Our Lady of Mount Carmel Academy

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Video Games

Dear Parents,

What sort of policy should we, teachers and parents, have regarding video games? Whenever deciding to do or not do something, we should always first look at the thing in itself. If it is bad in itself, we must not do it at all in any circumstance. If it is good in itself, then, before saying we can do it, we need to consider the circumstances. An example would be: should I tell a lie in order to gain a pay rise at work? Telling a lie is bad in itself. I cannot do it for any reason. There is no need to consider the circumstances because they won't make any difference. Another example would be: being an alcoholic, can I go to a bar? Going to a bar is not evil in itself so, all things

being equal, I could go. Now I need to look at the circumstances: I'm an alcoholic. For me, it would be an occasion of sin to go to a bar.

So, applied to video games, firstly, we should distinguish between good video games and bad video games. For this, we need to apply the same principle that we apply to all works of art or entertainment - to films, television programmes, to books, to music, etc. Video games are in themselves good unless there is something morally wrong with them. Generally, there are three things that can make a video game (or movie, or book etc.) morally wrong. They are morally bad:

a) if they glorify sin;

b) if they are an occasion of sin; or

c) if they are graphically violent.

What does that mean?

a) **Glorifying sin** means that the message of the video game (or movie etc.) is that sin is good, or at least desirable and beneficial. An example of this sort of game is *Grand Theft Auto*, which is a very popular video game. One wins the game by committing crimes: killing policemen, robbing

banks, etc. If I commit sin, I win. That is a bad message: it glorifies sin. It corrupts the mind and the will.

b) Being an **occasion of sin**, means that the game is actually apt to lead the person into actual sin. This would be (particularly for teenage boys) if there were immodesty and impurity in the video game. I haven't watched the recent movie *Wonder Woman*, but I can tell you that on no account should teenage boys watch it. It is an occasion of sin because the heroine is very immodestly dressed. This may not be a grave occasion of sin for women; it is for adolescent boys.

c) **Graphic violence** makes a video game bad because it makes us, and in particular our imagination used to what it should not be used to. Our imagination does not know the difference between right and wrong nor between truth and falsehood. If you doubt that, consider horror movies. People watch them because they have the thrill of feeling scared. Although they know that the scenario is entirely fictitious, their imagination does not know and so they feel scared. Graphic violence is not theatrical violence, but rather extremely realistic bloody and gory violence.

In these three cases, it would be sinful to play the video games. Therefore, it is up to us, parents and educators to lay down rules forbidding the playing of these games.

Now, assuming that our sons do not play bad games, should I still allow them to play? My answer would be: **if they do not already have a video-game console, do not get one; if they already have one, then only in great moderation.** The reason is that highly developed video games create a parallel world where boys can get the sense of achievement they need, but in an entirely unreal way. In his book, *The Collapse of Parenting, How we hurt our Children when we treat them as Adults,* Jonathan Sax tells the story of the twelve year-old boy who was very good at a football video game. Seeing him spend more and more time playing this game, his father became more and more frustrated. Eventually he came in and turned off the game. "We're going to play real football!" he said. The son was duly signed up for football practice. After the first session, the coach turned to him and said: "You're fat, you're unfit and you're unco-ordinated, but at the end of this season, if you train, you will be a good player." The boy never went back. Unlike the real world where we must all live and go through the pain of effort, playing video games doesn't involve pain to achieve a real goal. The danger

for boys who play video games for several hours a week or more is that they replace the real world with an artificial one where they can achieve goals but at the price of no pain. In the real world, they may collapse. It is not too difficult to identify at school the boys who play video games excessively. They tend to be unmotivated in real activities, allergic to hard work and they often complain a lot about their real cross.

Video games are also addictive. They have to be, because the companies that make them need you to consume more. It is very easy for boys to spend more time than they have; and to cut out important things such as prayer, work, spending quality time with family, sleep and homework.

That is why video games should be allowed only in moderation. During school time, this means never on a school day, and not more than two hours a week in total. During school holidays, it should not be more than four hours a week. Parents have the right and the duty to lay down these rules and their teenagers have the duty to obey. To make it easy, parents must explain (and discuss at length if necessary) the reasons behind the rules: that they are not to make life difficult, but they are for the young person's development.

Fr. David Sherry