

Game Night and WWJD?

by Carol Duerksen

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 This session will work best if you have youth who play video games that have violent elements. Halo is one example—you can ask youth for others. Arrange for the class to meet at a home or in your meeting space where you have the equipment to play the games.
- 2 Copies of the Winter 07/08 *With* Magazine or the article at the end of the session for each student.
- 3 Newsprint and markers
- 4 Paper and pens
- 5 Bibles

SESSION OUTLINE

- 1 Play the games. Spend some time playing the game(s). Make sure everyone has an opportunity to play—not just those who are most familiar with them.
- 2 Talk about it. Was it fun? Did anyone feel uncomfortable? Why or why not?
- 3 Read “Why Mennonites Play Halo.”
- 4 Discuss: Do you agree or disagree with the article?
- 5 Ask students to find a place where they can be quiet and get into “their own space.” Then ask them to close their eyes. When everyone’s eyes are closed and it is quiet, say: *I’d like for you to imagine something. Imagine that we are all here, playing the games just like we did, when someone walks into the room. That someone is Jesus. (Pause.) What do you think your conversation would be with him? What would he say? What would you say?* (Allow time for youth to imagine this conversation.)
- 6 Ask youth to choose one of the following ways to show what their conversation with Jesus might be: Do a skit, a comic strip on the newsprint, a poster, a silent pantomime, or write a short story.
- 7 Share the responses with the class.
- 8 Ask students to locate Biblical input on this topic. Can they find stories or verses that support their responses? Does the Bible say anything about playing violent video games?
- 9 Discuss what students found in the Bible.

- 10 Discuss: *What's next? Does it matter whether you play violent video games? What about kids younger than you? Is it okay for them?*
- 11 Option: Depending on your group and where they come out on this topic, they may want to plan an awareness event for parents in your congregation.
- 12 Close with a prayer, inviting Jesus to be a part of the lives of the youth, walking with them in everything they think, do and say.

Session Reproducibles

“WHY MENNONITES PLAY HALO?”

By Travis Duerksen

“How do you, as a pacifist Mennonite, justify playing a violent game like Halo?” That was the question I got through the telephone one lazy afternoon.

I stopped for a moment, nervously chuckling. “Hey. Um, well, you see ...” I trailed off, my voice trying to hide the sheer panic spinning in my mind. *Halo? Mennonites? How do you justify that, anyway!?* I asked myself.

Not hearing any answers, I immediately started going through the standard catchphrases. “What else am I going to do?” No, too wishy-washy.

“It’s not that bad.” Ugh, that’ll require an explanation.

“I really need to go; I smell something ... burning ...” Hey, there’s a winner!

After I carefully reworded the sentence to avoid the *With* editor calling the fire department, she hung up with the expectation that I would write a small explanation (or apology, I can’t remember which) on how some pacifist Mennonites justify playing Halo.

Prepare to be disappointed.

First off, let me give you a little background on Halo. It was released way back in 2001 for the Xbox, a video game console. Since then, it has been released for the PC as well. It is rated “M” for mature, a rating very similar to “R” for a movie, because of blood and gore and violence.

The game revolves around a super-soldier named Master Chief whose goal is to stop an alien force, the Covenant, from destroying all humans. Compelling, huh?

During most of the game, you’ll find yourself looking from the perspective of Master Chief, that is, “first-person.” So, if Master Chief is holding a weapon, you would see its back, as well as your hands holding it, and an aiming reticle in the center of the screen.

You are expected to beat the game by, at the most basic level, depositing small fragments of lead (at a high rate of speed) into the physical bodies of your enemies, until the entrance and residence of these said fragments impede the normal operation of any of their primary biological processes.

In short, you’re supposed to shoot the aliens until they *die*.

This immediately poses a bit of a problem, as you are put on the forefront of a war, spearheading an effort to rain destruction upon an alien race that would love to do the same to you.

Mennonites have taken a stance of peace when two groups create war with one another, and unfortunately that is just not possible in the game of Halo. Nowhere in the game does it allow you to go to and participate in peace negotiations or to write up a truce of any kind. (Although, there’s always a chance for it in Halo 3!)

In the single-player version, killing your enemies is the only way to reach the end. And kill you do. While you are never pitted against other humans, you’ll find yourself up against a variety of aliens, from half your size to more than three times as big, and even zombie-like creatures (I kind of stopped paying attention to the plot at that point ...), each with its own colorful blood. Red. Green. Purple. Blue. Orange. Much like the color of Skittles, in fact, but in tougher, mobile packaging ...

Session Reproducibles

shooting at you with lasers ... and piloting space ... ships ...

Regardless, while the gore never gets beyond what is shown on various shows on TV, and the fact that you're fighting fictional aliens, the content of the single-player game is very difficult to justify for a Mennonite. And it should be. Many people like to breeze over it with such phrases as, "It's just a game," and "It's not real." But I can't.

Granted, I love playing Halo (the multiplayer much more than the single-player, which I'll get to in a moment). But looking from the outside in, I can see how easy it would be to call us hypocrites. (That's a word I hate, by the way. You show me someone on this earth today who is not a hypocrite, and I'll know you're lying.) In this case, the word is totally justified. How can we say we dislike war when we ourselves are participating in digital battles ourselves?

Yes, it's not *outright* hypocrisy (that would be declaring that you're a pacifist but still jumping at the chance to go to war), but it is a form of it. It's the same thing as looking down on adultery, then running home to finish writing your saucy romance novel. It's not physically the same, but mentally there's no difference.

Coming off of that paragraph, here comes the hardest part of justifying Halo (as if it wasn't going great already). Here goes.

In the multiplayer section of the game, you and up to 15 of your closest friends can shoot it out in a variety of matches. The two main ones are Deathmatch (the name, while true, doesn't exactly help my case either) and Capture the Flag. In Deathmatch you see who can score the most kills in a set amount of time. Capture the Flag is a game where two teams each have a flag and try to get the other team's flag. Both are pretty simple.

Now, the main problem here is that instead of aiming your gun at computer-controlled opponents, you're gunning for an enemy that is controlled by your buddy sitting next to you.

Personally, I don't look at it that way. I view it as a competition between friends, much like a quick game of basketball or football. Like those sports, it's a place where you can show off what little skills you love to brag about. But, like those games, if you're not a team player, you'll end up losing.

Granted, Deathmatch doesn't require much strategy at all, but Capture the Flag absolutely demands it, as well as communication and strategy among your teammates. It's a really good feeling when you can organize a plan with people, change it on the fly, adapt to the other team, and watch the scheme come together seamlessly.

"But that still doesn't excuse the fact that you're shooting each other!" you might say aloud, hoping that somehow the page you're reading will try to come up with some witty retort.

Well, there's no witty retort here. I fully agree with you. It really *doesn't* excuse the fact that you're shooting each other.

But hey, I had to try.

The thing is, to a lot of youth this moral dilemma isn't really a big deal at all. When I posed the question that I was asked to some of my friends, they all did the same thing I did.

They chuckled.

Then they said something was burning.

Many of them simply concluded that they "hadn't really thought of it," and "it's not that big a deal." And I believe them. To us, this stuff really *isn't* that big a deal.

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Should it be?

To me at least, if I really want to belong to the Mennonite church, and if I really want to live by its beliefs, I need to at least think it over, talk it out with a variety of people, and, most importantly, pray about it.

Will it end with giving up Halo and its ilk? I don't know yet. Will I be weighing the morals that a game is impressing on me from now on?

Oh yes.