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Considerations in the Age of Video Games

by PHILLIP TELFER



Chapter 1

Consideration #1

The first and most important consideration is that embedded inside of every gamer is a unique soul. A soul with longings, desires, hopes, and dreams. These compete with regrets, frustrations, disappointments, and personal pain.

Like others who don't play video games, they struggle with identity, wondering where they fit in the world and are looking for community. Sometimes they are looking for isolation from community.

If you are reading this, I'm guessing that there is a gamer in your life; a son or daughter, a husband or wife, a friend or someone you love more than a friend. You may be a grandparent with concerns for a grandchild. Or maybe, just maybe, you are reading this for yourself. If so, I commend your bravery to at least take a peek and make it this far. Consider the soul of your gamer or consider your own soul.

I spent over a decade traveling across the country speaking to youth and adults about media and entertainment from a Biblical worldview. Most of my conversations with others about video games started with someone asking me what I thought about such and such a game. Fifty percent of the time I didn't know anything about the game in question. So, I began sharing some self-assessment questions and points to consider. My goal is to share those with you and my hope is that they will be helpful to you. Before I dive further into this let me tell you about an unusual encounter I had with a twelve-year-old boy in Knoxville, Tennessee after I spoke to his youth group.

The boy approached me after my presentation in order to thank me. The information I shared impacted him and he confessed, "I play video games a lot." He told me he lived with his grandparents and what he said next pierced my heart, "I'm lonely and I don't know what to do with myself." What an insightful glimpse into the soul of

this young gamer. It's likely that he is not unique in that struggle. I've never forgotten that brief conversation and I wish I could have become a big brother to him and spend time mentoring him, but I was only passing through.

Let's not forget about the soul of the gamer as we consider some of the pitfalls of video games in the twenty-first century. Speaking of pitfalls, that happened to be one of my favorite Atari games when I was around twelve years old. I loved the adventure through the jungle, swinging on vines over tar pits, jumping on crocodiles, collecting gold bars, all in its 8-bit glory. In fact, it might help if I give a little of my own backstory with video games.

Chapter 2

There was a time in my life when I wished that quarters grew on trees. I grew up in Oregon where there were plenty of trees but couldn't say the same thing for quarters, they were rare. Yet I willingly parted with one or two quarters on occasion in order to play Pac-Man, Donkey Kong, or Centipede. It's hard to get good at a game and learn how to make a quarter last when you have so few quarters in life to spare.

In Jr. High, Radio Shack sold several hand-held video games. A popular one in 1985 called Track Star sold for \$17.95. I'm not sure where I got the money but I owned it. Track Star had two buttons to operate the legs of your runner and one button to jump hurdles. It mimicked one element of the much cooler arcade game called Track & Field. The graphics of the T-Rex Dino Game on Google Chrome that mysteriously appears when you are offline are more sophisticated than Track Star, yet I spent hours getting good at running and jumping. I should have lettered in track with my new skills. But the limitations of the game made for a short half-life of fixation and the game soon became boring.

Around that same time my parents got sucked into a timeshare presentation with the promise of a gift for sitting through it. Boy, my older brother and I were surprised when they brought home a Commodore 64 with a couple of games included. I had no idea at the time that it was actually a home computer that could do more than play games. They hardly resembled the arcade versions but the bottom line was that these inferior home video games didn't require quarters! The limitation of quarters in my life in the mid 80's limited the time I spent playing video games. We could now play Night Driver or Pinball to one's heart's content.

Before you jump to the wrong conclusion that I quickly became an addict, there were other limiting factors that restrained the amount of time I would play. For one, I had to take turns with my

brother. Many of these games were one player at a time. The second limiting factor—Mom.

I'm guessing she was conflicted like many parents today, between the amount of time her kids spent in front of the TV screen and the reality that we were occupied and out of her hair. It didn't involve a thousand LEGO pieces getting spread across the carpeted floor. I do recall getting into some verbal altercations with my brother over whose turn it was to play, but other than that, it caused hardly any trouble.

One thing is for sure, we embraced the new era of home video games. An Atari 2600 eventually replaced our old system. Then in high school I bought my own Nintendo Entertainment System with Super Mario Bros. and Duck Hunt. I spent a fair amount of time playing video games but I was not addicted, just enthusiastic. I had school, a job, and a devotion to my sport of BMX freestyle. Video games happened whenever convenient and there was only one TV in the house. We couldn't play games while someone else was watching the latest episode of their favorite television program. That's probably enough reminiscing to demonstrate my card-carrying credentials as an early adopter among the first generation with this new form of entertainment in the home.

When the first home video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, hit the market in 1972, it was unlikely that anyone could fathom the impact video games would have in homes almost forty years later. In 2007, a remarkable record was set by the video game Halo 3. It sold \$170 million worth of games in twenty-four hours. That was not just a video game sales record, that was an entertainment industry sales record that was soon to be upstaged by Grand Theft Auto IV and then topped by the release of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, which sold \$400 million in twenty-four hours. According to Guinness World Records, Grand Theft Auto V broke that record and several others. It was the best-selling videogame in twenty-four hours, the fastest entertainment property to gross \$1 billion, the fastest videogame to gross \$1 billion, the highest grossing videogame in twenty-four hours and the highest revenue generated by an entertainment product in twenty-four hours. In case you are not aware, GTA V is rated Mature 17+ for "Intense Violence, Blood and Gore,

Nudity, Mature Humor, Strong Language, Strong Sexual Content, Use of Drugs and Alcohol.”

According to the Entertainment Software association, “2018 was a record-breaking year for our industry, with total video game sales exceeding \$43.4 billion. Over 164 million adults in the United States play video games and three-quarters of all Americans have at least one gamer in their household. As the leading form of entertainment today, video games are an integral part of American culture... we are living in the golden age of video games, and video game players are thriving.”¹

Mobile gaming is on the rise and raking in billions. The phenomenon of gaming as a spectator sport is bigger than life through the rise of Twitch.tv and stadium events that draw tens of thousands to watch e-athletes compete and earn millions of dollars in prize money. In 2019 Twitch.tv clocked over 600 billion minutes of gameplay watched online. The National Association of Collegiate e-sports now boasts over 170 member schools, offering over \$16 million in scholarships and aid, and over 5000 student athletes participating.²

Video games were not a toy that would be forgotten as my generation entered into adulthood. Would it shock you to know that the average age of a gamer is 33-years-old?³ Yet, in my case, something dramatic changed the course of my life.

¹ <https://www.theesa.com/esa-research/2019-essential-facts-about-the-computer-and-video-game-industry/>

² <https://nacesports.org/about/>

³ https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ESA_Essential_facts_2019_final.pdf

Chapter 3

In 1989, as a high school senior, my life changed dramatically when I surrendered my life to follow Jesus Christ. Shortly after my initial launch in this new direction, I heard a convicting sermon at a youth event. To this day I can't recall if the preacher actually mentioned anything about entertainment in his message but the Holy Spirit was clearly reaching into my heart on the subject of how I spent my time. It wasn't just video games, it was my music, my toxic movie choices, and mindless hours of television. At the time, I honestly didn't believe that most of my media choices had a negative effect on me, other than the notably awful movies I'd previously been in the habit of indulging in. All of that was about to change, but only for two weeks.

An idea was planted in my mind to go on a media fast for two weeks. I didn't call it a media fast at the time and no one other than the Holy Spirit was compelling me to do it. I boxed up all my music cassettes, unplugged my radio, put my game console in my closet, avoided watching television, and stayed clear of the movie theater. It didn't last two weeks. I was seventeen-years-old. I had no idea what I was getting into.

Chapter 4

Don't worry, I haven't forgotten that you are interested in the other considerations regarding video games. I wanted to give you some backstory in order to qualify myself for writing about this topic.

My two-week long media fast changed my life. A mental and spiritual fog lifted, and I felt a huge release from a heavy burden that I didn't realize I was carrying. I found new freedom without my old diversions.

You might be thinking, "I thought you said your media fast didn't last two weeks." You're right, it didn't. It lasted much longer. I continued the fast, except it was technically no longer a fast, it was a course change for my life. My former media habits altered. Another important change took place—I determined to read through the Bible for the first time.

You might have already guessed that I would be considered fanatical by my peers, and out of step with culture. I might have become discouraged by this except for the fact that I truly enjoyed my new-found freedom. One thing I learned not to do was to talk about it. The subject was apparently an offensive one in this media saturated society. I didn't push my personal convictions on others, I simply lived differently. This still made others uneasy, so I kept it to myself as much as possible. A decade later, circumstances compelled me to change my tactics. In 1999, on the threshold of a new millennium, I became a youth pastor.

Chapter 5

The first consideration in the age of video games is to remember the soul of the gamer. The next six considerations emerged from my years of interacting with teens about video games. Instead of giving them a list of rules, I tried to present them with thought provoking questions and reasonable concerns for young people to consider for themselves. This approach alleviated a lot of apprehension from those who took the initiative to ask my opinion.

Consideration #2

The second consideration is about time. God established time at the very beginning of creation.

“God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.” Genesis 1:5

God intends for us to use time wisely.

“So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.” Psalms 90:12

The Bible doesn't specify how much time a person should spend working, versus recreation, versus education, and so on. But it does instruct us to redeem the time.

“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.” Ephesians 5:15-16 NASB

Before going any further, I realize that you may have some questions or some pushback. How do I know this? I've been

interacting with parents and teens for over a decade, I get the pushback, and I listen to the questions. So, let's get something on the table—something important to clarify. I believe there's an appropriate place in our lives for recreation.

One dictionary gives the following definition for recreation, "The refreshment of the mind and body after work, especially by engaging in enjoyable activities... an activity that a person takes part in for pleasure or relaxation rather than work."

I love the Webster's 1828 dictionary which says, "Refreshment of the strength and spirits after toil; amusement; diversion. Or... relief from toil or pain; amusement in sorrow or distress."

There's a need for re-creation of strength and spirits after a time of toil, or a diversion from sorrow or distress. But today, many young people and some adults avoid toil in order to amuse themselves through video games. That's a distortion of this important subject of recreation in the right context. When recreation undermines hard work, and facing real difficulties in life it is no longer recreation in its proper sense, it is deconstruction, or demolition of a balanced life, a whole life, a purposeful life.

True recreation has a beneficial purpose in your individual life and in your family's life. I'll come back to this subject in a moment but let's not lose track of the main point, redeeming the time. Redeem means to buy something back that was lost or squandered. How we spend our time matters to God. It matters to our family. It matters to our community. It matters to your employer. But why? Why does it matter?

Time is tied to purpose, and purpose directs our attitudes and activities for the better or worse. When there is a lack of purpose, time is no longer viewed as a precious commodity. It is no longer something worth redeeming. Time is not valued. When you place no value on time, it is more easily squandered. There is no motivation to buy it back when it has been treated as cheap.

Video games can be an enormous black hole with a gravitational force that eats time. Yes, there are other media and entertainment options, like social media, YouTube videos, television binging, but this is not an e-book about those things, this focus is on video games, and in some aspects, video games are king of the hill.

As I mentioned earlier, there's an appropriate place for recreation in the home but I don't personally believe that video games are an ideal form of recreation for the family, and even if it could be proven that there is a beneficial use of video games as a family, it should be way down on the list. Why do I say this? The other considerations will build on this. By the way, in all my years of travel and speaking, it is extremely rare that I have ever heard positive and inspiring stories about video games in homes. Nine times out of ten, I'm listening to parents groan about the problems video games have caused, especially with sons.

Let's consider some alternate forms of recreation. Let me warn you that many ideas will cost you more time, energy, and possibly money. Let's ease into this by pointing you to board games. A board game is interactive. It can foster conversation while playing the game. They are not usually addictive, but they do require more energy from a parent. I confess that there are times I would rather not play a board game because of the investment of undistracted time, and depending on the game, it may cost me some mental energy as well. Plus, the games my kids want to play are not always the games I would prefer to play and vice versa. I'm probably not alone in this, and I suppose that many parents, like myself, would rather take the path of least resistance and veg out in front of a screen with the kids or let them veg out in front of a screen.

There are likely a thousand ideas that you could consider as alternatives to video games. I'll let you do your own thinking but I'll share a few personal decisions I have made, not as a prescription for you, but as a description of what one family does for alternatives. One of the major decisions I made years ago was to get my son involved in a hobby that could also earn him some money and help him learn some transferrable skills in life.

CJ was eleven years old when I bought a woodturning lathe as the first installment in an adventure of wood craft. A lathe is a tool that rotates a block of wood between two centers while the craftsman uses sharp tools to shape the wood from square to round then other tools to make useful or decorative items. In our case, I taught my son how to make classic wooden toys, starting with spin tops. Seven years later, we have successfully sold our products at a local farmers market for

six of the seven years, every Saturday with only a few exceptions during the year. My son has become an expert wood turner. He has learned skills of interacting with people, while at the same time earning money, and the value of hard work. This week he is turning spindles to repair an antique rocker for a client who wanted to restore a family heirloom. Very few people have the skills necessary for such a job.

That's not all, my three daughters have done the same. My youngest was only nine-years-old when she began woodturning her own projects and joining us at the farmers market to help with sales. She's about to turn thirteen. She and her older two sisters are all skilled wood workers.

I realize this is an unlikely fit for ninety-nine percent of families that are reading this. It's not my intention to inspire you to start a wood working business, but I do want to inspire you to think of other activities your kids could get involved with.

By the way, this woodworking endeavor has cost me more time, money, and energy than simply letting my children waste untold hours of their time playing video games. I believe it has been worth the sacrifices I have made. I work alongside them, make my own projects and have funded our dedicated workshop with my own product sales. When the kids are all out of the house I'll have a pretty sweet workshop to tinker around in! I don't anticipate that any of my children will make a career of woodworking but that was not the point from the beginning. The main idea was to give them something meaningful to occupy their time, and help them learn transferrable skills.

For many of you, you might be thinking, "That's not an entertainment alternative. That doesn't sound fun at all." You're right, it hasn't always been fun, but it's realistic. There is something rewarding to finish something you've crafted, and even more rewarding when others like it enough to buy it.

Let me give you another alternative that we did for a several years. We learned how to build remote controlled airplanes from scratch using Dollar Tree foam board, hot glue, BBQ skewers, and some electronic bits and pieces that we purchased online and from a local hobby store. Learning to fly these planes was a completely different story. It was a good thing we knew how to build these planes because we had to keep rebuilding them when they crashed. Here's a

lesson in reality, when our plane took a nose dive and crumpled on the ground, we could not just hit a reset button and immediately start over like you can with a video game. Reckless behavior abounds in many if not most video games today. That's a bit off topic so let me get back to redeeming the time and the importance of purposeful recreation. That's a helpful word because we re-created our RC planes more than we flew them. We did get better over time at keeping them up in the air but it is certainly not a hobby for the faint of heart.

My children all tend toward the creative side of the brain so I have continually encouraged them to pursue other types of artistic expression. Painting, drawing, creative lettering, dance, and karate are some of the activities my kids have been involved with. Your family has a unique DNA with unique gifts, unique quirks, unique limitations, as well as unique opportunities. Don't waste your limited time together as a family, be purposeful and buy as much time back that you can. The short-term convenience of video games may have long-term negative effects and consequences. Don't let digital gaming short circuit more purposeful activities that can result in a better payoff in the long run.

Chapter 6

Consideration #3

One of the reasons video games can become such a colossal time sink is that they have been proven to be addictive in many cases. It is certainly not all cases. At one end of the spectrum you have out of control addiction and at the other end you have regulated amusement that is under control, governed by reasonable parameters. In between is what I would call habitual and problematic.

I interviewed several experts on this subject for my documentary “Captivated: Finding Freedom in a Media Captive Culture” here’s what a couple of them had to say on this subject.

“There is a great need for concern. Every parent needs to be serious in thinking through all of these media issues. Now, ten percent of children, according to the studies that have been done on this, are actually addicted to video games. They don't even have a category in the Diagnostics and Statistics Manual for this kind of addiction, but the scholars have found that when you look at the addiction to video games, it parallels one-to-one, a gambling addiction. So, parents who are not concerned are actually saying, “It's ok with me if my child has a crippling addiction.” Dr. Jeff Myers, President of Summit Ministries

“I was honored to represent the United States at an international conference on Internet safety. When I arrived in Seoul, South Korea, I discovered that they do not hesitate to use the word addiction because what they told me when I asked them about the use of the term they said, ‘If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck.’ And we have people for whom video games and the Internet have taken over their lives.” Dr. David Walsh, Author and Speaker

“I had a soldier come into my office and he said, ‘Hey, Chaplain, I’m having nightmares and I’m having difficulty sleeping. I keep seeing myself shooting at people and getting shot.’ I said, ‘What is your

job?” He said, ‘I’m a mechanic.’ I said, ‘Have you ever been outside the wire? To actually be confronted by the enemy?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘You play video games?’ He said, ‘Yeah, Chaplain, I play a lot.’ I said, ‘Man you need to stop, you haven’t been shot at by the enemy. But it’s the video games that’s messing with your mind. It’s the video games that are giving you combat stress. You’re not getting combat stress from combat, it’s that” Major Phil Willis, U.S. Army Chaplain

Over the last decade, many experts have been reluctant to call it an addiction. Well, the debate is nearly over now. The World Health Organization has recently added “6C51 Gaming disorder” in the latest revision of the International Classification of Diseases.

“Gaming disorder is defined in the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as a pattern of gaming behavior (“digital-gaming” or “video-gaming”) characterized by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences... Studies suggest that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who engage in digital- or video-gaming activities. However, people who partake in gaming should be alert to the amount of time they spend on gaming activities, particularly when it is to the exclusion of other daily activities, as well as to any changes in their physical or psychological health and social functioning that could be attributed to their pattern of gaming behaviour.”¹ World Health Organization

The American Psychiatric Association did not include gaming addiction as a formal disorder in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) last updated in 2013. Yet, they wrote the following about Internet Gaming Disorder...

“Internet Gaming Disorder is identified in Section III as a condition warranting more clinical research and experience before it might be

¹ <https://www.who.int/features/qa/gaming-disorder/en/>

considered for inclusion in the main book as a formal disorder. The Internet is now an integral, even inescapable part of many people's daily lives; they turn to it to send messages, read news, conduct business and much more. But recent scientific reports have begun to focus on the preoccupation some people develop with certain aspects of the Internet, particularly online games. The "gamers" play compulsively, to the exclusion of other interests, and their persistent and recurrent online activity results in clinically significant impairment or distress. People with this condition endanger their academic or job functioning because of the amount of time they spend playing. They experience symptoms of withdrawal when kept from gaming. Much of this literature stems from evidence from Asian countries and centers on young males. The studies suggest that when these individuals are engrossed in Internet games, certain pathways in their brains are triggered in the same direct and intense way that a drug addict's brain is affected by a particular substance. The gaming prompts a neurological response that influences feelings of pleasure and reward, and the result, in the extreme, is manifested as addictive behavior. Further research will determine if the same patterns of excessive online gaming are detected using the proposed criteria."²

For years I've been telling audiences that moms with sons who play video games are often better experts on whether or not this activity can be addictive. If you are still skeptical then let's not get hung up on clinical disorders and at least agree that the experts, including moms, believe that there is a potential problem with video games. It is a valid concern and should be a consideration when thinking through the issue. The video games I played in the 80's were not sophisticated, multi-dimensional, and immersive experiences as the games have become today.

Did you know that South Korea has state sponsored digital detox camps for teens addicted to online gaming?

²

https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Practice/DSM/APA_DSM-5-Internet-Gaming-Disorder.pdf

One of the elements of addiction is the temporary gratification and feeling that fades sooner or later, leaving the person feeling unsatisfied when the euphoria doesn't last. It often requires more frequent use, higher doses, or new experiences to reach the temporary high. If video games bring about lasting satisfaction, we would all still be playing Pong. But we're not. Here are the symptoms that are being suggested by the American Psychiatric Association regarding Internet Gaming Disorder...³

- Preoccupation with gaming
- Withdrawal symptoms when gaming is taken away or not possible (sadness, anxiety, irritability)
- Tolerance, the need to spend more time gaming to satisfy the urge
- Inability to reduce playing, unsuccessful attempts to quit gaming
- Giving up other activities, loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities due to gaming
- Continuing to game despite problems
- Deceiving family members or others about the amount of time spent on gaming
- The use of gaming to relieve negative moods, such as guilt or hopelessness
- Risk, having jeopardized or lost a job or relationship due to gaming

These “symptoms” describe many of the struggles I’ve heard about from parents who are dealing with teenage and young adult children. If you’re not comfortable calling it an addiction, then call it what you will, but there’s no denying that some families are experiencing extreme difficulties when it comes to their kids and gaming. It is at least something to consider.

³ <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/internet-gaming>

Chapter 7

Consideration #4

In the past, I have integrated this next consideration into one of the other points but now I feel it should have its own spotlight. Here it is—video games foster escapism.

“Escapism is the avoidance of unpleasant, boring, arduous, scary, or banal aspects of daily life. It can also be used as a term to define the actions people take to help relieve persistent feelings of depression or general sadness. Entire industries have sprung up to foster a growing tendency of people to remove themselves from the rigors of daily life – especially into the digital world.” Wikipedia

“The tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy.” Oxford Dictionary

Now to be fair, there are other ways for people to escape reality, responsibility, and real relationships other than video games. Getting drunk is probably the oldest form of escapism on the planet, but hopefully most parents don’t allow that in the home.

There seems to be a growing number of young men unwilling or unable to launch into responsible adulthood. Growing up in the 80’s we were accosted with the jingle, “I don’t want to grow up, I’m a Toys R Us kid...” but I never imagined they were serious. It was just a memorable joke, right? Well, I won’t blame a toy store. The jingle only represented the changing culture wanting to escape from adult responsibility in order to stay in a world of amusement and play.

I’ve heard it referred to as the Peter Pan syndrome, adultolescence, kidults, and failure to launch syndrome. In his book, *Boys Adrift*, author Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D. gives five factors driving the decline of boys from growing up to fulfill their potential. Can you guess the number one factor? “Video Games. Studies suggest that

some of the most popular video games are disengaging boys from real-world pursuits.”⁴

We’ve gone a long way off course from the apostle Paul’s words...

“When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.” 1 Corinthians 13:11

Life can be hard. Responsibilities are a given. Facing real challenges are... well... challenging. Then you add to the mix the need to learn the daunting skills of healthy interactions with others. It’s no wonder that many young people, if not guided otherwise, take the easy exit off the highway of responsibility and cruise the path of escapism.

Once again, video games are not the only way of escape or the only factor in cultivating a failure to launch. I find it interesting that video games are prominently referenced in nearly every article I’ve read on the subject about the failure to launch and in many real situations I’ve heard about from concerned parents. It’s definitely worth considering.

⁴ <https://www.boysadrift.com/home.php>

Chapter 8

Consideration #5

Video games often create a false sense of accomplishment. A battle is won, a world is created, an enemy defeated, a mission accomplished, a map explored, a challenge overcome, a discovery made, skills achieved, goals realized—or not.

Nothing real is actually achieved unless the gamer is able to monetize their game play. A small percentage of hardcore gamers have learned to do that. A whole new world of video games as a spectator sport has emerged triumphantly. E-sports competitions fill stadiums while teens and young adult e-athletes earn millions through prize money and sponsorships. But what percentage of gamers reach that level? Before the dollar signs give you tunnel vision, let's consider the subject of accomplishments.

I'm especially concerned about young men who have an instinct to fight battles, rescue the damsel in distress, build kingdoms, and accomplish something heroic. The energy, time, emotion, and determination needed is being spent on games at the cost of real-life goals. Focus on preparation for work, marriage, cultural battles, and life purpose, are often being undermined in this age of video games.

Marshall McLuhan, the grandfather of media literacy, wrote about the extensions of man—meaning the new technologies that many believe have extended mankind's abilities. These are usually viewed as advancements in society, but McLuhan brought attention to the other side of the coin—amputations. As we digitally extend our lives, we tend to focus on the positives, the benefits, but rarely do we consider any deficits or amputations that are happening in the process.

One glaring amputation as a result of the extension of video games is this false sense of accomplishment that often diverts the individual from actual accomplishments and important milestones in life.

For many years I have been speaking about this from a spiritual standpoint. In 2011 when interviewing Dr. Jeff Myers for the documentary, I was blown away when he talked about this from a neurological standpoint.

“The basics look like this. When a person is executing on a task—you give them a task, they have to think it through and figure out what to do. It stimulates a part of the brain called the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex—the executive center of the brain. There's another part of the brain that's really essential in this way as well, and we call it the nucleus accumbens. It's the pleasure center of the brain. What happens when somebody is really working on something they find absolutely compelling and interesting, it floods the executive center of the brain with activity, in a way that actually stimulates the pleasure center of the brain. So, when you work at something you really find interesting, it brings pleasure to you.

“The studies in media are really disconcerting in this way because we're finding that video games, for example, stimulate the nucleus accumbens, the pleasure center of the brain, by draining blood away from the executive center of the brain. So, it gives people the sense of accomplishment without ever having actually done anything. It has the same effect on the brain, except for the actual brain damage part of it, as somebody who smokes crack. It gives them the sense that they've done something really great, when in fact they've done nothing at all. That's the effect that so much of the media has on kids today. And people ask me, ‘Why are so many young men passive?’ I can tell you the answer, it's very simple. We've arranged the culture to trick their brains into thinking that they've done something, when in fact, they haven't.” Dr. Jeff Myers, President of Summit Ministries

I also interviewed author Maggie Jackson. In her book *Distracted*, she wrote the following on the subject of video games.

“We don't yet know whether video games teach us problem-solving, pattern recognition, or how to construct order from chaos, as Steven Johnson and others argue. Early evidence shows that many computer games teach the kind of iconic and spatial skills useful for playing more computer games, and not much more.”

When I was a kid, the word on the street was that video games were helping us improve our hand and eye coordination. I'm sure you've heard that one yourself. Is it true? Maybe they do, or maybe it's a 21st century wives' tale. But if it could be proven then for what purpose? I'm curious to know if your children have gotten faster at doing dishes with better precision? Have they been better equipped to spot the dirty sock in the corner of the room and pick it up and place it efficiently in the laundry basket? Do they walk into a room and now spot and clean previously unperceived cobwebs and dust bunnies? I know—they are now able to pick up their potato chip crumbs in the back of the minivan at lightning speed with thoroughness! Or maybe they have new keen sensory abilities allowing them to recognize that the grass is slightly taller than it should be, and swiftly remedy the situation with a mower.

Tongue-in-cheek aside, I'm not saying there are not possible benefits that might be gained. I previously used the positive example of the brain games by Luminosity to help elderly people increase their cognitive skills. My positive example took a nose dive when I read the following in the news.

“The creators and marketers of the Lumosity ‘brain training’ program have agreed to settle Federal Trade Commission charges alleging that they deceived consumers with unfounded claims that Lumosity games can help users perform better at work and in school, and reduce or delay cognitive impairment associated with age and other serious health conditions. As part of the settlement, Lumos Labs, the company behind Lumosity, will pay \$2 million in redress and will notify subscribers of the FTC action and provide them with an easy way to cancel their auto-renewal to avoid future billing. ‘Lumosity preyed on consumers’ fears about age-related cognitive decline, suggesting their games could stave off memory loss, dementia, and even Alzheimer’s disease,’ said Jessica Rich, Director of the FTC’s Bureau of Consumer Protection. ‘But Lumosity simply did not have the science to back up its ads.’”⁵

⁵ <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2016/01/lumosity-pay-2-million-settle-ftc-deceptive-advertising-charges>

Well, so much for that positive example. I've come to realize that there are often two types of people that will make positive claims about the benefits of video games. They are the companies who sell them, and people who are addicted to the games.

So, what is the answer to this growing problem? I've personally been encouraged by the following passage in the Bible.

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” Ephesians 2:10

We are crafted by God with a purpose for our existence. There are things He has prepared for each of us to accomplish.

Can video games be redeemed or handled wisely? I'll come back to that question after the last two considerations.

Chapter 9

Consideration #6

As I write this, I'm assuming that I'm communicating to a Christian. If that's not accurate in your case then feel free to skip to the next chapter because this next consideration requires an established faith in God, the Bible, and His Son, Jesus Christ.

In the past, when having these conversations with others about video games, I usually start with the following consideration regarding the content in video games—is there anything in the game that you are playing that if done in real life would break a moral commandment from God?

It's not uncommon for me to hear, "But it's just a game, I wouldn't do that in real life." When Jesus gave His famous Sermon on the Mount, He taught that it's not just the things you do that break God's laws, it starts with the heart. One example Jesus gave put a spotlight on sexual lust.

"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Matthew 5:27-28

There are many games today that clearly cross the line when it comes to gratuitous violence, murder, sexual lust, revenge, and other activities and motivations that are clearly defined as evil in the Bible. It's not enough to say that you wouldn't do those things in real life, you shouldn't even pretend to do those things, or think those things. We are called to repent of sin, not pretend to indulge in it, or dwell on it through games.

For those of you who are not faint of heart, I have a bonus point for you if you think you can handle it. If you truly desire to take this subject to heart, let's also consider the law of Christ.

What did Jesus say were the two greatest commandments?
Here's a hint, they are both about love.

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And He said to him, " 'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.' "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:36-40

According to Jesus, all of God's laws can be summarized into those two statements. So, my question for you in this context of the law of Christ, is there anything you are pretending to do in a video game that if it were done in real life would break the law of love. Are you portraying anything that is unloving towards God or anything that is unloving toward your neighbor? This is certainly something that a disciple of Jesus needs to seriously consider when it comes to any activity we are involved in, including video games.

Chapter 10

Consideration #7

The final consideration in my list is not last in importance, in fact it is first in importance. Is the gamer you are concerned about a Christian? A non-Christian will not find salvation through changing their entertainment habits. Christianity is not about behavioral change in order to better yourself. It is about a changed heart and peace with God through Jesus Christ. I would rather share the gospel with a non-Christian, than try to merely convince them to change their gaming habits. Gamer or not, I believe anyone without Christ in their life is missing out on the very purpose of existence. The gospel is the most critical subject for a lost world. They don't need to hear me talking about the latest gaming craze, they need the everlasting message of hope.

How does this affect you or the gamer in your life? If you emphasize games over the gospel in an unbeliever's life, they may benefit from making wiser choices with their limited time but it won't help their soul in eternity.

"For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" Matthew 16:25-26

I remember an occasion in 2004 after speaking at a youth event when a twelve-year-old boy marched up to me afterwards. He was visibly angry and blurted out, "I don't agree with you."

"You don't agree with me about what in particular? I just spoke for over an hour and talked about a lot of issues," I said.

"Grand Theft Auto! I think it's okay to play Grand Theft Auto."

“Oh,” I said, “You didn’t like what I said negatively about Grand Theft Auto. Well, before we talk about that it would be helpful for me to know a little more about you. Are you a Christian?”

This question confused him a little, he wasn’t prepared for it. He looked at me with a face that seemed to say, “What does that have to do with this conversation?”

He reluctantly replied, “Yeah,” with a tinge of cynicism.

“Maybe it would help if I explain what I mean by that question, I’m not asking if you go to church, or read your Bible on occasion, or say a prayer before a meal once in a while. I’m asking if you have come to a place in your life where you clearly recognized that you were a sinner who was lost and without eternal hope until you heard the truth of the gospel. You learned and believed in your heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He was born of the virgin Mary and lived a sinless and miraculous life. That He was the fulfillment of all the ancient prophecies about the coming Messiah who would save the world. That He died a sacrificial death for our sins on a cross, was buried in a tomb, and on the third day, rose from the dead. He ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of God and is judge of the living and the dead. And those who repent and confess their sins and believe in Him are forgiven of their sins and given eternal life as a gift. Now having learned all this and believed it to be true, did you surrender your life to Jesus Christ in order to follow Him?”

The boy’s eyes were big and he looked somewhat stunned at my brief presentation of the gospel. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “Yeah.”

“In that case,” I said, “what does it mean to follow Jesus as a disciple of His?”

He shrugged his shoulders again and said, “I don’t know.”

I told him, “Well, to follow Jesus means to walk in His footsteps. What we mean by that is to pattern our lives after His. Do you think if Jesus were on the earth He would be sitting in your room on your bean bag chair, with your game controller, playing a game where he is killing cops, jacking cars, bludgeoning people to death, picking up prostitutes and dealing drugs?”

That question really unnerved the boy. He looked almost frightened and quickly responded, “No!”

“Then I guess you don’t totally disagree with me then because that is my point when talking with you and the other teens today. I want to encourage you to follow Jesus and if you can clearly identify certain activities that Jesus would participate in, then I hope you will reconsider those things in your life.”

The story I just shared is an example of the not-so-secret secret of my ministry when I began talking about media and entertainment. It is a platform to talk about what it means to follow Christ. I’m much more enthusiastic about Jesus than I am about today’s media, technology, and digital entertainment. All those things will one day vanish, but the Word of God endures forever.

No one will take their gaming achievements to heaven. They won’t impress Jesus. But if you decide to set aside, or limit the distractions like gaming, to pursue His purposes. That is eternal.

In a previous chapter I posed the question whether or not video games can be redeemed or handled wisely as Christians? If the game itself doesn’t break the law of love, and if you are able to set reasonable time limits and stick to them without inciting anger, arguments, and obstinate pushback, then maybe so. There may be better ways to spend your time together as a family but that’s in your court. I believe in the established jurisdiction of the family, invented by God and entrusted to dads and moms to lead and guide.

Can video games be used in moderation without compromising responsibilities? I don’t necessarily have answers to that question because I’ve not witnessed many positive examples. That doesn’t mean they don’t exist.

Can video games be leveraged as a tool for evangelism and discipleship? If you find a way to effectively reach gamers for Christ, then go for it, that’s eternal. Which brings us back to the beginning of this book, the soul of the gamer. All gamers have a need for a Savior. If a video game ministry effectively reached gamers for Christ, I’m likely to be a fan, not of gaming, but reaching gamers with the gospel, without compromising the need to live a responsible and Christlike life.

Here is a summary of the seven considerations in a bullet point list.

1. Always consider the soul of the gamer.
2. Video games can be a huge time sink. God calls us to redeem the time so consider how you spend it.
3. Video games can be habit forming and addictive.
4. Video games foster escapism.
5. Video games often give a false sense of accomplishment.
6. Is the content in the video game contrary to God's law or Christ's law of love?
7. Is the gamer a Christian? If not, they need the gospel more than anything else.

Thank you for taking the time to read about these seven considerations in the age of video games. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to [use the contact form](#) on my website www.philliptelfer.com to reach me.

You may also be interested in my new novel, [Why Save Alexander](#). It's about a hardcore gamer that must survive a real-world crisis...

My documentary, Captivated: Finding Freedom in a Media Captive Culture is [free to watch on Amazon](#) if you have a Prime membership. Otherwise you can rent or purchase it online as well.

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