

# Chapter 11

## Family Fun and Fostering Values

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter looks at the interplay between video and computer games and values discourse within families. The authors focus on the theoretical models for values discourse within families; the role that video games can play in values discourse within the family; the role that both research and design have in the game creation process; and the future opportunities for engaging values and ethics discourse within the family context through gaming.*

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, much has been said about the role of media, especially television, in family life and communication. Of all of the media that are part of the home ecology, video and computer games have had the least attention in the family communication context. Moreover, the reports that have been published have mixed findings or perspectives on the valence of role games play. Some reports have focused on how games can alienate family members from one another (Williams, 2006); whereas others (particularly early on in the game studies field)

pointed to the positive, or at least neutral, effects on having a game system in the home on family interactions, particularly as a space for additional interaction between family members (Mitchell, 1984; Mitchell, 1985; Murphy, 1984). None of the previous work in this area, however, discusses the role of these games in the values discourse among family members. Because of the growing use of computer and video games by all family members, from preschoolers to grandparents, it is important that we pay more attention to these media.

This chapter will look at theoretical models for values discourse within families, including family systems, symbolic interaction, family rituals, and

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social cognitive perspectives. Next, we will use these theoretical perspectives to outline the five key elements that need to be addressed when designing games for families. Finally, we will review future opportunities for engaging values and ethics discourse within the family context through gaming.

## **The State of Play**

Like radio and television before it, electronic games provide a mediated space in the home for families to interact; a place for parents and children to gather and play together. Although console games have been around on a significant consumer scale since the 1980s, video and computer game play has increased continuously over the past few years (NPD, 2009). Today, 65% of households in the US, with or without children, play computer or video games (ESA, 2008). Kids are usually not the only gamer in the family. The average number of gamers in a household with children, including the child, is three (NPD, 2007). Currently, over half of American adults play video games, with one in five playing at least everyday (Lenhart, Jones, & Macgill, 2008). When we put it in the family context, however, we see that parents significantly over index on video game play, with 66% of them playing (Lenhart, Jones, & Macgill, 2008). This increase in video gaming on the parents' side may also be having an effect on the way they view the role of video games in their children's lives. In 2008, 63% of parents who play games themselves said that they believe that games have a positive effect on their kids' lives (ESA, 2008).

In addition to the generational shift that has occurred over the past few years, as the first generation of 1980s console gamers has embraced parenthood, the change in technology to be more accessible and pervasive has also had an effect on family game play. From a generational perspective, we see that 40% of younger parents (under 40) play games with their children, compared

with 25% of older parents. From a platform and mechanics perspective, the Nintendo Wii, with its intuitive movements and family-friendly games packaged within the console system, changed the dynamics of game play in the household (NPD, 2008a). Many family members, who had not been console gamers, became interested in the Wii console (NPD, 2008a). In 2008, the "Family Entertainment" category of games, which includes titles such as *Wii Sports* and *Rock Band*, surpassed the other categories in sales after growing 23% in one year (NPD, 2008c). In fact, the top two selling games of all time across platforms (*Wii Play* and *Guitar Hero III*) are in the Family Entertainment category.

When it comes to online gaming, there has been a huge rise in casual game play by people of all ages (MTV Networks, 2008). Although there is no consensus on what the term "casual" means, in general it refers the lesser commitment to game play, and stands in contrast to "hard core" play. Casual gamers tend to play games to relax, escape, and keep from being bored (MTV Networks, 2008).

Moms (21-49) are heavy casual gamers and are the heaviest online gamers, with 80% of moms playing free online games regularly; and over 30% of those moms spending over 2 hours each time they play (MTV Networks, 2008). Although these moms enjoy playing games by themselves to relax, most also say that they like to play online games with their kids, and wish that there were more games designed for parent-child co-play (Nickelodeon, 2009a). Moreover, the intergenerational communication around online gaming is also strong, with almost one-third of moms getting most of their information on gaming sites from their kids (MTV Networks, 2008). Clearly, gaming across platform is a family affair; and a topic in need of greater study when it comes to how that co-entertainment experience affects family communication around ethics and values.

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