A Veto on Video Games

A parent speaks out on why he has barred TV video games from his home.

BY LLOYD GARVER

My wife and I are the kind of mean parents whom kids grumble about on the playground. We’re among that ever-shrinking group of parents known as video game holdouts. We refuse to buy a video game set. Around Christmas-time, my son made a wish list, and I noticed that Nintendo was No. 1. I said, “You know you’re not going to get Nintendo.” He said, “I know I’m not going to get it from you. But I might get it from him.” Alas, Santa, too, let him down.

I don’t think that playing a video game now and then is really harmful to children. But the children I know are so obsessed with these games that they have prompted at least one second-grade teacher (my son’s) to ban the word Nintendo from the classroom. When I asked my seven-year-old if the teacher wouldn’t let the kids talk about the games because that’s all they were talking about, he said, “No. That’s all we were thinking about.”

Our society is already so computerized and dehumanized that kids don’t need one more reason to avoid playing outside or going for a walk or talking with a friend. I’d still feel this way even if there were nothing wrong with games whose objectives are to kill and destroy.

I know, I know.

There are games other than those like Rampage, Robocop, Motor Cross Maniacs, Bionic Commando, Dr. Doom’s Revenge, Guerrilla War, and Super Street Fighter. But aren’t the violent games the ones the kids love to play for hours? And hours. And hours. My son told me he likes the “killing games” the best, hasn’t had much experience with “sports games,” and likes “learning games” the least because they are “too easy.” (Manufacturers take note.) My five-year-old daughter told me she enjoyed playing Duck Hunt at a friend’s house. The beauty of this game is that even very young players can have the

1. dehumanized: machine-like; lacking emotion or individuality.
2. objectives: aims or goals.
fun of vicariously\(^4\) shooting animals. And then there’s the game with my favorite
title—an obvious attempt to combine a
graceful sport with exciting action—
Skate or Die.

‘Promote habituation’\(^4\): The January
issue of the Journal of the American
Academy of Child and Adolescent
Psychiatry featured an article entitled
‘Pathological Preoccupation with \(^5\) Video
Games.’ The author believes that some
game manufacturers try to develop
programs that “deliberately promote
habituation,” and the
goal of some of the
people who make up
these games is “to
induce\(^5\) an altered
level of concentration and focus of
attention in the gamester.”

If you have children, or know any,
doesn’t this “altered level of concentra-
tion and focus” sound familiar? If not,
try talking to a child while he is staring
at that screen, pushing buttons. He won’t
hear you unless the words you happen
to be saying are, “I just bought a new
game for you.”

In case you couldn’t tell, I’m worried
that electronic games are dominating
children’s lives. There are games that
simulate sports like
baseball and basket-
ball, and that’s all
some kids know
about the sports.

Someday soon, a young couple will take
their children to their first baseball game
and hear the kids exclaim, “This is great.
It’s almost like the real baseball we play
on our home screen.” When I took my
son to a recent Lakers basketball game,
the thing that seemed
to excite him most
was a video game in
the lobby. You see, if
a kid didn’t want to
be bored watching
some of the greatest athletes in the
world play, he could just put a quarter in
the machine and watch lifeless electroni-
c images instead.

My son’s teacher was right. Kids do
play and talk about these games too
much. They even have books and maga-
zines that kids can study and classes so
they can get better at the games. And
that’s what’s got me worried. I’m just
concerned that this activity is so absorb-
ing, kids are going to grow up thinking
that the first people to fly that airplane
at Kitty Hawk were the Super Mario
Brothers.

I don’t like to discourage children
from doing something they’re good at;
in this case, I must. And believe me, my
desire to see them play the games less
does not diminish how impressed I am
by their skill—they seem to be getting
better and better at these games at a
younger and younger age.\(\^\)