

Life Skills Learned Through Video Games

By Aaron L. Granger

Raising a young teenage boy presents a multitude of challenges. Especially when that teen is going through a physiological metamorphosis and fails to use the appropriate executive skills necessary to successfully complete even the most mundane tasks. Techniques to help boost these executive skills are discussed in a useful parental survival guide *Smart but Scattered* by Richard Guare and Peg Dawson. I recently encountered this smart but scattered phenomenon when cross examining my son about why teachers alleged that he failed to complete a number of assignments. With exaggerated incredulity he proclaimed that the evidence would exonerate him of these scurrilous accusations and he would be found “innocent” of all charges. I responded that the best he could hope for was a finding of “not guilty” because in my house, as with the criminal justice system, a finding of “innocent” is not available.

He painstakingly combed through his backpack that was so stuffed it look like it was having contractions. One by one he presented a quintuplet of dittos, his smile widening with each delivery like a proud father bearing witness to the miracle of life. His smile dimmed as I pointed out that none of the documents he produced contained the typical chain of custody markings that would suggest that the assignments had actually been in the possession of the examiner. “Well, I meant to turn it in.” He said squeamishly. I replied, “You can’t raise a *mens rea* type defense, son. Failing to do your homework is a strict liability offense.” We spent the next few minutes developing arguments for an appeal.

Despite being admonished by several family members not to talk “at” them like a lawyer, I irrepressibly deploy my professional skills when trying to win an argument or use the power of persuasion. My son has largely been impervious to my argumentative idiosyncrasies because I have refused to allow myself to view the world through his lens. Instead, I have insisted that he view and understand the world through the eyes of someone thirty years his senior, and with the expectation that he do so without the benefit of experience to provide context. However, this time was different. I could not use my usual approach. I needed him to understand that completing work and turning it in would be the core function of his educational life and professional future. This time, to build my case I did not pore over my personal collection of self-help manuscripts. I turned to video games.

I have personal knowledge of my son taking over hostile terrain using violent weaponry in the video game series *Call of Duty*. Admittedly, I have assisted him in mounting several campaigns protecting our homeland and defending the very democracy that allows me to earn a living in a society governed by the rule of law rather than by a bald dictator with a pencil thin mustache, goatee, and a Russian accent. In the multiplayer mode the goal is to complete various missions. At the end of each successful mission you receive a star. You have to collect a specified number of stars before the game will unlock the next series of missions. The player can also select the degree of difficulty. Raising the level of difficulty allows you to accumulate more stars per mission. The game

is designed so that it is impossible to advance to the next level simply by completing the missions using the easiest degree of difficulty. This ensures that the players will not graduate until they have proven beyond a reasonable doubt that they possess all of the necessary skills to advance.

I used this gaming theme in my opening argument. “Complete the mission. Collect the stars. Advance to the next level.” Using *Call of Duty* as my analogy I explained that completing the mission involved not only doing the work but turning it in. I warned that repeated failed missions could result in him starting the game over from the beginning of the last successfully completed level. Completing the missions successfully also had the added bonus of upgrading my son’s armor and available munitions making him a more formidable and battle tested competitor anywhere in the global arena regardless of the nature of the combat in the future. I agreed to the authenticity of his statement that some of the missions are “extremely hard” without waiving objection to the admissibility of his statement into evidence. I also attempted to introduce evidence that my son enjoys a significant feeling of accomplishment when he is able to prevail over difficult obstacles but that was excluded as hearsay (even though it clearly should have been permitted under the excited utterance exception).

In my closing argument I repeated my opening theme four times in a chant like fashion getting louder each time. “Complete the mission. Collect the stars. Advance to the next level.” Interrupting my son smiled and said “Okay Dad, I get it!” His reluctant smile provided me with validation that at least I was connecting with him in language that he could understand. Will that change behavior? Who knows? The jury is still out or should I say the game is still loading. The way I see it, if the father/son pep talk doesn’t work, I can always take the video games away! As for me, I feel like I’m on a roll. Tomorrow I’ll be teaching my daughter the value of patience using the video game Frogger.



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