



WAS THERE LIFE BEFORE VIDEO GAMES?

By Susan Vogt

©2006

One of the continuing struggles in our home has been control of computer and video games. For years my husband and I limited TV watching in our home to an hour a day. We count video games because it uses the TV and raises some of the same concerns that TV watching does, i.e., sedentary, frequently solitary recreation that often doesn't involve much active creativity. Add to this the number of shows and games that glorify violence, and limiting it made sense to us. There's been grumbling, but overall the rules have worked, perhaps because we've been generous with making exceptions for special occasions.

It's been much harder over the past few years, however, to hold the line on this form of entertainment. As I reflected on why this might be, I realized that Nintendo hadn't even been invented till our oldest child was 12 years old. The one we currently struggle with is 11 years old and has been around video games for his entire conscious life. What did our older children do for recreation before video games were common? I started remembering the mammoth forts that were built using the couch, chairs, and blankets, riding bikes to no where in particular, impromptu plays and magic shows staged in the living room, and neighborhood Olympics and circuses.

Then I remembered my own childhood which of course is considered to be prehistoric by our children's standards. We played basketball in the driveway, created crafts out of scrap supplies around the house, and played kick the can at night with all ages in the neighborhood including parents. Now before you panic that I am incurably nostalgic for the old days, I certainly appreciate the many advances that have improve our lives and culture today. What I am concerned about is the proliferation of passive and over organized forms of recreation.

For example, I grew up playing a lot of sports. Only one of my sports, however, involved parental transportation and scheduled games. Now don't get me wrong. I love sports! Among our four children we have transported, provided refreshments, fundraised, cheered, and worked dinner around organized soccer, baseball, tennis, dance, and basketball. What I have noticed, however, is that the number of organized and sophisticated, parent initiated sports and extra curricular activities has mushroomed in the last 20 years. None of these activities are bad in themselves. It's a matter of restraint. ***Too much of a good thing can be bad!*** Just as video and computer games and TV are not evil in themselves, too much passive entertainment, organized sports, or even church meetings, often don't leave open time in our lives. ***A certain amount of boredom is a prerequisite for creativity.*** With our older children I remember listening to them complain bitterly about having nothing to do. Given time, however, they pushed through their boredom and usually became engrossed in an activity that they wouldn't have thought of if a quick fix of entertainment was available.

So what's a busy family to make of all this? Yank the kids off the soccer team? Of course not. Put the TV out for Goodwill? Probably not. But we can bite the bullet and make some hard choices about which good activities to do. Our kids will still get into college if they don't do them all. Hopefully this will make room for creative time.

What to do with the newfound creative time? Why not turn back the family clock to a time before computers, even before TV, maybe even before electricity – not for the rest of your life, but just for one day or one evening. I wonder what you would discover if your family agreed to take an evening off from all scheduled activities and just played together in some old

fashioned ways. Perhaps exclude anything in the home that runs on electricity and see what's left to do. It might take them beyond the highest level of their favorite video game. "Come on mom, what do you mean you played baseball in the street without uniforms or nine players! Is that legal?"

(For further ideas see *Just Family Nights – 60 Activities to Keep Your Family Together in a World Falling Apart*).