A guide for parents, video games

The Spectrum - St. George, Utah

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Start Page: 3

Section: A

Document Text

With talk about what the video game industry can do to help create a less violent culture in the United States, I've decided to do my part as a gamer and a writer. My favorite amendment to the Constitution is the first, and video games are protected by that from censorship or government intrusion. Still, I think parents can make important choices about what video games their children play and even forbid some games from coming into the house. As my own parents used to say, family isn't a democracy. With that in mind, I present the rules for parents to follow to keep violent and offensive games away from children.

Rule 1: Don't buy violent or offensive games for your children.

Rule 2: Don't allow your kids to play violent or offensive games.

So that's easy, right? Every time you wonder how you can keep video games from negatively affecting children, go over those two rules. You can even cut it out of the paper, laminate it and refer to it whenever video game purchase decisions are made. Video games are self-regulated by the Entertainment Software Rating Board, which puts ratings on each video game sold. These ratings are easier to understand than a McDonald's Extra Value Menu. They have big letters indicating which age group the content is considered to be appropriate, they spell out which age group the content is appropriate for and a list of possibly objective content.

Want to keep games that have blood and swearing away from your kids? Each game that has blood and swearing tells you so right on the front of the box. If you find things that are offensive on the content descriptor, don't buy the game. The only reason to be surprised by offensive content in a game you buy is to purchase it while blindfolded.

So why does it happen that so many parents get horrified when they buy their children a violent game and discover violent content in it?

Every family is different, and every child is different. Parents can determine what level of violence -- or sex or profanity or whatever -- that their children should be exposed to, and there are plenty of tools to help parents decide which video games fit their criteria. The ESRB website -- www.esrb.org -- is a great place to begin. Perhaps I oversimplified it when I listed only two rules. After all, games these days often involve online aspects where many players can play together. Modifications to games -- especially games played on the PC -- can bring changes that go beyond what the ESRB rated. Personal taste can be different than ESRB ratings. Images of sexy dancers in "Guitar Hero" may be offensive to parents who don't want their children exposed to that sort of thing, but it isn't listed on the ESRB rating.

With that in mind, I modify my list by adding one more rule, possibly the most important rule of all: Monitor what your kids are doing with video games. Even if,

somehow, every method to keep offensive games away from your kids fails, if you see your kids playing something offensive, you can put a stop to it.

The reason behind all of this is I like video games. I even like violent video games that children shouldn't be exposed to, and I don't like it when politicians, pundits and special interest groups like the National Rifle Association spout video games as reasons for this country's woes. These people would seek to control video game content before it ever reaches parents and that's not how this country works.

So, parents, please take control of the electronic entertainment in your home so other groups can't.

Josh

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Nerds Eye View

All I want as a father is for my child to be a nerd
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Start Page: 3
Section: A
Document Text
When a couple gets pregnant these days, there are more things to consider than in years past when it comes to telling people. The question is: When do we put this on Facebook, meaning, when do we stand up in a virtual crowded room and shout to nearly everyone we know or ever knew that a baby shall be forthcoming?

Of course, writers like me also have the option of blurting it out in a column to a host of strangers. Either way, my wife and I are having a baby. It's not a big deal in the grand scheme of things, as most people will have babies sooner or later, but it's a pretty big deal for us. We've been trying for almost 10 years with no success, gave modern medicine a chance without luck and then randomly got pregnant.

As I have tirelessly chronicled here, my wife and I are big nerds and I hope our kids are too.

I want my kids to be the ones who spend more time obsessing about the world in "Lord of the Rings" than high school popularity contests. I want my kids to know all about Nikola Tesla, Marie Curie, Richard Matheson and Hedy Lamarr before they know anything about modern pop icons. I want them to use terms like sauropoda, post-colonial and muggle in everyday conversation. I want them to build their own computer before they own a car.

I want them to argue with their English teachers about the validity of Internet-speak as a natural evolution of language, even though they don't really believe it. I want them to argue in favor of free-use and the space program.

I want them to go on hikes and be able to identify the strata of rock. I want them to understand the biology of reproduction while they still assume members of the opposite gender have cooties. I want them to know there is no such thing as a cootie

but still draw pictures of what a cootie might look like. I want those cootie pictures to be epic.

I want to take them to Disneyland and have them question how each special effect is done. I want them to understand the physics of roller coasters before they're tall enough to ride them. I want them to build huge constructs out of Lego blocks.

I want them to go on fossil hunts. I want them to lose track of time in museums. I want them to play with remote control helicopters and gyroscopes. I want them to name pets after Pokemon.

I want them to read. Good glory I want them to read. Everything from "Treasure Island" to "Anne of Green Gables." From "Hound of the Baskervilles" to "1984." From "Cannery Row" to "Frankenstein." From "Eyes of the Dragon" to "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." From "Little Women" to "Dune."

I want to play video games with them. I want to catalog the various species of insects we find living in our yard with them. I want to get a microscope and spend the afternoon looking at the minutia of our world with them.

Most of all, I want them to wonder at the world around them and have the tools to find the answers. I hope I don't screw it up.

Follow the Nerd's Eye View blog at TheSpectrum.com. Follow Josh Huntsman on twitter, @joshhuntsman.

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Nerds Eye View

Don't turn off your brain for entertainment

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Start Page: 3
Section: D

Document Text

I was talking to a friend about a TV show recently. I won't reveal the identity of my friend because, frankly, none of you know her so it wouldn't do much good. The TV show was "Big Brother."

I have never watched "Big Brother." I asked her why she liked it so much and she talked about the drama and recounted to me some of the moments she liked from the show.

I started asking questions about "Big Brother." Does it have any ties to the Orwell novel "1984?" Do contestants have to wear tiny swimsuits the whole time or do they just objectify women on commercials to get men to watch?

That's when my friend told me she doesn't want to analyze the shows she watches like I do -- she just wants to be able to turn off her brain and enjoy something.

Why in the name of all good things living on this blue marble we call earth would anyone ever want to turn off their brain? What does that even mean?

"Well, Josh, it means I want to sit on my couch in a half-stupor with drool running down my chin as I watch generally horrible people be horrible to each other for an hour."

The problem is this: Your brain never turns off. Well, it does but at that point it's usually not a choice you make and after it happens it's practically impossible for it to start up again.

Your brain is always on and it's soaking up everything you toss your eyeballs at. It absorbs every image, sound, smell and idea you come across. Combine this with the fact that stories were invented in order to direct and control behavior. Every story teller has a particular viewpoint because they are human. If you "turn your brain off" then you absorb opinions and points of view with no critical thinking to protect yourself.

There is no "one phone call" rule when you get arrested. It's something made up by movies like the chalk outline of dead bodies. Great White Sharks aren't really that dangerous. You can't blow up a gas tank by shooting it. CSI workers don't interrogate criminals.

Possibly the biggest lie people believe from entertainment is the falsity that life is split up like a story. A fat person wants to get skinny. They overcome obstacles with the help of perky friends and several training montages. In the end, they are skinny and happy. This basic storyline is the entire premise of the TV show "The Biggest Loser" and it's a lie.

In real life it would work more like this: A fat person wants to get skinny. They diet for a few weeks before backsliding. This process repeats for years. Finally a medical condition requires they either lose weight or die. The medical condition scares them enough for them to drop a lot of weight, but they struggle with proper nutrition and exercise for the rest of their life.

A bigger problem occurs when people don't realize that their life isn't a story. Hard work doesn't always pay off and true love doesn't always come -- and for most of mankind's existence that was alright. Entertainment tells us that the struggling actor will always make it big and the kooky-bookish girl will get married in spite of her horrible sister's opinion. If we buy into the message entertainment tells us, we become depressed when our own life doesn't work out like a three-act movie.

None of this is to say to ignore stories. I gobble up every story I can from whatever form I can be it books, movies, video games, comic books or whatever -- just make sure you're aware. Every piece of entertainment you engage in has the potential to change you. It's only a little change per movie or TV show, but you watch thousands of movies and TV shows over your lifetime. Don't you want your brain turned completely on so you can analyze what you are being told?

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Nerds Eye View

Batman keeps evolving with changing times
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Start Page: 3
Section: A
Document Text
First things first, I love Batman -- but this love has led to a level of familiarity that forces me to admit how strange the Caped Crusader is.

I'm not saying that Batman as a character is strange. A billionaire with no super powers that plays with Superman and Wonder Woman and also dresses like a bat and fights the same handful of criminals over and over -- nothing wrong with that.

I'm talking about "Batman" as an intellectual property. You see, I recently did something I haven't done since high school. I watched the 1997 film "Batman & Robin" starring George Clooney, Chris O'Donnell, Uma Thurman and a hilarious Arnold Schwarzenegger. Joel Schumacher directed it and later apologized to "Batman" fans for it.

This movie is bad. This movie has the following: a person dressed in a huge gorilla suit who dances seductively; a fight scene where costumed goons play hockey with a huge diamond in a museum; Schwarzenegger desperately trying to lead the same costumed goons as a choir singing "Snow Miser."

I remember loving it. I don't know what to say to defend myself against this, but in high school I loved it. When I watched it as an adult, not only can't I believe I loved it, but that it was made in the first place. I can't believe there was nobody on the set -- all functional adults I assume -- who didn't stand up and put a stop to it.

Now, there has probably been more silly adaptations of Batman -- the 1966 film "Batman" comes to mind with Adam West saying the awesome line: "Some days you just can't get rid of a bomb."

No, "Batman & Robin" was worse.

I watched "Batman" -- 1966 version -- as a kid and saw it more like a museum artifact. The "POW" "WAM" nature of the movie, and the 1960s TV show, was nothing like the somber Batman comics or the surreal Tim Burton movies of the early '90s.

Of course none of these are like the current movie iteration of Batman thanks to Christopher Nolan's recent dark, oppressive and morally complex film trilogy.

In the 1930s and '40s, Batman was a comic noir detective that grew slowly more silly into the '50s and '60s. In the 1970s, Batman grew more somber and serious with villains more murderous and wicked. In the 1980s and 1990s, things grew more silly again, cumulating with the disastrous "Batman & Robin" film that put an end to Batman movies for a long time.

Now, Batman is more realistic and faces more morally challenging issues. Where, in the '20s and '30s, Bruce Wayne's billionaire status was seen as a near heroic aspect, today it's a liability to the point where "The Dark Knight Rises" was basically an "Occupy Gotham" demonstration.

What is weird is that Batman is the same character that danced to disco in the '60s, played hockey with a diamond in the '90s and stopped an occupy-style protest in 2012. Would the real Batman please stand up?

The truth is that Batman goes far beyond the specifics of the story details. Batman is one of those strange stories that get passed on from generation to generation, changing as it goes to better suit whatever the culture is doing at the time. You can see how Batman becomes more serious in times of war and sillier in times of excess or greed. Batman villains are scarier as threats to the United States become larger. This is a very brief discussion of a much larger and more complex topic, but the take-away lesson is this: If you want to see what American culture was like at any given moment in the past century, take a look at what Batman was doing at the time. And if you want to see what we are all about now, see what Batman is doing now. Either way, go see what Batman is up to. It's interesting stuff.

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Nerds Eye View