DIGITAL PLAYGROUNDS: LEARNING & CONNECTING THROUGH GAMES

DIGITAL PLAYGROUNDS

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If you read our first book, "Our Kids & Video Games", you know that games are the digital playgrounds that our children are playing in. It's their Third Place (i.e., a place where people spend time between home [their 'first' place] and work [their 'second'] place) where they can meet up to connect with friends and family, becoming whomever they want to be in those moments. But games aren't just about hanging out with pals on a lazy Saturday. They're also tools for learning, creativity, connection, and healing.

It's also a murky online lagoon that might be full of monsters or magic.

The only way to know for sure is to dive right in. Don't worry, though. We're your Fairy Gamemothers and we will lead you through the unknown.

First, we have Dr. Rachel Kowert. She's a research psychologist and mom of three. Rachel has been studying the uses and effects of games for more than 10 years with a specific focus on the ways games impact us physically, socially, and psychologically. She's published a variety of books and scientific articles relating to the psychology of games and also hosts a YouTube channel Psychgeist (www.youtube.com/psychgeist) which serves to bridge the gap between moral panic and scientific knowledge on a variety of psychology and game related topics.

There's also Amanda Farough (not a doctor). Amanda's been many things in her life — business analyst, consultant, game journalist, speaker, entrepreneur, and writer. Over the course of her work as an analyst and journalist, she's focused on the

business side of how video games are made (www.virtualeconcast.com) and on how parents can navigate the world of games without being gamers themselves. When Amanda isn't consulting on games (or making them as a narrative designer), you can find her chilling with her four kids.

Between the two of us, we're going to lead you through the world of video games as parents. It can be a little scary and definitely a bit (okay, a lot) intimidating, but once you have the language and the context to navigate these conversations with your kids, you'll be a pro before you know it. You might not be a Fortnite pro, but you will definitely be better equipped to talk to your kid about it.

GAMES AS TOOLS

In "Our Kids & Video Games", we talked at length about play and how games encourage a number of different forms of play. Play is at the core of every game and is what makes games, well... fun. Without play, games would be rote and tedious, lacking soul and depth. **Play acts as a paint brush**, sweeping through a palette of social connection, learning, mental health, problem-solving, leadership, and skill development, to create a multifaceted masterpiece of any given player, including your child.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Rachel grew up in a small town in Texas. She was someone who spent her Friday nights playing role-playing games like *Final Fantasy*, rather than convening under the Friday night lights of the high school football games. Rachel was a bit of a wallflower among her peers. The advent of online gaming changed this dramatically, providing Rachel with an opportunity to find a shared community of other girls in towns large and small who shared a love for pixelated playgrounds.

Amanda was a lonely girl growing up, always zigging when her peers would zag. She never learned to fit in with the social spaces that she was expected to. It was video games that gave her the community that she needed to find her way out of loneliness in a crowd. Through *Halo* LAN parties at her house, with her father participating in team matches and her mother baking cookies for twelve teens, Amanda found herself. She found her crew in gaming, the 2000s equivalent of her high school "ride or die".

Our stories are not unique. Many children struggle with finding a place in environments that can be outwardly hostile, whether that's because they're offbeat (like Amanda), queer, trans, neurodivergent, or otherwise Other to what their peers expect them to be (like Rachel). Many of us, regardless of who we were, were forced into friendships of convenience that relied on proximity more than common interests.

In the past, the stereotype of the "nerd in the basement with no friends" has been how we've seen gaming represented. Representation is everything, so we need to update how we see gaming in order to change our perspectives for our children. These days, gaming is all about connection, whether that's in shared social spaces like *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*, competitive arenas like *Fall Guys* and *Valorant* or couch co-op with *Overcooked* or *Goat Simulator*.

The best gaming experiences are always shared, even if it's single player.

Our kids connect with one another, especially at school, over everything. Sometimes, it's the latest TikTok dance that's got them grooving. Other times, it's the goal they scored at soccer over the weekend. A lot of the time, it's internet memes and video games. Establishing and maintaining connection through gaming is an essential part of a child's social growth and evolution.

Online games provide incredible opportunities to safely connect with likeminded people all over the world. Through a match of *Valorant* or being a part of a guild in *Final Fantasy XIV*, connections are forged through being a part of a wider digital playground that encompasses both play and partnership. We know from the research that games can, and do, facilitate long-term close knit friendship bonds between players and that most players report they have made good-friends within gaming spaces[1]. For anyone who plays games, it may seem obvious to recognize that games can be wonderful melting pots, so to say, to meet new people, or catch up with old friends, engage and interact with people we may have never met before – from across the globe, across cultures, age groups, and backgrounds.

For those less familiar with these social spaces, **there tends to be a common assumption that online friends (made through**

games or otherwise) are somehow "less valuable" or "less important" than connections made at school or afterschool activities. In addition, there's also the idea of social displacement, which is the concern that online friends are being displaced by "less socially valuable" online friends, to contend with. However, the research has shown us that player experiences and connectedness in online spaces are meaningful, long-lasting and tend to augment one's pre-existing relationships rather than displace them[23].

Rachel didn't stop hanging out with her close friends at school when she found *World of Warcraft*, she simply joined an additional social circle where she could nerd out about her love of Elven aesthetics … which wasn't a really big topic of conversation in small town Texas anyway. Amanda's online friends were often vetted by her parents through a combination of shared play (through *World of Warcraft* and *City of Heroes* with her dad) and hard boundaries of needing to live in her hometown (which was fairly sizable, at least geographically).

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2. Collins, E., & Freeman, J. (2013). Do problematic and non-problematic video game players differ in extraversion, trait empathy, social capital and prosocial tendencies?. Computers in Human Behavior, 29(5), 1933-1940

3. Shen, C., & Williams, D. (2011). Unpacking time online: Connecting internet and massively multiplayer online game use with psychosocial well-being. Communication Research, 38(1), 123-149

LEARNING

Most modern parents have sat down with their toddler or preschooler to look at the educational apps available for tablets to find ways to blend fun and learning before said kiddo goes off to elementary school. There are many formal educational games out there to choose from that are appropriate for an array of age ranges and educational needs. Rachel highly recommends *Endless Learning Academy* (Originator Inc). No, they do not pay her to say that but it's just that good. Amanda recommends *Adventure Academy* (ABCMouse) for a combination of whimsy and learning.

What if we told you that even games that aren't listed as "educational" or even "edutainment" had the capacity to teach? **Most games, even ones that seem like they have no meaning out in the "real world", have something to teach**. Much of it is indirect or unintentional as it happens through emergent experiences, like large group collaborative efforts (e.g., MMO endgame raids) or learning how to talk to an NPC (non-playable character) so they'll help you achieve a goal. Learning is not necessarily the explicit goal of the game but rather an unintentional consequence of playing because games are fantastic vehicles for learning.

Games are such effective tools for learning because they induce what we refer to in the research community as a **state of flow**. More generally referred to as "being in the zone," players can

experience a flow state when the challenge of the activity perfectly meets the skill level of the participant. Games have mastered this dynamic. When we enter a state of flow, we become hyper focused on the task at hand and determined to complete them because our skills are being challenged. It is in this state that learning is enhanced because we are intensely focused and motivated to learn, whether that means solving a difficult puzzle in *The Legend of Zelda*, figuring out the right button smash to defeat Kirby in *Smash Bros.*, or stacking your deck of cards just right to beat the *Gwent* masters in *Witcher 3*.

Games are also great tools for learning because they incorporate a range of different learning styles and approaches. Learning isn't just for the classroom; it's everywhere in digital playgrounds if you know where to look. Players can find great opportunities in games that require an immense amount of visual input to learn from (e.g., *Unpacking*, *A Little to the Left*). There are games that engage listening skills and allow players to put their best selves to the test (e.g, *Wandersong*, *Theatrhythm*). Players can find joyful learning in riddles/word puzzles and problem-solving through conversation (e.g, *Wildermyth*, *Wordle*). Even those that relish movement have a place in gaming, especially with the advent of the Meta Quest headset (though VR is only recommended for children over 13) and *Ring Fit Adventures* on the Nintendo Switch.

Learning in games is all well and good, but it isn't why we boot them up on our phones, tablets, consoles, and computers. **At the core of gaming is, of course, play**.

But what exactly can games teach us, you ask? While typically hand-eye coordination and other visual-spatial skills are often the focus of these kinds of discussions, video games can promote a range of skills and abilities including creative thinking, problem solving, time management, and leadership skills.

The link between video game play and creative thinking may not be particularly surprising, as most video games require players to develop new solutions to different problems in a short amount of time. Whether you are exploring a new world, solving a puzzle, or figuring out how to mine all the Adamantite you need to make your sweet motorcycle in *World of Warcraft*, overcoming various in-game challenges can promote creative thinking and help develop more complex problem solving skills[1].

Players can also unintentionally pick up a new range of knowledge while playing video games, the nature of which depends on the video game they are playing. For example, you can learn about history by playing games like *Age of Empires*, or what it takes to be a successful city planner by playing the popular simulation series *SimCity*, or the wonders of the world, key world leaders, and world history through *Civilization*.

Leadership skills are also often discussed in the context of unintentional learning as they can be developed and played in online games. Online games provide a particularly unique opportunity to observe, learn, and lead groups of all sizes, ages, and backgrounds.

Yes, this means it is likely time to rethink your child's "raid nights". For example, if your child is organizing "raid nights" on *Final Fantasy XIV*, they're building leadership and production skills that will help them communicate and stay organized as they get older. Children cooperating with other players, especially ones they don't know, doesn't have to be scary, either. These scenarios can teach kids how to cooperate to achieve a common goal and give them better communication skills to guide them through challenging situations outside of digital playgrounds. On Amanda's podcast, Virtual Economy, she and her co-host Mike Futter had an excellent interview with CCP Games about *Eve Online* helping to create a more "agile" employee through

learning, cooperating, and building in their online game. And yes, experimenting with and experiencing success in leadership roles online have been found to cross over into other offline contexts[2].

Then there is **social learning**.

Along with being a space for social connection also comes a space for social observation and practice. At their core, online games are inherently social spaces, which makes them ideal spaces for various forms of social learning. Players have to directly interact with other players to progress through the game content or, at the very least, observe other players socially engaging with each other, players have ample opportunity to learn and perfect various social skills, both directly and indirectly[3].

Through trial and error, **players can learn and refine various kinds of social strategies**, such as opening a conversation, accepting constructive criticism, expressing emotions, interpreting others emotions, etc. Indirectly, social learning can occur through the observation of the interactions between other players. The opportunity for this kind of observation occurs frequently within online gaming spaces. Similar to observing real-world models, players can observe different behaviors modeled by others in a wide variety of situations and learn socially appropriate (and inappropriate) behaviors to draw upon in any future social experience (both off and online).

For example, players can learn the appropriate way to situate themselves when talking to a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger (i.e., more interpersonal distance with less social intimacy) through observation. Players may also observe social interactions related to negotiating for something strategic or even how to ask others to attend a casual social event. As humans, we observe these things in our offline spaces regularly. These same situations occur within digital worlds and can be observed,

learned from, and carried over into future offline and online interactions.

Let's circle back to **hand-eye coordination and visual spatial skills**. These skills are considered a cornerstone of many measures of intelligence, and include abilities such as visual perception, processing and memory, and mental rotation. Many games challenge players to notice small changes in their visual environment and react quickly. Through repeated practice, players hone their visual processing speed and accuracy[4]. Research has also found that the transfer of visual-spatial skills from digital spaces transfer to non-digital spaces quite easily.

Educators of all ages have started tapping into the power of video games and learning as tools for a range of subjects. Video games are being used to immerse students in historical time periods using Assassin's Creed, help explain difficult real world events with the serious game *Darfur is Dying*, and teach moral decision making using the choose your own adventure game *The Walking Dead*. *Minecraft Education* is an excellent example of a large, mainstream game being used as an educational tool in schools. Minecraft Education allows educators (STEM and otherwise) to connect with their students through shared experiences like #HourOfCode or even to lead a lesson about climate change through the BBC's use of *Minecraft*'s sandbox environment.

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2. Lu, L., Shen, C., & Williams, D. (2014). Friending your way up the ladder: Connecting massive multiplayer online game behaviors with offline leadership. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 35, 54-60

3. Ducheneaut, N., & Moore, R. J. (2005). More than just 'XP': Learning social skills in massively multiplayer online games. *Interactive technology and smart education*.

4. Spence, I., & Feng, J. (2010). Video games and spatial cognition. *Review of general psychology*, 14(2), 92-104

MENTAL HEALTH

We often hear the negative side of gaming through the lens of mental health with discussions around online toxicity, child grooming in gaming communities, and even addiction. We'll get into some of these challenges later in this book. For now, we're going to focus on games as a tool for mental health, well-being, and belonging.

An integral piece of mental health, well-being, and belonging is in seeing ourselves positively (and adequately) represented in all forms of media, not the least of which is games. Representation in games is something that many developers (and players) have been pushing towards for a number of years.

Having the ability to create a version of oneself (through customization) or see oneself represented within games can have a profound effect on players' experiences, including increasing gaming's cognitive benefits and increased enjoyment. Allow us to go down a bit of a research rabbit hole for a moment to better illustrate this point.

In 2016, a research study was published looking at more than 100 participants who played an endless runner game (it's exactly as it sounds; you're simply a person running through an environment). Players were either given the opportunity to

customize their avatar or to use a preconstructed avatar (that did not resemble them). Being able to customize an avatar led players to feeling significantly more identified with the character in game, gave them a greater sense of freedom, immersion, invested effort in the game, rates of enjoyment, and reported positive emotions associated with the game itself. In the end, greater identification translated into a range of positive outcomes as well as more play time in what, arguably, could be the most droll game genre of all time – an endless runner.

A 2021 article, "How Representation Feels in Games", explored how it felt to see oneself represented by Miles Morales in *Marvel's Spider Man: Miles Morales*[1]:

> *"It is difficult to put into words what it was like to see a character I truly identified with to be featured in a video game. I played the game twice, and both times, I had a very emotional experience. When I played Miles Morales for the first time, just seeing Miles walking along the street listening to music and walking with such joy made me feel overwhelmed. I was so happy to finally play a story-driven video game as a Black character that I started crying."*

As illustrated by that quote, representation can be incredibly powerful and meaningful.

Of course, there's always a flip side. **Lower identification with one's avatar can actually lead to losses of many of gaming's benefits**, including lower quality socializing, increased frustration with the game itself, and fewer psychological benefits, such as mood repair[2].

There was a time not that long ago when women had almost no representation in games, beyond the trope-laden damsel in distress (Princess Peach) or the eye candy (*Tomb Raider*'s Lara

Croft). While things have improved significantly on gender representation, there is still not nearly enough representation for people of color (BIPOC). To put this in perspective, **non-white characters represent only about 20% of characters within digital games**[3].

1. Daley, D. (2021, August 1). Gaming industry members discuss how it feels to play a game that represents them. *MobileSyrup*. Retrieved from https://mobilesyrup.com/2021/08/01/how-it-feels-to-play-games-that-represent-you/

2. Behm-Morawitz, E., Hoffswell, J., & Chen, S. W. (2016). The virtual threat effect: A test of competing explanations for the effects of racial stereotyping in video games on players' cognitions. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 19(5), 308-313.

3. Currys UK. (2019). Diversity in Gaming. Retrieved from https://techtalk.currys.co.uk/tv-gaming/gaming/diversity-in-gaming/

SELF-CARE

We touched on self-care a bit in our first book, "Our Kids & Video Games", as an introduction to understanding the importance of gaming as part of self-care. While everyone approaches self-care differently, **the throughline is creating behavioral changes to enable well-being**. Those of us that love games will often ensure that gaming is an integral part of our self-care routine.

Rachel's self-care routine typically consists of setting time aside for the things that bring her joy in a consistent way. This includes pre-booking time at the spa and taking one day every quarter to enjoy a day of relaxation. Making sure to always take a book she wants to read with her when she knows she will have to be spending time in a waiting room (for now, it is "Time of Contempt" by Andrezej Sapkowski). And scheduling in time to finally check out some of those games in her Steam backlog. Even with a packed schedule, she makes sure to either use the down time (like in a waiting room) or formally schedule in time to nourish her body and mind.

Amanda's self-care routine is often a combination of things, including journaling, coffee, connecting with nature, spending time with family, and yes, gaming. There are different kinds of experiences that Amanda finds nourishing. She spent a chunk of her time in 2022 weaving through *Immortality* (a single player

game) with her partners passing the controller back and forth, which was a connective experience that was a balm at the end of a long day. Other times, she needs quiet with a cozy indie game, like *Unpacking* or *A Little to the Left*. And yet others, she wants to play in an environment that engages her competitive nature and her cooperative tendencies, like a round of *Dead by Daylight*.

Before we continue, let's talk about the elephant in the room: violence in video games. Amanda described an element of her gaming self-care as a round of *Dead by Daylight*, which is an asymmetrical horror game that pits a killer against their would-be victims. Why in the world would she use violence in games as a part of her self-care routine? Doesn't that make her a violent person with violent thoughts and tendencies?

The short answer: no. We'll unpack this more in our "Addressing Fears" section.

Before we address our fears as parents (as there are many understandable trepidations), let's dig into what started on this path to begin with: gaming as a means for socialization.

GAMES AS SOCIAL SPACES

In our first book, "Our Kids & Video Games", we talked about the importance of defining a Third Place that's separate from school/work and home life. **This Third Place can be anything from a cafe to a baseball diamond to *Minecraft* with friends after school**. What's important is that it's safe and free from the obligations of the rest of the world.

Video games are ideal social spaces, despite the corny and outmoded stereotype of the "gamer in the basement" (basements have great lighting for playing games, though). There's an inherent social nature to it, even beyond explicit social spaces or the digital playgrounds that our kids play in. If you watch how children play in any capacity, they're often looping others into their games, digital or not. Amanda's youngest daughter prefers all games to be social, even if it's a single-player experience. She creates "couch co-op" moments with her friends, where they pass the controller back and forth to experience the game together, despite being designed for one person to play.

Multiplayer experiences — where people play together separately but together, sometimes on the same screen but most often on different devices altogether — are an **instrumental piece of**

creating and maintaining social spaces in games. There are lobbies, like in *Among Us* or *Overwatch*, where folks can gather together and mess around before engaging in structured play.

We've all heard our kids shouting in the mic to someone across town or even across the world, trying to coordinate play remotely (goodness knows that Amanda's son is fairly consistent in his "turn it up to 11" volume when playing *Minecraft* or *Fall Guys* competitively with his friends). **The competitive element of multiplayer is also part of creating social spaces in games**. Sometimes that's through shared camaraderie, such as a game like *Apex Legends*, where team coordination through competition is paramount. Other times, it's through a game like *Civilization VI*, where players can create political machinations through socialization in a way that the single-player experience can't match.

Now, for many of us that last sentence might have you thinking "wait, what? Single player games can be social too?" Absolutely! It is important to remember that in today's world even single player games are not truly single player games. While we may be navigating the game space independently, we are connected to the broader gaming community through platform chat functionality or within our third-party chat apps, like Discord. We also can feel social closeness or affinity towards the characters we are playing with, through a **psychological phenomenon called parasocial relationships.**

Parasocial relationships are common in our day-to-day lives. These so-called "one-sided" relationships explain why we feel an affinity to our favorite weatherman or our favorite *Witcher* (you know it's Henry Cavill). In games, we can develop this same kind of affinity for the characters we play (for instance, Link in *The Legend of Zelda*) or the non-playable characters (NPCs) within our gaming space (everyone has a favorite …or least favorite,

neighbor in *Animal Crossing*). Even though they are one sided, parasocial relationships are social relationships. They are inherently social in nature and come with a variety of social benefits, similar to reciprocal relationships, including a decreased sense of loneliness[1].

We'll get to esports a little later in our book, but as a primer, allow us to define the term and what it means for social spaces. Esports are exactly as they sound: electronic sports. They began many years ago, specifically around *Starcraft* in the '90s, where we saw the earliest emergence of "shoutcasting" (esports commentators) and professional players around the world. As gaming has evolved to become more of a focus on "live service games" — games that are updated regularly with new content and features, usually with a strong multiplayer component — so too have esports.

These social spaces surrounding esports, where professional video game athletes gather, are some of the most powerful experiences in competitive gaming. Until you've attended a live esports tournament where the players are staking thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, on their performances, it's almost indescribable. The energy is electric and the community experience for the fans, as well as the players, is an incredible bonding that brings everyone closer together. Amanda had the privilege of attending a *Fortnite* World Cup in 2019 and it was magic.

And then there are MMOs — Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games — which are a combination of both cooperative and competitive gaming. The cooperation is often through shared social spaces, such as with a guild (*World of Warcraft*) or a free company (*Final Fantasy XIV*), where members contribute resources, time, and expertise. The cooperation extends to "raiding", where players band together to defeat a mighty enemy (or swarm of enemies) in a "dungeon", which is composed of

puzzles, traps, and cooperative keys that require the guild to learn and repeat said dungeon until it's solved.

The mightiest enemies in MMOs are felled in a test of strength, fortitude, and organization, all of which require many hours of skilled play and experimentation to ensure victory. There's nothing quite like spending an evening with friends, devising strategies to take down the next big boss in the game.

Many MMOs also have a PvP (player vs player) element that allows players to compete in minigames (such as capture the flag or king of the hill) or arenas of valor (like *Destiny*'s Crucible mode) to earn in-game rewards. There's sometimes overlap between those who like to "raid" and those who prefer PvP, but usually you'll find players fall into one of the two camps according to their preferred playstyle.

These shared experiences, whether in cooperation or competition, are essential to creating and maintaining social spaces in gaming. Your child playing their favorite minigame in *Minecraft* is no less (or more) valuable than solo creation or outright cooperation in both "couch co-op" or multiplayer cooperative experiences. Each kind of multiplayer experience is a worthwhile pursuit, not just because it has the capacity to teach greater empathy through leadership or teamwork, but because it's fun.

There are still more than a handful of things to be concerned about with regards to online multiplayer activity, especially for children. So, before you let your kiddo loose on the *Valorant* competitive circuit, let's figure out what to do about online spaces that can become hostile, engage in bullying, or even begin the grooming process.

1. Greenwood, D. N., & Long, C. R. (2009). Psychological predictors of

media involvement: Solitude experiences and the need to belong. Communication Research, 36(5), 637-654.

THE CHALLENGES OF ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Online multiplayer, whatever multiplayer game or genre that might be, comes with its own set of challenges unique to gaming and internet culture.

We are Millennials, which means that we both had the internet in our lives when we were teenagers. Back then, it was the wild west. No one knew anything about anything, other than learning the importance of "netiquette". It also wasn't that complicated back then. Teens and young adults had ICQ, AIM, MSN Messenger, forums, and the odd chatroom, in addition to guild chats on Ventrilo (a gaming alternative to Skype from the '00s and '10s), but we didn't have to worry about how to navigate social media or in-game voice chat .

The internet was a smaller space back then.

These days, the internet — and therefore the advent of online multiplayer as a gathering space for children and teens — is complicated and enormous There are bad actors and creepy crevices that unsavory elements can sometimes thrive in. It's important to acknowledge these digital dangers without becoming lost in them. Connecting through games is a force of

good when we adequately prepare ourselves and our young ones on the challenges of navigating spaces that we don't control.

What should I talk to my child(ren) about before they start playing online?

The first thing that we encourage all parents to do is investigate the game itself. Read reviews from parenting sites like Common Sense Media (https://www.commonsensemedia.org/), Engaged Family Gaming (https://engagedfamilygaming.com/), or Polygon (https://www.polygon.com/). Get a sense of what the game is and isn't to better prepare yourself for the conversations ahead.

Before you give the go-ahead, **sit down and define "house rules" around this game**. These rules may require no in-game voice chat (or limited to only when the parents are around and can listen in) or, for older children, it may require a lighter touch to ensure autonomy and growth as a teen stretches boundaries, which is normal. Make sure you write the list down so that when there's a dispute, there's written proof that the conversation(s) happened, and these were the agreed upon rules.

Talk to your child about, well, talking. Ensure that safety is met — no last names, no addresses, no phone numbers — and that the lines of communication are immaculate between you and your child. Ask them about the best match of the night. Make it safe for them to talk to you about scary things — like when a grown-up talks to them and they know it's not appropriate. It's easy to get angry when we feel our child has made a bad choice, but calmness is everything in those moments. It will demonstrate that we're on their side, on their team, even before we're pulled into parenting panic mode.

Chances are that your child's school will start these conversations with guidance counselors at a fairly young age. **It's our job as parents to keep those conversations at the forefront of their minds before (and during) online play**. Just like anything else in our kids' lives, it's important to keep it age appropriate. It's almost impossible to broach this subject with anyone under the age of 10, so it's our job to be there with the kids while they explore online spaces.

For preteens and teens, it's a little easier because they'll have heard stories or even witnessed bullying firsthand.

Cyberbullying is the digital expression (and often extension) of the bullying we've experienced ourselves firsthand. Once again, Millennials managed to create this behemoth of an issue through use of forums (early social media), chat rooms, and messenger apps like ICQ, AIM, and MSN Messenger. Back then, even if we were being bullied online, we could walk away from our computers and choose not to engage.

These days, cyberbullying takes shape everywhere, including text messaging, social media (Instagram, BeReal, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok are most common), and yes, even video games.

There is a difference between cyberbullying and the overall toxicity of online gaming lobbies. Cyberbullying is targeted and is often carried out over an extended period of time. Cyberbullying often requires coordination amongst perpetrators, whereas toxic gaming lobbies are a cesspool of trolls who genuinely believe they're being funny, edgy, or both.

Any conversation around bullying is going to carry a weight that feels impossible to carry, especially as parents who wish to believe the best of the world that we're raising our children in.

Compassion is often the best way to conduct such conversations, leaning into kindness and understanding wherever we can. Our schools will often start the conversation, but in case they haven't, here's where we recommend you begin.

I'm very concerned about online grooming. How can I talk about this with my child?

Before we begin in on our advice to discuss grooming, it's important to understand what it is and isn't.

According to RAINN (https://www.rainn.org), grooming is "manipulative behaviors that the abuser uses to gain access to a potential victim, coerce them to agree to the abuse, and reduce the risk of being caught." Grooming is often conducted by someone familiar or in the victim's "circle of trust" and can be something conducted online and/or in-person.

It is important to understand that grooming is not discussing gender or sexuality in a knowledge-driven capacity. Children are growing creatures with an abundance of curiosity. If your child asks to talk about gender dysphoria and/or questions about their sexuality with a trusted advisor (whether that's a teacher, counselor, or family friend), it's curiosity and knowledge at the heart of those conversations, not facilitating a future of abuse.

Grooming is often talked about within the context of sexual exploitation. Grooming children to either perform, comply, or agree to an act that is inappropriate and abusive.

Beyond the absolute unthinkable, a child can also be groomed to join extremist and white supremacist groups. By pressing limits about what a child may find acceptable or unacceptable, the abuser gains more access and has the opportunity to mold a very impressionable mind into believing things that run antithetical to how they've been raised (racism, transphobia, antisemitism,

misogyny, etc.). As gaming spaces can be ones where hate and harassment are commonplace, these environments are particularly conducive to the sharing of a range of extreme ideologies.

Talking about this is going to be far, far more challenging than a conversation about cyberbullying because of the intimacy of the content. Instead of framing it as "here's what grooming is and why it's bad", lean into understanding what's appropriate and inappropriate behavior online, as well as what we consider to be appropriate and inappropriate content. The latter will obviously differ from family to family.

In Amanda's house, she takes the time to speak with her son (in particular, but not solely) about the kind of people that he's connecting with online. He knows the rules of online engagement, especially for online communication: no one older than mid-teens; friends of friends are allowed but strangers must be vetted by the parents; we speak kindly and don't tolerate hate speech of any kind; stand up for those that cannot stand up for themselves.

In Rachel's house, her children are much younger, so she places limits on not being able to engage with anyone online outside of their immediate friends and family. While she has started to get some pushback from her 8-going on 18-year-old, she regularly has open conversations about how not everyone on the internet "is nice" or has good intentions.

While these approaches seem different, they are the same at the core: **having age-appropriate, open conversations with your children that continue through childhood into adolescence**. Over time, these conversations will shift perhaps from conversations about people not "being nice" and towards

conversations of explicit dangers of how people lie, coerce, and manipulate for nefarious purposes.

If you're already concerned about your child being groomed and/or abused online, please review RAINN's "warning signs" (www.rainn.org/warning-signs) and follow their directions about what to do next.

ESPORTS

We all know how to put our kids in sports. We (or they) find a sport or two to try, we sign them up, they practice, they compete, and they maybe continue for another season or move onto something else. Sports have popular culture impact, from professional sporting events to movies, in ways that people have grown accustomed to. We know how to talk about sports because they're ubiquitous.

To many parents that we know, esports remains inscrutable. It's video games, but sports? That doesn't sound like a thing that's real!

Your friendly neighborhood Fairy Gamemothers have a much more nuanced perspective to understanding what esports is, the impact and importance of it, as well as why our kids are turning to it as a competitive outlet.

We can trace esports all the way back to the 1970s, but what that version of early competitive gaming looked like at Stanford University isn't remotely reflective of what esports (as a $1.3 billion global market and growing year-over-year) has evolved into today. If we want to dig as far back as the original Starcraft, we can see the true roots of modern esports, especially among Korean competitive gamers.

But you're not here for a history lesson (you can get one of those through UCLA's DataRes article on the history of esports[1]). You're here to understand how this applies to the child(ren) in your life.

1. Chen, A., Meng, Z., & Liu, J. (2021, December 19). The history of esports: A look into the developments and trends of competitive gaming. *Medium*. Retrieved from https://ucladatares.medium.com/the-history-of-esports-a-look-into-the-developments-and-trends-of-competitive-gaming-9dfdd46bfb2f

DEFINING ESPORTS

The simplest way to explain what esports is to examine the etymology of the word: electronic sports. While your child may be playing competitive games like *Fall Guys*, unless they're actively participating in tournaments and organized play, it's **not** an esport. The sport element of competitive gaming is what sets esports in its own category.

Professional and amateur esports players are athletes in their own rights, even if it doesn't appear that they are at first glance. Some of the most impactful esports professionals are in great physical health, as well as being at the top of their respective games as players. Mental acuity is at its best when our bodies are in good physical health and esports players need that.

The top 1% of the top 1% of esports players become the well-paid professionals that we see on stage at major esports tournaments, including the *DOTA* International, the *League of Legends* World Championships, ESL tournaments, and *Valorant* Champions. It's like when parents want their kid to get drafted in the MLB or NHL when they've excelled in the sport — it's very, very unlikely it'll happen unless your child is an absolute superstar.

THE IMPACT AND IMPORTANCE OF ESPORTS

Beyond the global revenue and impact on the game industry at large, esports has become culturally relevant among the "streaming generation". You know, our kids' generation. They've grown up watching cartoons without commercials, having movies on demand through a number of services, and the ability to watch someone play a video game online through Twitch or YouTube Gaming.

Just like watching your favorite movie star might have ignited some acting aspirations in you as a child, **your kiddo watching a favorite esports athlete could inspire similar passions**. Thanks to the ubiquity of video game streaming, kids are watching esports on their phones and computers like our parents watched sports on TV.

Whether it's watching a Twitch streamer participating in competitive gaming in Apex Legends or enjoying a glitzy tournament like The International (for *DOTA 2*), there's a lot of entertainment to be had there. The top esports events in 2022 garnered between 1.47 million and 5.4 million peak viewers during their streams[1]. And those are just the biggest events — even the smaller events have relevance to their audience,

including games that younger kids play, like *Minecraft*, *Fall Guys*, and *Fortnite*.

Beyond how culturally relevant esports are to our kids and their friends, **they're an indicator of how ingrained video games are for this generation of children**. They don't think esports are "weird" or "not real" — they're clearly real and impactful because video games are part of their everyday lives, guiding how they talk to one another and what they talk about.

1. Simic, I. (2022, December 26). Top 10 highest-viewed esports events of 2022. *ESI Sports Insider*. Retrieved from https://esportsinsider.com/2022/12/highest-viewed-esports-events-2022

OUR KIDS AND COMPETITIVE GAMING

Healthy competition is something that is often encouraged among children and adults alike. Who here hasn't competed in a friendly workplace challenge or signed their children up for some kind of friendly competition (sack race? Chess tournament? Organized sports of any kind?). **Through competition, we learn a lot about our abilities, our limitations, and what it feels like (and our ability) to persist through challenges**. Through these experiences we not only learn about our ability to achieve success in whichever arena we are competing in, but also what it means to cooperate with others and exhibit sportsmanlike conduct.

However, what's often not emphasized when it comes to healthy competition is t**he role that parents, coaches, and other family members play** in helping their kids develop and transform these experiences into social, psychological, and emotional growth[1]. It's important to encourage our kids to pursue the things that make them happy, whether that's painting their masterpiece, weaving a killer story together, or crushing it as Lady Macbeth on stage. This now includes esports, in whatever appropriate game that you decide is best for your child and your family.

However, there are a few special things to consider here. First, that esports is in fact... a competitive sport. Just when your child takes up a physical sport that you know little about, **it is important to make an effort to learn the rules, expectations, and cultural norms around it**. You may not be able to sit and play *Apex Legends* as competently as your child does, but taking the time to understand the competitive angles around the game itself is imperative. Watch professionals streaming the game as they grind to the top of their tier, whether that's on Twitch or YouTube. Read up on the game itself from both a critical perspective (through reviews) and a fan perspective (Reddit, game forums, professional esport athlete interviews).

Second, we also have to keep in mind that even though esports is a sport, **it does require a lot of sedentary activity**. If your child is interested in engaging in esports at the competitive level, you have to keep in mind (and remind them) that it is just as important to make sure they are moving their body as much as they're exercising their brains (and hands). Remind them that professional athletes in esports and regular sports have to treat their bodies with care as much as they train for their individual sports/games. There is a reason professional esports teams have medical doctors and physical therapists on staff!

1. Choi, H. S., Johnson, B., & Kim, Y. K. (2014). Children's development through sports competition: Derivative, adjustive, generative, and maladaptive approaches. *Quest*, 66(2), 191-202.

ADDRESSING FEARS

We started to touch on this in our previous section about the "Challenges of Online Multiplayer", but we would be doing you (and ourselves) a disservice if we didn't acknowledge the very large elephants in the room: our fears around video games. W**e invite you to get comfortable with your discomfort** and begin to peel apart the layers that are keeping you from fully grokking these digital playgrounds that our children play in.

VIOLENCE

W e've all heard the stories, whether that's in the news or through parent networks, both online and off: children behaving violently and the media connecting that to violent video games. **This mostly uninformed moral panic nonsense that's often fueled by the very human desire to have something to blame for the ills of our time** (for a more in-depth look at moral panic, we recommend checking out Rachel's YouTube video on the topic at www.youtube.com/psychgeist)[1]. We've seen it with radio, music, television, fashion, *Dungeons & Dragons*, movies, and now we're onto video games. (And honestly, we've been stuck in this place since the '80s.)

It doesn't remove the concern, mind you. This is one of the most common concerns that we hear from parents: the effect of violent video games on behavior and what that means for our kids.

But before we even get to that, let's talk about what makes a violent video game... violent.

Violent video games are those that include **elements of violent action** that are actively committed by the player or other individuals, such as non-playable characters, and witnessed by the player. Violent actions include fighting, using weapons, and aggressive or inciting language. Violent content may or may not

be realistic in terms of appearance (graphics) or content (fighting in a fantasy world for instance).

While violence may be the defining feature of many popular video game franchises — *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty*, *Destiny*, *Elden Ring* (and other *Souls* games) — violent elements can be found in many games across genre categories such as role playing (*Final Fantasy*), action adventure (*Tomb Raider*), puzzle games (*Portal*) and party games (*Jackbox Party Pack 3*, with "Trivia Murder Party") among others.

The effects of violent video games have been debated since the late 1970s with the release of *Death Race Exidy*. Or as the media referred to it as: a "murder simulator". Released in 1976 as a driving simulator, players could earn points from using their on screen car as a weapon to run over 'gremlins'. *Death Race* immediately sparked controversy for encouraging players to use their cars as weapons and awarding points for essentially committing vehicular homicide. This led to waves of concerns from parents and policy makers alike due to the interactive nature of the game itself.

Gerald Driessen, a psychiatrist from the US National Security Council, at the time said, "In *Death Race*, a player takes the first stem in creating violence. The player is no longer just a spectator. He's an actor in the process."

A couple decades later, in the early 1990s, *Mortal Kombat* reinvigorated debates with their fighting game known for their gore and "fatality" special moves that were particularly gory. It seems quaint to look back on from our viewpoint in the 2020s, considering the low fidelity graphics of the time. But until the original *Mortal Kombat*, blood wasn't really depicted in video games quite that graphically. And bloody it was, especially for the time.

We talked quite a bit about this in "Our Kids & Video Games" to lay some foundational history in order to provide better understanding about how we got to where we are today. These debates haven't taken a break, even though we have better tools, programs, and websites out there to help parents evaluate games before they purchase them for their kids. With graphical fidelity being what it is in 2023 — 4K resolution shows us everything and then some — we're now faced with a potentially troubling reality.

Games have been, are, and will continue to be violent. **Blood is no longer depicted as just a few pixels smeared against the scanlines on a CRT television in the family living room**. And whether we like it or not, our kids are going to want to team up with friends (and family) to play these kinds of games at some point. But before we toss our consoles out into the trash and lock down the content options even more than we already do, let's talk through the elephant in the room.

What even is violence in video games? Is it all blood and gore and *Mortal Kombat*? Well, no. Not always. Violence in games doesn't necessarily have any blood at all, like in *Fortnite* or *Minecraft*. In a gameplay setting, violence comes down to using force to progress the game forward, as opposed to narrative cunning or conflict resolution.

There are really three issues to unpack here:

- Does playing violent video games make someone more aggressive?
- Does playing violent video games make someone more violent?
- Does playing violent video games desensitize players to violence?

Does playing violent video games make someone more

Aggression is generally defined as angry, or violent, feelings or behavior. It's important to understand that a person who is aggressive doesn't necessarily act out with violence.

Hundreds of scientific studies have evaluated the relationship between violent video game play and aggression. Of these, many have reported **small**, short-term increases in aggression following exposure to violent video games. While this may seem like a reason to sound the alarm, it's important to note that these increases in aggression are **typically measured within the first few minutes** following violent video game play and there has been no evidence to suggest that these short term rises have any long term impact on players level of aggression.

In fact, many research studies have concluded that there are **no significant links between violent video game play and aggression**[2].

It can be difficult to try and tease out fact from fiction when conflicting conclusions have been found in research. However, the few studies that have claimed to find links with aggression have been widely criticized for the ways in which aggression was measured.

For example, one widely used measure of aggression asks research participants to finish a word completion task following violent video game play. This task typically consists of a series of words with letters missing and players must complete the words in a short amount of time with the first word they can think of to fill in the blanks. Depending on the letters people choose, different words can be formed.

For example, participants could be presented with K I _ _ and write

K I S S. Then play 20 minutes of a violent game and be presented with the same letter combination and this time put K I L L. This response would be considered representative of post-gameplay aggression.

Another popular method asks participants immediately after playing a violent video game to indicate how much hot sauce and at what level of spiciness they would give to another research participant to eat. Referred to as the hot sauce paradigm (yes, really), aggression is measured by participants choosing to give another person in the room a greater amount of hot sauce. The more allocated hot sauce, the greater the perceived aggression.

It is difficult to see how being deemed more aggressive from these tests translate into real world aggressive thoughts and behaviors.

Does playing violent video games make someone more likely to commit violence or violent crime?

Violence is defined as the use of physical force with the intent to injure another person or destroy property. While violent video game play has been linked to **short, short-term increases** in aggression, no relationship between violent video game play and violent behavior has been found.

Let that sink in for a moment: No relationship between violent video game play and violent behavior has been found[3].

This is partly because it is impossible to expose a group to a violent video game and have a group not exposed (these kinds of games are so ubiquitous in our culture, and as mentioned earlier many games not even considered traditionally 'violent' have violent elements) and then follow them around to see if they commit crimes.

So, remember when Amanda was explaining that she'll

sometimes relax at the end of a stressful week with games that are combat-heavy and violent? None of that play changes her day-to-day behavior — she's still a loving person who will just as soon cry at an ad (this happens more often than she's willing to admit to) as she will take down waves of enemies in *Diablo IV*.

Despite these methodological and potentially research ethics limitations, a direct relationship between violent video game play and violent behavior is highly unlikely.

If there were a direct relationship, then we should have seen an increase in crime over the last twenty years corresponding with the rise in popularity of violent video games. Youth crime should have shown a particularly steep increase since, presumably, teenagers have more time to dedicate to video game play (and thus, have a greater exposure to violent content) and they're thought to be particularly susceptible to media messages[4].

But this increase that policymakers and your nosy next-door neighbor has been worried about? Yeah, that hasn't happened. I**n fact, the opposite has become true.**

With the steady increase in violent video game consumption over the last 20 years, we've seen a steady decline in what is called "societal youth violence", which is violent crime committed by those under the age of 18. As the relationship between these two variables is correlational (they are related by not in a cause-and-effect type way), these findings do not mean that playing violent video games contributes to declines in real world violence but rather they indicate the unlikelihood that violent video game play actively contributes to an increase in youth violence.
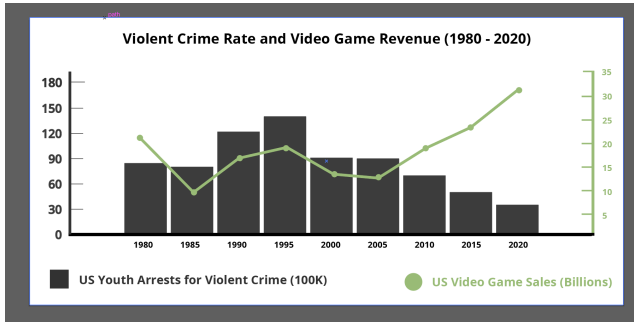
Furthermore, there's a veritable wealth of other research in this area that has found previous exposure to violence, trait aggression (the level of aggressiveness innately held in one's personality), peer delinquency, family conflict... are all more influential in determining if someone will commit a violent crime than exposure to violent media, including video games18.

Does playing violent video games desensitize players to real world violence?

Desensitization is a classic psychology term that refers to "a treatment or process that diminishes emotional responsiveness to a negative, aversive or positive stimulus after repeated exposure to it". The idea being that playing violent video games exposes a player to 'simulated' violence and that then translates to being less negatively impacted to witnessing or experiencing 'non-simulated' or real-world violence.

There is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that violent video games do not desensitize players to real world violence[5]. **Our brains are fantastic at differentiating between real world violence and fictional violence**, so it's uncommon for people to generalize what they see and learn from fictional contexts, such as shooting people in a video game to real world contexts, such as committing gun violence.

This is easily illustrated with a simple example: take a minute to

recall how you feel when you watch a particularly violent movie (like, any Tarantino film…) and then compare that to how you think you would feel if you were to see the same violence occur right in front of you. Scenes from "Pulp Fiction" or "Reservoir Dogs" may make Rachel cringe but if she were witnessing that in real life, her reaction would be much stronger and cause lifelong trauma. And while Amanda may be an ardent fan of the horror genre, the same horror unfolding in real-time outside of the fantasies of the given media would be scarring.

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2. Ferguson, C. J., & Kilburn, J. (2010). Much ado about nothing: the misestimation and overinterpretation of violent video game effects in eastern and western nations: comment on Anderson et al. (2010).

3. Coulson, M., & Ferguson, C. J. (2015). The influence of digital games on aggression and violent crime. In *The video game debate* (pp. 54-73). Routledge.

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ADDICTION

In 2019, the World Health Organization announced they would be including Gaming Disorder in their new diagnostic manual, the ICD 11. The WHO classifies gaming disorder as:

A "clinically recognisable and clinically significant syndrome...When the pattern of gaming behavior is of such a nature and intensity that it results in marked distress or significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational or occupational functioning."

This announcement prompted backlash from the scientific community, voicing significant concerns about the content of Gaming Disorder as proposed by the ICD-11, specifically due to the low-quality research to operationally define and monitor the proposed topic (including a lack of evidence demonstrating the impact of GD on the mental well-being of players). Additionally, the operational definition of Gaming Disorder relied too heavily upon substance use and gambling disorder criteria, as well as a lack of consensus on symptomatology and assessment of problematic gaming[1]. Mental health professionals are also concerned that the disordered use of gaming may not be a distinct, unique disorder at all but rather a maladaptive coping strategy for managing other underlying conditions[2].

Supporting this further, research published by the Oxford

Internet Institute in 2020, which examines the relationship between video game play and well-being using server data from EA and Nintendo of America, found that **objective, server-logged play time was positively, not negatively, correlated with well-being**. While this doesn't directly mean more play time directly increases our well-being, it does debunk the idea that it is associated with poorer functioning and refutes the forty or so years of dialogue suggesting the longer people play, the more unhappy they are.

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LOOT BOXES

Loot boxes are in-game mechanics wherein a player purchases a randomized in-game item without insight as to what they're buying. Sort of like when we were kids buying hockey and baseball cards — we bought the packs not really knowing what was in there, but we definitely still bought them to see if we finally got Trevor Linden's rookie card. (Okay, maybe that was only Amanda doing that.)

The kind of loot within a loot box varies, but it often is cosmetic (changing the way an in-game avatar looks), including costumes, dyes, or skins. There are times when these loot boxes yield something that actually changes the game, like armor, weapons, or even consumables that are useful for in-game time. Loot boxes can be bought with in-game currency and/or real money… and sometimes the contents within a loot box can be traded among players for real money as well (this last point is key when it comes to talking about regulation).

Loot boxes have been found in lots of games across platform and genre, including *Fortnite* (although this is no longer the case, since loot llamas have been removed from the game), *Overwatch* (loot boxes are not in *Overwatch 2*), gacha games (such as *Genshin Impact*), and many popular sports games, such as *FIFA* (now known as *EA Football Club*), *Madden*, and *NHL*, *WWE 2K*, and *NBA*

2K. 2K Games and EA remain two of the most staunch publishing supporters of in-game loot boxes.

Loot boxes have, in recent history, been incredibly popular. In 2019, 71% of the top games on Steam, a popular platform where people download games, contained loot boxes[1]. However, as global regulatory legislation has struck down loot boxes from a government level, they have almost entirely fallen out of favor.

Loot boxes have been enticing. Everything about them is designed to make you want to buy them — the colors, the sounds, the rewards.

Loot boxes fall under what we would call "dark patterns", which are designs that have purposely deceptive functionality that are not in users' best interest. Dark patterns occur when, instead of placing players at the center of the creation process, companies place their business goals at the center[2].

Dr. Cecilia Hodent, a game designer who focuses on ethicality in design, believes that avoiding loot boxes in all games that aren't rated Adults Only or Mature within the ESRB rating system (or 18+ with PEGI) is the most ethical option. Ethical is the key word here, since this isn't necessarily about legalities. Loot boxes are not (at least as of the filming of this video) considered gambling in legal terms.

For some, this may seem extreme, but in Dr. Hodent's own words, when talking about **the psychological impact**:

> *"What is much more concerning is the potential impact of loot boxes on children and teenagers, although still not clear today. … children and teenagers do not have a mature prefrontal cortex, which can make automatic and conditioned responses much harder for them to control when need be. If you were wondering why children are so bad at refraining from doing an*

action if they didn't hear "Simon says" first, this is why. This is also why your teenagers have a greater tendency to partake in risky behaviors than adults past 25 years of age (approximately). So loot boxes tied to monetization in a game can potentially, in my opinion, be an issue if children or even teenagers play this game, especially when the game is popular and they feel particularly compelled to buy loot boxes until they obtain a price that is fashionable at school. Peer pressure or even bullying, which could happen yesteryear if a teenager wasn't wearing the fashionable brands, can happen today with trendy virtual goods. The issue is that game developers cannot easily control who's playing their games. Unlike casinos, studios cannot easily ID players before letting them access their monetized variable rewards (there are some privacy concerns and it's easy to cheat when there is an age gate)[3]."

And yes, you are thinking, isn't this just like *Pokemon* cards? Kinder eggs? Baseball cards? Hockey cards, as Amanda described at the top of this section? Indeed it is. But there is a difference between getting a new pack of *Pokemon* cards and opening up a new season's card pack on FIFA and that is "natural obstacles".

When Rachel was a kid, she loved "X-Men" comics and there was a point in time in which she was very much into getting "X-Men" collectable cards. It's like baseball cards but for mutants. But there were a lot of obstacles for her to get those card packs.

First, she had to have money. This was always obstacle number one, because it was Texas and it was often too hot to mow lawns for money and her parents were very stingy with the chore money. Then, she had to convince her parents to drive her to the comic book store, which was several cities away. Then, the store had to have these card packs in stock because, for some inexplicable reason, they weren't very popular. Then, she had to hope that she

got the cards she wanted (Fingers crossed for Jubilee!). ...that was a lot of steps.

If we want the Manuel Neuer card for FIFA, we just have to click a few buttons.

In this "X-Men" card scenario, Rachel had to be patient, persevere through begging her parents to drive her 30 minutes to the comic book store, and delay my gratification for a significant amount of time to get through all those steps.

With the *FIFA* cards, **these steps do not exist**. The effort is just lax parental controls and a few clicks. So the ethical debate is a bit more gray area when it comes to loot boxes.

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WRAPPING UP

Video games aren't nearly as black and white as they're made out to be in reactionary spaces. They're nuanced pieces of commercial interactive art that are enjoyed by every major demographic and psychographic. **Video games can be sources of connection, education, creativity, and community.** They can also be the scapegoat for moral panics that have sought to set back the medium from the outset.

We hope that you've come away from this book with a more robust toolset to help your child(ren) be responsible on the digital playgrounds that we're all playing in together. It's a complex industry that moves at lightning pace — what's true today, even within us writing this book, may not be true tomorrow.

As parents, all we can do is our best. So, eyes up, Guardians. It's onto our next adventure in Digital Playgrounds with Book Three.

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Amanda Farough has been many things in her life — business analyst, consultant, game journalist, speaker, entrepreneur, and writer (and these days, game developer). Over the course of her work as an analyst and journalist, she's focused on the business side of how video games are made (www.virtualeconcast.com) and on how parents can navigate the world of games without being gamers themselves. Amanda has four kids and when she's not making games as a writer, producer, and narrative designer, she's hanging out with them.

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Rachel Kowert, Ph.D is a research psychologist and the Research Director of Take This. She is a world-renowned researcher on the uses and effects of digital games, including their impact on physical, social, and psychological well-being. An award-winning author, she has published a variety of books and scientific articles relating to the psychology of games and, more recently, the relationship between games and mental health specifically. She also serves as the editor of the Routledge Debates in Media Studies series and the upcoming ETC press series Psychology of Pop Culture. Recently, she founded her YouTube channel Psychgeist, which serves to bridge the gap between moral panic and scientific knowledge on a variety of psychology and game-related topics. In 2021, Dr. Kowert was chosen as a member of The Game Awards Future Class, representing the best and brightest of the future of video games. Dr. Kowert has been featured in various media outlets, including NPR, the Washington Post, and the Wall Street Journal. To learn more about Rachel and her work, visit www.rkowert.com.

RESOURCES

Take This (Takethis.org)

Take This is the oldest mental health non-profit serving the gaming industry and communities. They provide mental health information and support in and around all topics associated with games and game-adjacent spaces.

Raising Good Gamers (Raisinggoodgamers.com)

Raising Good Gamers is an initiative created by Games for Change to catalyze positive change in the culture and climate of online gaming for youth. They have a range of events, programs, and initiatives in and around these topics.

Common Sense Media (Commonsensemedia.org)

Common Sense Media is an organization that provides reviews and ratings for media and technology with the goal of providing information on their suitability for children. We (Amanda and Rachel) have found these reviews particularly helpful as they provide a lot of context around why any particular piece of media receives any particular rating. For example, it will indicate if there are positive messages or positive role models in a game as well as violence, substance use, or explicit language. It also flags if there are any in-game products or purchases.

Family Gaming Database (Taminggaming.com)

The Family Gaming Database is a database written by parents, for parents that is meant to complement the ongoing discussions about staying safe and informed within digital gaming spaces. This resource has a plethora of information about game titles as well as various lists for parents to explore to find the right game for their family (there is even a fun "game finder" feature to find a specific title that is tailored to you and your family's preferences).

Engaged Family Gaming (Engagedfamilygaming.com)

EngagedFamilyGaming.com is an online resource for parents that want to stay informed about the latest video games and board games their kids love. They empower families to engage in the gaming world by offering in-depth reviews, age-appropriate recommendations, and expert advice to help navigate today's dynamic gaming landscape. Their dedicated team of passionate gamers and parents provides a friendly, supportive community where you can learn, connect, and make informed decisions about your children's entertainment. Head to EngagedFamilyGaming.com now and get your family game on!

Games And Online Harassment Hotline (Gameshotline.org)

The Games and Online Harassment Hotline is a free, text-based confidential hotline for emotional support. If you, or someone you know, is experiencing distress because of something that happened while playing online, you can reach out by texting SUPPORT to 23368.

GAMES REFERENCED

Game Title	Developer	Release Year	ESRB Rating
Fortnite	Epic Games	2017	E10+
Final Fantasy	Square Enix	1989	E
Final Fantasy XIV	Square Enix	2013	T
Halo	343 Industries	2001	T
Minecraft	Mojang	2011	E10+
Fall Guys	Media Molecule	2019	E10+
Valorant	Riot Games	2020	T
Overcooked	Team17	2017	E
Goat Simulator	Coffee Stain	2014	M
World of Warcraft	Blizzard	2004	T
City of Heroes	Cryptic Studios	2005	T
Unpacking	Witch Beam	2021	E
A Little to the Left	Max Inferno	2022	E
Wandersong	Humble Bundle	2017	E10+
Theatrhythm (Series)	Square Enix	Recent: 2023	T
Wildermyth	Worldwalker Games	2019	Unrated (Fairy Gamemothers Guesstimate: T)
Wordle	Josh Wardle	2018	Unrated (Fairy Gamemothers Guesstimate: E)
Ring Fit Adventure	Nintendo	2019	E10+
Age of Empires (Series)	Ensemble Studios	Recent: 2021	T
SimCity (Series)	Maxis	Recent: 2014	E10+
Civilization (Series)	Firaxis	Recent: 2016	E10+
Eve Online	CCP	2003	T
The Legend of Zelda (Series)	Nintendo	Recent: 2023	E10+

Super Smash Bros. (Series)	Nintendo	Recent: 2018	E10+
The Witcher 3	CDProjekt Red	2015	M
Assassin's Creed (Series)	Ubisoft	Recent: 2020	M
Darfur is Dying	Take Action Games	2006	Unrated (Fairy Gamemothers Guesstimate: T)
The Walking Dead	Telltale Games	2012	M
Minecraft Education	Mojang	2016	E
Spider-Man: Miles Morales	Insomniac Games	2020	T
Tomb Raider	Eidos, Crystal Dynamics	Recent: 2018	M
Dead by Daylight	Behaviour Interactive	2018	M
Among Us	Innersloth	2018	E10+
Apex Legends	Respawn Entertainment	2019	T
Overwatch (Series)	Blizzard	Recent: 2021	T
Animal Crossing: New Horizons	Nintendo	2020	E10+
Starcraft	Blizzard	1998	T
Destiny 2	Bungie	2017	T
DOTA 2	Valve	2013	T
League of Legends	Riot Games	2009	T
Grand Theft Auto (Series)	Rockstar Games	Recent: 2013	M
Call of Duty (Series)	Activision	Recent: 2022	M
Elden Ring	FromSoftware	2021	M
Portal	Valve	2007	T

Jackbox Party Pack 3	Jackbox Games	2016	T
Mortal Kombat	Midway Games	1992	M
Genshin Impact	miHoYo Games	2020	T
FIFA (Series, now EA Football Club)	EA Sports	Recent: 2022	E
Madden (Series)	EA Sports	Recent: 2022	E
NHL (Series)	EA Sports	Recent: 2022	E10+
WWE 2K (Series)	2K Games	Recent: 2023	T
NBA 2K (Series)	2K Games	Recent: 2022	E

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