e-BAAL

Videogames:

Entertainment
or
Enslavement

THE WHOLE ISSUE of entertainment has been a long discussed topic in Christianity. It isn't a modern phenomenon – this very issue has been entertained (pun intended) for centuries. The Puritans, who were never against the modest and appropriate uses of entertainment, have nevertheless always been caricatured as being cosmic killjoys. And should there ever be anyone who treads on the thin ice of this topic; to question, probe, and offer guidelines to entertainment, he will invariably face some opposition as the Puritans did. This writer is in fact prepared for opposition, but hopes and prays that the principles and arguments brought forth in this article would enlighten and challenge some young minds and, as we shall see in this article, some not so young minds.

Concerning the entertainment of Christians, there are many opinions. And concerning the topic of videogames (VG) and whether to play them, there are even more opinions, ranging from not playing them at all to playing whatever games, whenever you want, and however much you want. There are many organizations that fight against the VG industry with rabid vigor (such as Mothers Against Videogame Addiction and Violence; www.mavav.org) and others which defend the playing of computer games with equal vigor. Which is correct?? Is it entertainment or is it enslavement? In order to understand the issues involved, let us

take a look at the history of VGs (which will also include PC games).

The History of Videogames

Avid videogamers should at least be familiar with one name: Ralph Baer. After all, he is the father of VGs. He first came up with the idea in 1951, but shelved it until 15 years later when he invented and played the pilot version of Pong. It was a chase game with two spots on a screen; it generated no polygons per second, could render nothing but squares. A polygon is the basic shape in graphic games. Today's modern games render in excess of 200 million polygons per second. He was then employed by Sanders Associates (a military electronics firm) to further develop his game. Then in 1972, Sanders Associates released the very first in-home gaming console; named the Odyssey, it sold 100,000 units at US$100 each. It had 6 different games – all variations of Baer's first game of chase. It had no sound, no color, and no way of keeping score, but it was a hit!

Subsequently, in 1975, Atari came out with its home version of Pong. Very soon after that, arcade games were invented; this became a money making industry where manufacturers would spend more money building a unit, but

receive much more in returns as gaming became centralized, with more customers, and played at an affordable price. Then in 1982, the famous Atari 2600 was released and the world famous Pac Man was born.

Some Videogaming Statistics

Since VGs have been around for awhile, it is only natural to assume that many people have played it. In fact, it is without question that we all have either played VGs or know someone who does. The average age of videogamers in the USA is 28 years. And this is probably not very far off from the Singaporean average. If the average is 28, that must mean that many not-so-young people play VGs regularly. Whereas it is not surprising to read that 79% of American children play VGs on a regular basis, averaging 8 hours a week (so says a University of Chicago research), it may shock many to note that a year 2000 survey done revealed that 60% of all men, women, and children surveyed played VGs routinely. But when we give this some thought, it shouldn't surprise us, because if the

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average age is 28, that means there's a grown-up in his 30s, 40s, or even 70s glued to his video screen. Thom Gillespie, a professor at Indiana University, says, "Like rock music in the 60s and

70s, the game industry is driving culture at the moment."

And it is driving the economy too. In 1999, the VG industry took in US$6.1 billion dollars. In

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2003, according to CNN, it took in more money than even the movie industry – US$10.3 billion compared to US$9.5 billion. In 2004, it is US$11 billion. And now, according to the Straits Times (19 May 2004), a symbiotic relationship has been forming in recent years between movies and VGs. Movies (such as *Van Helsing* and *Star Wars*) are becoming the bases for games, and games (such as *Tomb Raider*) are becoming the bases for movies.

The games aren't just Pong anymore. The systems aren't just Atari anymore. Since the mid-80s, systems have mushroomed up – Nintendo, Sega Genesis, Playstation, Microsoft's Xbox, with all their intense graphics, schemes, sounds, etc. The PC gaming industry has also kept up by designing intense software, with PC manufacturers in suit with their high-performance chips and graphic cards. And there are also virtual reality gaming rooms springing up as well, where the sense of touch, on top of the usual visual and aural senses, is appealed to.

Since VGs were invented 30 years ago until now, games have consistently become more realistic with

Increasingly, Christians must be wiser with their entertainment choices. their sounds, themes, and graphics; what will they be like in the next decade? Increasingly, Christians must be wiser with their entertainment choices. Moral decisions have to be made. Do moral decisions impugn our liberty? They most certainly do not. But we do need the right kinds of information to make the right kinds of choices. What kinds of VGs are out in the market?

Kinds of Videogames

There are many different kinds of VG categories. In fact, naming the games, the different categories, and to which gaming console/medium they belong would probably fill up this entire weekly article. But here is a brief list to give you an idea of what is out there: Action-Adventure, Cards, Driving and Racing, Educational, Fighting, Game Design, History, Massive Multiplayer Online, Music, Music and Dance, Puzzle, Recreation, Role Playing, Shooter, Simulation, Sports, and Strategy.

Under Action-Adventure, there are games like Commando, Resident Evil, Behind Enemy Lines, and the famous Tomb Raider series. In Resident Evil 3, the hero is a lady named Jill Valentine who is trapped in a town crawling with hordes of flesh eating zombies, hideous mutants, and a relentless new nemesis; she must rely on cunning and brute force

to stay alive. It must do wonders for one's spiritual life to think upon the living dead.

Under Cards, there are games like Hearts, Spades, Solitaire, and Spider Solitaire; all found within Microsoft Windows, with which many adults are familiar, spending much time playing during their 3 hour long lunch breaks. The Sports category includes games of every kind of sport one can imagine, from hockey, soccer, football, golf, racing, and even hunting.

Educational Games teach players how to type, how to do arithmetic, and even how to improve your vocabulary through Scrabble. Simulation Games include flight simulators, The Roller Coaster Tycoon Games which requires the player to design theme parks, and 911 Paramedics which has the player rescue and resuscitate victims of car-jackings, murders, heart attacks, etc. A reviewer commented, that it was "graphically awesome with real life videos. The patients looked so real and as a person who tends to gross out easily, I had to actually shut my eyes through a few procedures, like the large and bleeding open wounds. I would not suggest this game to anyone who gets queasy easily."

The Role-Playing Games include such games as Ever Quest, Final Fantasy, and Dungeons and Dragons (D&D). In D&D, the goal of the game is to kill an extremely powerful Wizard named Kaedin who tortured the land. The player is to take on the role

of different characters to cast spells and face hordes of demons. There is also now an online virtual community, which is global, playing this game in real time. There are literally thousands of games in every category. Gone are the days of Pong, Donkey Kong, and Pac Man. It seems as if there are many violent and occult games. But since there are many choices, they can't be all bad, can they?

The Pros of Videogames

Indeed, not all VGs are bad. There are many good games which improve one's intellect and academic abilities. There was a research that identified "benefits associated with creative and pro-social uses of video games, as in physical rehabilitation and oncology. Proponents of video games suggest that they may be a friendly way of introducing children to computers, and may increase children's hand-eye coordination and attention to detail." Another research done by Rochester University noted that videogamers have a marked increase in their visual abilities. They can see, focus on, and process what is happening around them 30 to 50 percent better than non-gamers.

The United States Air Force uses flight simulators to train their pilots before letting them pilot an actual fighter plane, and even the Division of Motor Vehicles are now using driving simulators to instruct learners about the effects of alcohol on driving ability. With such pros, how can there be any cons?

The Cons of Videogames

Unfortunately, the cons outweigh the pros. Of course, not all of these cons apply to every VG, but many do. **The first disadvantage of VGs is their addictiveness.** There are many psychologists who are specializing in VG addiction, and when even secular experts are warning against it, we Christians should pay careful attention. One study said that one in four teenagers who plays video games feels addicted. Harvard Medical School even has a clinic devoted to treating computer-addicted people. It is said that symptoms include dry eyes, backaches, skipping meals, neglecting family and friends, lying about computer use and feeling euphoria when sitting at the computer. But aside from such symptoms, there are also many signs of addiction. VG addicts will usually think about the game throughout the day, especially about how they can beat it and ascend to the next level. Their minds will concentrate on the various strategies and devise solutions for every obstacle. Their conversations will also be centered around the game. If they are not thinking about it, they will be talking about it with their friends or in online chat rooms. A big indicator of

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addiction is temperament; their mood is affected when their game is interrupted, especially by a parent who calls them to their homework. Of course, the most obvious indicator is the amount of time that is spent on the game. Addicts can spend an inordinate amount of time playing, staying up as late as 5 AM, even though they have work/school/church the next day. In the words of an addict, "You know, I think I have always been a videogame addict. You just can't stop playing. I just couldn't stop. I just wanted one more game, one more game. It turned into two, three more hours." And at the height of his addiction, he played 6 to 8 hours a night. We are told in 1 Corinthians 6:12, that "*All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.*" This is a sobering thought. Even the secular world knows how powerful it can be. Which is why a VG trade association president Douglas Lowenstein issued the following statement about VG addiction, "All those who play computer or video games need to take personal responsibility to ensure they use games in a sensible and appropriate way, as tens of millions of people do every day." How sad it is when the Christian who is

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The second disadvantage of VGs is the time wasted playing the games. Ephesians 5:16 exhorts us to "redeem the time, because the days are evil." How can we redeem the time if we spend 8 or even 1 hour behind a game console? Many students are unable to stay up in their classes (or for that fact, in my Sunday School classes!) because of the inordinate amount of time they spend awake at night. And a major complaint teachers have concerning their students is that they don't complete their homework – and the reason given is that they lack time. No kidding! In order to beat a game, it takes days of gaming. But what reward is there at the end of 100 hours of gaming? Absolutely nothing! So you beat the game. Big deal. But it certainly will be when you fail that History paper.

The third disadvantage of VGs is that they distract from important things in life. 1 Peter 5:8 says that we are to "be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." Satan can surely use VGs to distract us from our spiritual lives, from our family lives, and from pursuing the things to which the Lord has called us. It's almost comical when family members fight over the use of the computer, and sad, really, when they can spend the time worshiping God together. There's a real case of a fight erupting between father and son, because

the father wanted to finish his Spider Solitaire game, having played for the past 3 hours.

The fourth disadvantage of VGs is that they promote wickedness. Ephesians 5:11-12 tell us to, "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret." Any Christian will tell you it is wrong to commit murder, adultery, and theft. These are, after all, the 6th, 7th, and 8th Commandments. However, they won't bat an eyelid when it is done virtually. The verse tells us that as Christians, we should not only stay away from doing the evil things the world is doing, but we should not even talk about them nor find out about them. Yet, in the game Grand Theft Auto 3, players are to murder mobsters, have sex with prostitutes, and steal cars, all in order to gain points. A US$246 million lawsuit was filed against the makers of this game by the families of two people shot by teenagers inspired by the game. The teenagers told investigators they got the rifles from a locked room in their home and decided to randomly shoot at tractor-trailer rigs, just like in the video game. The VG industry has legitimized every criminal and immoral activity on the account that it is not real.

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The fifth disadvantage of VGs is that they are harmful to your body and mind. Aside from the dry eyes and backaches mentioned earlier, there are reports of VGs causing death. A man in Thailand recently died due to the fact he played Half-life: Counter-Strike all night. "The 22 year old man was hospitalized after he collapsed in an internet café in Chiang Mai. Due to cardiac related problems he died. As it turned out he had played CS for more than 24 hours. The anger and physical degradation became fatal." There was a report in late 2002 which alleged that a Korean man died after playing VGs nonstop for 86 hours. He hadn't had a meal in days and died in the toilet after collapsing. About 10 days later, a Taiwanese man died after playing for 32 hours continuously. He was found foaming at the mouth and bleeding from the nose on the floor of the café's toilet. Doctors said he died of exhaustion. VGs are also harmful to the mind. They have become so realistic it can be hard to tell the difference between the violence there, and the violence in our life. And hence we become desensitized to violence as it stretches our tolerance of it. A Lt-Colonel from WestPoint said that the simulators used by law enforcement agencies and the military such as FATS (Fire Arms Training Simulation) and MACS were used to desensitize soldiers and policemen so that they would more readily fire their guns in combat.

Lastly, the sixth disadvantage of VGs is that they are great money wasters. The average cost of a VG in Singapore costs upwards of $30. But after one game is conquered, another must be bought. Playing VGs is a costly pastime/addiction, which is why piracy is such a common phenomenon in Singapore. This is stealing. Period.

Conclusion

Let's face the facts. There are pros and cons. But the very fact that there are so many glaring reports against VGs shows that this form of entertainment is at best shady. It is entertainment, and there is liberty when played in maturity. However, more often than not, it is not done so. Then it becomes an enslavement. It becomes a god (vi-deo = virtual god?). I dare say, this electronic Baal has become one of the major gods in the lives of the youths today. But since the average age of gamers is 28, this god is also worshipped by older folks. But by far, the ones enslaved by this god are the youth. How late do they stay up? How do they do in school? How much money do they spend on VGs? Do they throw fits when parents refuse to buy them some video console? Do they play an inordinate amount during the Lord's Sabbath? That's enslavement and spiritual adultery.

Let us hear some friendly advice from the original craftsman of this god. Ralph Baer said, "All this violence, who needs it? All this gross stuff? Who

needs blood all over the floor? But, hey, it sells. I'm just an old [guy] talking…Still, I wish there was a little more content in some of this stuff. The people who say that [videogames cause children to be violent and unsuccessful are] the same parents who can't control their kids. I don't see eye to eye with that. It's the parents' fault. There's nothing in the Bible that says 'you must play video games.' Just say 'no' to them. Make them do their homework, then they can go outside and play." Good advice, if only Christians were to heed them.

So what are we to do? Videogamers and the parents of videogamers are to exercise biblical discernment and discipline. Ask yourself – What kind of games are played? Are the themes shady? How much time is spent? Is there a preoccupation? How is the conscience? Are there pirated games? What are the results of their gaming? Is there rebellion? How can any of these things be good for their spiritual health? Will there be a whole generation of spiritually lethargic, academically insipid, and physically afflicted Church goers? There sure seems to be. What is the remedy?

Our Lord has the answer, *"And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut if off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell."* (Matt 5:29-30).

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