



Toy guns, Barbie and Monopoly:

Are these games
educational?

Over the last Christmas holiday break I found myself in three similar conversations about the educational merits of certain toys and games. Although each conversation was with a fellow Christian educator, the thrust of each discussion was around our ‘comfortableness’ in letting our own children play with these toys. What were we really discussing? Even if we didn’t express it in quite this way, on reflection I think we were really asking the question “how educational are these toys and games?”

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Educational

We need to first explore what it means that something is educational. When we hear of something described this way, including games, we can often think that it has a literacy or numeracy training component, or a scientific exploration element or it may be anchored around generating geographic knowledge. However, does it matter what is being taught for something to be educational? Does it need to be scholastic? If a toy teaches anything at all about life, is it not educational? This education may be at the level of skills and knowledge, but it may also be at a much more formative level, shaping the child's view of how to relate to others, their view of self image or their view of material wealth. Are toys and games neutral? Should the first and main thing be to consider whether they are fun or not? Maybe fun for the sake of fun is a blessing from God to celebrate and enjoy, but surely it is important to also explore the possibility of more fundamental, subtle education influences.

Toy guns

Guns or no guns, this is a question that has caused many a Christian parent to ponder. The first thing to explore in considering the helpfulness of children playing with toy guns is whether or not real guns are 'evil'. To do this we need to go back to a biblical worldview; a worldview that acknowledges that God, as creator, looked at what he had created (and will continue to sustain) and proclaimed it to be 'good'. All aspects of creation have good creational essence. There is nothing in creation that was 'bad'. Although the disobedience of Adam and Eve did result in a distortion to the order of creation, it did not cause a change in the status of the essence of creation. It is still good! As Plantinga suggests:

Badness is twisted goodness, polluted goodness, divided goodness. But even after the twisting, polluting and dividing have happened, the goodness is still there. Plantinga (2002)

As part of the good creation, God gave Adam and Eve (and all humanity) the ability to invent and innovate. The distortion comes when we use our technologies to progress our own selfish desires and power struggles especially in ways that compromise our stewardship of the creation.

From time immemorial we have developed numerous technologies for projecting things through the air. Whether bows for arrows, woomeras for spears or guns for small metal cartridges. For a majority of intended uses, these innovations have been helpful; hunting, maintaining law and order or for recreation. However, we can all think of many examples where the good creational essence (technological innovation that helps with certain tasks) has been abused and people have turned guns upon each other for power, selfishness and hatred resulting in terrible violence.

When our children play with guns they are modelling/simulating real life use of guns. That's what 'pretend' play is. So how are they playing with them and what sort of use are they modelling (pretending)? If all play is education, what are they learning in both cases? Is it the development of fine motor skills in a context of competition where skill development is celebrated, or perhaps in the second case, that violence is fun and that our pursuit of self-sacrificial love for others, as modelled in the cross, can be suspended in certain contexts? If a game educates by teaching that you win by simulating violence to your opponent, could this perhaps be unhelpful learning?

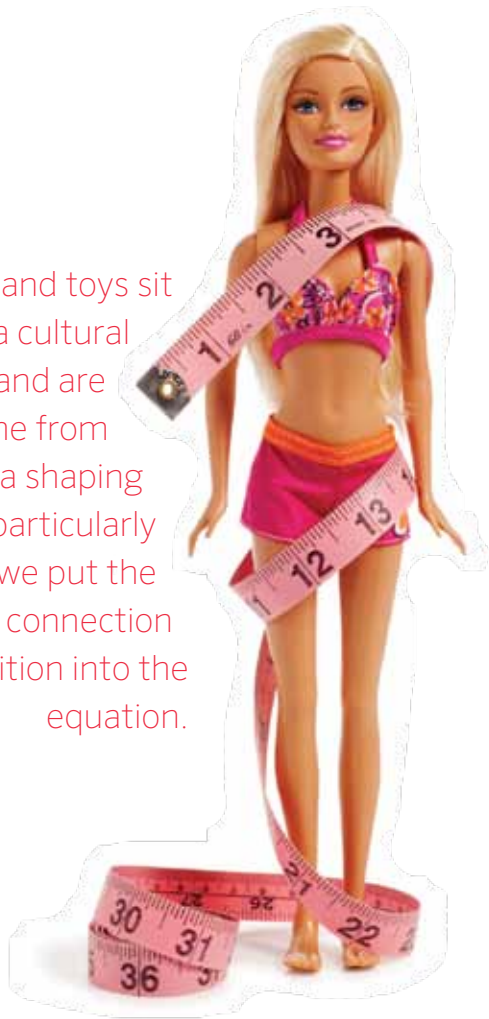
Monopoly

The game of Monopoly, a perennial favourite, also involves the notion of competition. A helpful view of competition suggests it contains good creational essence. It is good in and of itself, but it can be used in ways that flow from the sin of selfishness and self promotion. The God-created nature of competition is such that it has a strong emotional connection. Therefore, the ability to have our view of the world shaped by an activity is perhaps elevated when competition is involved.

This view of competition allows for the notion that it is fine to humbly seek to win in games. To compete in Monopoly means that you seek to win. The majority of us would most likely feel comfortable with the analysis to this point. To win in Monopoly means to become the wealthiest person in the 'pretend' society; to have accumulated the greatest amount of material (real estate) investment. When young minds engage in this activity they are being educated. They are having their views of the world shaped by the game and all the more when they are emotionally engaged with the stimulus of competition. Even if we avoid the discussion around the relative right or wrong of wealth accumulation, we can still ask the question, "What does Monopoly teach about the responsibilities of the wealthy towards the poor?" You do not win by considering the well being of your tenants. In fact the only successful strategy towards winning is to adopt a shrewd form of greed. A family might have a clear message taught through Bible study times that our responsibility as Christians in society is to be salt and light, peacemakers, generous, looking out for the well being of others and wary of an idolatrous attitude towards wealth, but if



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shaping influences. Games and toys sit within a cultural setting and are not immune from having a shaping influence - particularly when we put the emotional connection of competition into the equation. However, is the right response to conclude things like, "It is wrong for Christians to play Monopoly" or, "Children of Christian parents should never play with Barbie"? Absolutely not! This would be a legalistic response and we have been freed in Christ from this sort of law keeping.

Discernment is crucial as Christian parents. We must first realise that all activities are worldview-shaping and that the 'real world' that our games and toys might model is not necessarily God's design for the world; the 'real world' might actually be a distorted world and a good deal removed from the 'good life' that God designed for us. When we have grasped this we can then ask questions about age or stage appropriateness and we might even choose to deliberately engage with the activities with our children so that we can use it as an opportunity to discuss the importance of not being conformed to the patterns of this world and an opportunity to be transforming them by the renewing of their minds.

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we then clear the table and have a family game of Monopoly, the view of the world that we have been trying to create could be subtly yet powerfully undone.

Barbie dolls

"Surely Barbie dolls are just fun? The little ones that play with them have no idea of the issues of body size and body image. They play with Barbie innocently unaware of self identity issues."

Although there may be some truth in this statement, I suspect this view is at best underestimating the shaping effects of playing with a falsely proportioned body and at worst somewhat naive to the place that Barbie and related children's merchandise fits into the pervasive message by media and marketers of the 'ideal' body size and shape, and indeed, our society's emphasis on being 'sexy'. There is a plethora of messages being given to our little girls (and increasingly our boys) that suggest that you should view your place in the world as a sexual being and that the more you fit the objectified ideal of 'sexy' the more value you have. This shaping of a view of your place in the world happens at a young age, and with Barbie you don't have to do very much research to find that medical folk suggest that a woman with Barbie's proportions would be at best very sick, would have definitely stopped menstruating and would most likely be dead.

Discernment and transformation

If everything that we do sits within a cultural story that may be at odds with the gospel-shaped story of the world and that the cultural story has shaping effects on our view of life and others, then surely Christian parents and educators must be discerning about these

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