayStation®	Sony	1995	PS One
PlayStation®2	Sony	2000	PS2
PLAYSTATION®3	Sony	2006	PS3
PlayStation®Portable	Sony	2005	PSP
Game Boy® Advance	Nintendo	2001	
DS™	Nintendo	2004	
DS™ Lite	Nintendo	2006	
Wii™	Nintendo	2006	
Xbox®	Microsoft	2001	
Xbox® 360	Microsoft	2005	

with less hope of taking the field for their middle or high school football team have a more equal opportunity to excel on a virtual gridiron.

Shared among siblings, video games can provide an **unexpected means for brothers and sisters to interact** in ways that they probably wouldn't have otherwise. "With Webkinz.com, my older daughter encourages her little sister and demonstrates tremendous patience and kindness (with her)," says Merritt.

In the Yahoo! Shine/SOE survey, 77% of parents who responded said they "agree or somewhat agree" that **video games have educational value**. Beyond options designed specifically to boost brain power, there are other less obvious opportunities. For instance: Children can learn to count in base six and seven without even realizing it, such as when they learn how to score touchdowns in the *Madden NFL* games, notes Davison. By thinking strategically, plenty of games can provide similar springboards to learning.

Large corporations, such as IBM, are starting to see **employees who play online games emerge as leaders** within the company and even commissioned a white paper on the phenomenon. Online games, and specifically, with massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs), offer a glimpse at how leaders develop and operate in environments that are highly distributed, global, hypercompetitive and virtual.⁶

PLAYING BY THE RULES

Even with potential positives, video gaming needs to be actively managed by parents who set clear, consistent rules. An often-asked question among moms and dads is about play time: How much is too much?

You're not alone in wondering – even gaming experts struggle with this. Merritt admits that now and then, she wonders: *How much time did my kids spend yesterday on homework versus gaming, and did they ever actually go outside to play?*

Unfortunately, there's no magic formula. Some parents allot time to be used daily or weekly; others opt for weekends only. Generally, the pros agree that gaming should come into play only when all other obligations, including school activities, homework and household chores have been completed. (In the Yahoo! Shine/SOE survey, over three-quarters of parents who responded (77%) reported taking away gaming privileges when their children acted out.)

Not surprisingly, another question surrounds game content. Luckily, the Internet makes it easy to research specific games your child requests. You can always rent games to test before you buy, and remember, you're the boss. Do the necessary legwork, and then stand by your decisions.

GAME ON!

Why play video games?

When asked to describe the appeal of video games, kids' answers clustered around four general categories:

- **Excitement and fun.** It's cool to try to figure out a game and win.
- **Sociability.** They like to play with current friends and may make new ones through gaming.
- **Emotions.** Helps to get out anger, forget problems or feel less lonely.
- **Boredom.** It's an option when there's nothing else to do.

Source: Dr. Lawrence Kutner and Dr. Cheryl K. Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do*, Simon & Schuster, 2008.

BEYOND YOUR WALLS

More and more gamers – more than half the total gaming population, according to a 2008 study by The NPD Group⁷ – are opting to play with others who live anywhere from a few blocks to a continent away. Initially, interactive gaming was largely limited to computer users, but the newest consoles (such as PLAYSTATION[®]3, Xbox[®] 360 and Wii[™]) allow gamers to reach out virtually. After all, “Playing online is more challenging and engaging than playing by yourself,” says Bub. True – but it opens a whole other can of worms.

QUICK TIP

Periodically ask your kids what games their friends are into right now. The conversation will be less pressured because the spotlight isn't directly on them.

When it comes to Internet gaming, the same rules that apply to general online safety apply to kids who should be continually reminded of the basics:

1. Never, ever give out personal information, such as your name, address or telephone number.
2. Don't e-mail or instant message people you don't know.
3. Tell mom or dad immediately if anything strange, uncomfortable or unexpected happens.

Another key way to ensure that gameplay is safe and appropriate for your kids is to learn the ins and outs of parental controls. Available options generally include limiting time spent playing, designating only certain hours as accessible and disabling chat functions under select circumstances. In terms of online safety, SOE aims to be an industry leader, under the watchful eyes of its president, John Smedley, a father of four tween and teenage gamers. “The ultimate parental controls are parents themselves,” says Smedley. “But we as game makers should equip them with the best possible tools.”

In fact, SOE's *EverQuest®II*, the wildly popular follow-up to *EverQuest®* (both PC/Rated Teen), the genre-defining MMO, was among the first online games to incorporate stringent parental controls. The safety features built into SOE's brand-new virtual world, *Free Realms™* (Rated Everyone 10+) are top-notch. For console owners, all the latest generation models have built-in play management safeguards.

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*John Smedley, President
Sony Online Entertainment*

No matter what electronic means you utilize, make certain you stay alert when your kids are online. Even if you require them to game in a public area of your home (say, in the living room, as opposed to behind a closed bedroom door), you still need to pay attention.

Be aware of the possibility of cyberbullying, the virtual version of the schoolyard scourge, when one or more players gang up on another, refusing to let that player's character (also known as an avatar) participate or resorting to name calling, says Merritt. Tell your child that if it happens, they should never respond, save any evidence and tell you right away. Reassure them you will not overreact or insist they stop gaming.

Once your kids have been bitten by the online gaming bug, they may want to join new sites.

Emphasize that they are never to do so without asking your permission. Before giving the go-ahead, join your child at the computer for a joint site visit:

- ✦ Look for a parent's guide and go through it together.
- ✦ Check whether it costs money to join or if purchases are suggested. What's at stake, points or virtual money?
- ✦ Read the privacy policy carefully.
- ✦ If there is a chat function, verify that there are safeguards in place and whether you can disable it (this is especially key for younger children).
- ✦ Determine if personal information will be destroyed if you choose to cancel a membership.
- ✦ Ascertain whether there is a mechanism you can use to block your child from logging in, should you want to for any reason.
- ✦ If you have any unanswered questions following your virtual tour, contact the site and ask.

WORD UP

Avatar: A graphical representation of a person on the Internet.

Controller: The device used to play a video game; this could be a joystick, mouse, button, keyboard or combination.

NPC: NPCs, or non-player characters, populate the fictional game world and can fill any role not occupied by a player character (PC). NPCs might be allies, bystanders or competitors to the PCs.

Platform: Refers to how a video game can be played, either on a computer or specific gaming console.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

Although video gaming sometimes gets a bad rap, in the end, it's another form of quality entertainment, like movies, books and music, with the same potential rewards and risks, says Bub. Seek out like-minded parents in your neighborhood or school community, and on the Web for feedback, says Davison. As a group, you can compare notes and get a sense of how your "house rules" compare to others'.

Making the rise of video games into a false crisis distracts us from real social problems and turns us away from the potential advantages of this new medium. It's time to move on and begin to consider gaming in positive ways.

*Christopher J. Ferguson, Ph.D.
Texas A&M International University*

But, whatever you do, don't let tasks associated with gaming – enforcing rules, setting up parental controls, researching games – blind you to its potential benefits. Most parents who game with kids agree it's a phenomenal way to connect. Taking time out to share something that matters to them shows they matter to you. And gaming can work wonders in terms of bridging generation gaps.

"I'm notorious for turning my Mario Kart the wrong way on the field. My kids laugh hysterically," says Merritt. "But they also see that their mom is willing to let loose a bit and isn't hung up on always being perfect."

SOE president Smedley games with his children all the time. "Yes, I work in the industry," says Smedley. "But I'd play with them even if I didn't because we have a blast."

In other words, in a time when everyone talks about how challenging it is to be a parent, it's a boon to have extra means of relating to each other. It's time to let the kids game – with their moms and dads.

GAMERS BY THE NUMBERS

Who plays video games? How often?

Here's a look at the latest facts and figures:

33% American homes with a video game console.

33 Average age of video game player.

Ages:

28.2%: Gamers are under 18 years old.

47.6%: Gamers are 18-49 years old.

24.2%: Gamers are 50+ years old.

59% U.S. population over age 2 that plays video games.

56% Total gamers who play online.

8 Number of percentage points gaming increased overall from 2007 to 2008.

40% Online gamers who are kids age 2-17 (driven heavily by kids 6-12).

13% Overall online gamers who spend 20+ hours a week playing.

Nearly half of portable online gamers are teenagers.

Sources: *Online Gaming 2008 Report*, The NPD Group, and the *2007 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data: Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*, by the Entertainment Software Association.

RATING THE GAMES

With literally thousands of video games available and more being released, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) realized parents needed a quick, reliable way to research their kids' requests. Enter the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), a non-profit regulatory agency established in 1994. The ESRB assigns one of six specific, criteria-based content ratings to virtually all computer and video games.

LOTS OF GAMES FOR KIDS TO PLAY!

1,563 Number of game ratings assigned by the ESRB in 2007.

59% Games rated E for Everyone in 2007.

6% Games rated M for Mature in 2007.

91% Parents who found the ESRB rating system "very" or "somewhat" useful.⁸

Getting rated is voluntary, but there are plenty of incentives since many retailers refuse to sell unrated games. The ESRB age-appropriateness symbol appears on the front of the box and with content descriptors on the back. (No packaging? Use the search tool at ESRB.org.) Although ESRB ratings give you a good ballpark estimate of content, you should still consider renting and playing a game yourself to make sure you feel it's appropriate for your child and in keeping with your values.

GUIDE TO ESRB SYMBOLS

On the front of each game package are rating symbols that provide guidance on age appropriateness.



3+



6+



10+



13+



17+



18+



On the back, next to the rating symbol, are content descriptors that warn about violence, sexual or suggestive material, strong language, use or depiction of drugs, alcohol and tobacco, as well as gambling in the game. Parents should use both parts of the rating system to make sure they are choosing games for their families that they deem appropriate.

Source: *A Parent's Guide to Video Games, Parental Controls and Online Safety*, by the ESRB, ESA and PTA.

USEFUL WEB RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Whattheyplay.com

Comprehensive first-hand reviews in categories such as "For Boys," "For Girls" and "Most Popular Games" by ESRB Rating. Or, search their database by platform.

Grandtheftchildhood.com

The Internet presence of the breakthrough 2008 book of the same name. Helpful info about video game myths and facts, with links to scientific research and more.

Gamingwithchildren.com

An engaging blog about video games, parenting, violence and children.

ESRB.org

The official Internet home of the Entertainment Software Review Board.

Symantec.com/norton/familyresources/index.jsp

Internet safety for kids, teens and adults, plus access to safety advocate Marian Merritt's blog.

Commonsensemedia.org

Reliable entertainment information and ratings (based on age appropriateness and quality) from a national not-for-profit organization.

MORE INFORMATION ON PARENTAL CONTROLS

PlayStation®: www.us.playstation.com/support

Nintendo Wii™:

www.nintendo.com/consumer/systems/wii/en_na/settingsParentalControls.jsp

Microsoft Xbox®:

www.xbox.com/isyourfamilyset

Microsoft Windows® Vista®:

www.gamesforwindows.com/isyourfamilyset

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- ⁸ Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, 2007.

MEET THE EXPERTS

Many thanks to the pros who so generously shared their time and knowledge.



Andrew Bub

A seasoned video game journalist, Andrew Bub is now better known as GamerDad. He's spent the past five years educating parents on gaming issues and has written four nonfiction books about gaming strategy. Andrew writes a weekly column at WhatTheyPlay.com and is a stay-at-home dad of two.



John Davison

A former senior vice president at Ziff Davis Game Group and editorial director of the 1UP Network, entrepreneur John Davison is now president (and co-founder) of What They Like, Inc., publisher of WhatTheyPlay.com, an innovative and growing website devoted to helping parents keep up with the entertainment that appeals to their kids and empowering them to make informed decisions. He has two sons.



Christopher J. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Christopher Ferguson is an assistant professor in the Department of Behavioral, Applied Sciences and Criminal Justice at Texas A&M International University in Laredo, and a nationally recognized authority on video game research. He published a paper in 2008 that cast doubt on the popularly held notion that scientific studies found a link between video gameplay and violent acts. He has one son.



Marian Merritt

After 10 years building security software for industry leader Norton, Marian Merritt transitioned into a key corporate role at parent company Symantec as dedicated Internet Safety Advocate. She writes a popular parent-oriented tech blog, "Ask Marian," and often speaks about protecting the online security of children and families. She's the mother of three.



Cheryl Olson, Sc.D

Cheryl Olson is the co-founder and co-director (with her husband, Lawrence Kutner, Ph.D.) of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media. The two did a groundbreaking \$1.5 million federally funded, multigenerational study of violent video games and children, and co-wrote *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do* (Simon & Schuster, 2008). They have a college-age son.



John Smedley

Sony Online Entertainment (SOE) President John Smedley was instrumental in the development of the original *EverQuest*® and co-founder of Verant Interactive, Inc., which later became Sony Online Entertainment LLC. Through the vision of this industry veteran, SOE has grown from a small developer with a single online PC game to an industry leader with hundreds of thousands of subscribers and multiple titles published on the PC, PlayStation®2, PLAYSTATION®3, PSP®, wireless and handheld platforms. He has three daughters and a son.

**NEW FROM
Sony Online Entertainment**

FreeRealms™

Tweens, teens and parents (even those who normally can't agree on anything) can journey together in SOE's brand-new interactive environment for families, *Free Realms* (PC/Rated E 10+). The setting is a whimsical, fantasyland where the colors are bright, the landscape is 3D – and the sky's the limit. Think of it as the online equivalent of a totally family-friendly amusement park. Kids can slay spiders or tend animals. Parents can quest or play mini-games. Everybody can try to finish first in a fast-paced racing game. Bottom line: This is a destination with something for everyone. Just open a Web browser and savor a fantastic journey – it's free to play. The safety features default to the most restrictive levels; kids under 13 can only chat using certain predetermined phrases. Check it out at www.FreeRealms.com.

Let the Kids GAME!



www.station.com • www.soe.com

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