

A Dad's Video Game Guidelines

Courtesy of Scott Mathews, veteran in the video game industry, producer of Vader Immortal

Overview

As a parent, how do you navigate the world of video games for your children?

Which video games, if any, are the good ones and which are the bad ones?

The video game industry generated \$120 billion in 2019, three times greater than the film industry. Who has time to break all that down and make informed parenting decisions?

Here's some advice that will hopefully help. While as an Executive Producer of video game content I feel fairly informed on the topic, these are only suggestions. The advice here represents the guidelines we follow as a family, and you should make your own decisions when it comes to this topic. Don't substitute what I offer here with your own common sense.

High level, gaming in moderation is key. Gaming is totally fun when it is integrated into a healthy lifestyle that includes plenty of sleep, exercise, and good nutrition. If it begins to rule your life - and it can - you're headed in the wrong direction.

My advice is covered by two umbrella topics:

1. Set Limits
2. Play together

Set limits

As parents of a 10-year-old boy, we set certain limits concerning video games. These limits fall into four areas of concern:

- Content
- Time
- Location
- Friendships

Content limits

We restrict our son's game play to those games rated by the ESRB as "E" for "Everyone."

Not unlike the MPAA, the ESRB is a ratings system each video game receives before going public. Note that this is true of PC and console (Playstation Xbox, Nintendo) games, but it is not true of mobile games. The rating includes reference to 'content descriptors' found within any given game. The content descriptors on a "M" (for Mature) rated game can include:

Drug use
Sexual Content
Gore
Strong Language

Make sure you check the rating of any game your kid is playing and make a decision you feel comfortable with.

For more info on the ESRB ratings, go here:

https://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.aspx

We also further restrict video game content by not allowing games that rely on microtransactions, or MTX.

Games that market themselves as 'free-to-play' are not free. They are free to download, and you pay for content within the game. Want a better weapon? Two bucks. Want a better hairdo? Three bucks. If you have played Candy Crush, Farmville, or Clash of Clans, you have experienced MTX.

Given the wealth of game options out there, this type of feature is not something we want to introduce to our son at this time.

MTX can be a very enticing mechanic; many video games are designed with the same play pattern as gambling. This play pattern is formally understood as positive reinforcement with a variable schedule and, like gambling, in our opinion it can lead to addiction.

Gaming addiction is not formally mentioned in the DSM-V but is, at last publication, still under review. More on that here:

<https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/internet-gaming>

Also, not all microtransaction games adhere to the strictures of that reinforcement schedule – League of Legends is a great counter-example and a fine use of MTX – but some games do.

We don't want our son exposed to this sort of thing at his age, so we made a blanket rule and made all MTX games off limits. Many if not most mobile games listed as "Free" are MTX and therefore off the table for us. As an aside, we caved on Pokemon Go, and this one is allowed.

Some console games sell you the title for \$40 or \$50 and then upsell a given feature on top of that. Technically this is an MTX, but it is not free-to-play. The mechanic being utilized here is not the same found in mobile free-to-play games. He's too young for it now, but this type of game with an add-on component is OK by us.

Time Limits

We restrict our son's solo gameplay to 2 times a week, for 75 minutes a session.

If we are on a long car or plane trip, he can play while traveling.

All media time takes places after the completion of that day's homework. No exceptions.

We reinforce the idea that playing a video game is a reward, and not merely something to do because you are bored.

“Gaming in moderation” is the catch phrase to go by.

Location Limits

This particular parental rule may not seem intuitive, but we only allow games to be played on the family TV unit in the Living Room. I place particular emphasis on this rule.

To their discredit, video games can be highly non-social. That’s OK, we all need some alone time now and then to escape in to something imaginative. But if it becomes a habit – something to run toward and into a bedroom behind a closed door as a means to escape family dynamics – then this is not OK by us. So, our rule is to have fun but to do so in the aptly named Living or Family room.

As an aside, our son wears a pair of wireless headphones while he plays. While this is a bit non-social in nature, we made the trade-off for the sake of peace and quiet.

Friendship limits

There are single-player games and there are multiplayer games. A single player game is one you play by yourself. A multiplayer game is one you play with other people.

Multiplayer is split further into two, self-explanatory sub-categories:

- Cooperative
- Competitive

Both sub-categories are further defined as being either “online” or “couch.”

A “couch” multiplayer cooperative game is one where all players are seated physically in the same room, sharing a screen. They are sitting on the same couch as it were, and that’s where the definition comes from.

Online multiplayer games are ones where you are playing with one or more individuals via the internet.

When playing online you can do so silently, or connect via voice chat, or text chat, or both.

Almost all online multiplayer games have built-in capabilities to connect via voice or text chat with other players.

Many games are set up in a way that you enter into a ‘chat room’ where you hear the voices of those individuals who are on your team and/or within proximity of your in-game location. This can include the voices of strangers.

Many (if not most) online games allow you to filter out who you hear and do not hear. For example, you can filter down to just those individuals you have on your friends list. But in many if not most cases it is incumbent on the player to do this filtering.

It is too lengthy of a discussion here to describe how friending works on console, but suffice to say it is similar in nature to Facebook. You are in control of curating your friends list. Unlike Facebook, if you do not curate your list, you are therefore exposed to everyone and anyone playing the game at the time that you are.

Our son is far too young at this stage, but when he becomes a teenager, he will not be allowed to audio chat with strangers. People with antisocial tendencies are naturally drawn to video games and what happens in voice chat can be an “anything goes” sort of scenario.

To hammer home how important this rule is for us, read up on the wrongful and tragic death of Andrew Finch, found here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Wichita_swatting

Of course, we don't want our son drafting off of or impacted by anything remotely near that. Any friend connections he makes will be reviewed and approved by us, and he will only be allowed to voice chat with known friends in the real world, and not 'friends' made in the online world.

Some games - particularly in the MMO genre - also support text chat. This is similar to skype, but like voice chat, can be accessed by anyone playing the game at the same time.

Play together

I know a number of parents who allow their children to play video games, but they themselves do not play video games. I often think to myself what a terrible missed opportunity this is.

When I play with my son, I will sometimes laugh hysterically. It's a side effect of many games out there. I can see the value in my son's eyes when he sees me that way. When I make him laugh thru the vehicle of character antics shared on screen, I open his heart. When I solve the really tough level and defeat the boss monster that he just can't seem to do on his own, I become the hero. The opportunities to connect in this way are boundless.

As important, when I connect with our son in the realm of play, he sees me as willing to entertain what he is invested in, and in so doing I am more persuasive when setting the aforementioned limits.

Suffice to say that video games are an opportunity to build a bridge between you and your child. By participating, you are flipping the conversation from imposing limits to shared experience. It is my opinion that every child wishes for this from their parents. That it so happens to be within the landscape that captures their imaginations so completely, all the more perfect an opportunity. So, give it a try!

For starters, try Ten Pin Shuffle Pro on your mobile phone. This is three or four bucks and simulates bowling with your finger. It's a simple, non-challenging bowling game you can pass back and forth with your kid. Or Ellen DeGeneres' party game on mobile, called Heads Up! For a humorous yet simple turn-based experience, try Worms 3 on your mobile.