



Episode #156:

Making Peace with Video Gaming, with Eric Lanigan

May 7, 2019

Debbie: Hey Eric, welcome to the podcast.

Eric: Thank you, Debbie.

Debbie: So we were just talking before, I'm really excited about this conversation. I think it's kind of a fresh subject for us and a different take on video games and and some other things we're going to talk about today. So as a way of getting started, can you just give us kind of a brief introduction to who you are and what you do in the world?

Eric: Yeah. Well, my name is Eric Lanigan and I work as a coach and teacher around motivation and self connection. And that expresses itself in many forms, often with young people who are wanting to do something with their lives and don't quite know how to do it. Sometimes with professionals who are already successful and are wanting to refocus that in a direction that might be slightly more fulfilling or to really breakthrough around a project. And now with parents supporting their kids and developing their relationships with their kids around gaming passions.

Debbie: Gaming passions. I love even just hearing those two words together. And I'm just curious how you, you know, kind of your personal why in doing this work. How did you come to be doing this?

Eric: Well, it starts with me being rather insecure as a kid, being insecure about my height and feeling unattractive and then having this sense of inadequacy, which I looked out at the world, it's a big world from the eyes of a 12, 13 year old, and thought what would make me adequate? Well, it seems like money is really important. So I picked money and I started trading stocks at 13 and derivatives at 16 and I started a business in college and had a day trading mentor in college. And I thought this was gonna be my path. And fortunately I recognized that there was no amount of money that was actually going to make up for this sense of inner lack. And so I did change my trajectory, uh, around age 21 and started trying to figure out what would actually make me happy. And that was a bit of a multi-year journey, living at retreat centers, taking as many personal growth courses and retreats and seminars as I could.

And, and that path led me to Canada where I lived with a mentor there who did addiction therapy and emotional intelligence training with horses, where horses were helping people sort of reconnect with themselves. And after that I started coaching. And so my personal why is essentially wanting to help people avoid the pain that I had on my path of confusion. And uh, one, one person once said to me, either you love people and use money or use people and love money. And I loved money and used people for the majority of my young life and I wanted to love people and I didn't even know how. And that, I'm happy to say that it's now shifted, but that, whatever it is, looking outside yourself for validation in any form was a, was a painful process to resolve because at least when you have validation in whatever context you pursue it, there it's a structure for motivation.

And to give that up is very scary because if you give up people pleasing or whatever, then at times it might feel like you don't even know what you want.

Debbie: Right.

Eric: Yeah.

Debbie: Wow. It's a fascinating story in so many ways and I can imagine just that loss of identity, you know, and, and the fact that you had that aha moment so young, you know, at 21 had the wherewithal to realize I need to pivot here. And that's a pretty incredible thing. I think so many people don't ever get to that point in their lives. And uh, that's remarkable that that happened to you at so young an age.

Eric: Yeah, it was one pivot point. I think I immediately pivoted to seeing myself as a wise, smart person and that became my new identity, which was equally problematic or pretty much equally problematic. I pushed a lot of friends away because I thought I knew better and all of this. Eventually I learned that connection happens through emotion, emotional self connection, and now don't act as if I have the answers or at least not like I did around that age.

Debbie: Wow. So interesting. You know, just as you're describing this, I know so many of our kids, you know, in the community who listens to this podcast, our kids are often kind of concrete thinkers, black and white thinkers. And so I think it's easy for them to get wrapped up in this one aspect of who they are. And that can be really challenging because a lot of them are perfectionists or it's their, their intellect that is their identifying factor. I mean, I think a lot of these kids are potentially setting themselves up for challenge down the road when that, when they realize, oh, maybe I'm not who I thought I was or other people don't value me the same way or always looking externally for that validation. So it's really interesting.

Eric: Yeah. And the most meaningful pieces of life that I found are in connection, not necessarily in getting validation for, you know, being valedictorian or whatever else.

Debbie: Right. Absolutely. So let's us pivot for a moment. So I heard about you through Blake Boles who listeners might remember as the unschooling guru as I call him. And we had a really fascinating conversation about self directed learning and unschooling. And you had partnered with him or he was involved with you for a program you were doing on gaming, which really caught my attention. Um, because we were talking before the show, you know, my husband is a gamer, or has been, actually I will just say that I didn't know he was a gamer until after he moved in. So during the dating process that was kind of hidden from me. And then he moved in. I'm like, oh well this is interesting. I didn't realize so much time would be spent doing this. But anyway, it's a, it's his passion in many ways. And, and, and I've come to peace with that and my son is a gamer, but I know that a lot of parents in my community, their kids are really involved in gaming.

And it, well, I'm sure you know this quote unquote screen time, you know, we've had, we've talked about a lot on the show. It's a divisive issue. It creates a lot of concern around addiction and habits and motivation and all these pieces. So I would love to talk about that, your work involving helping parents make peace with video gaming. So I guess let's, let's start there. Tell us about your work with gaming and and again maybe your personal connection to that work.

Eric: Yeah, so with gaming, I was a gamer growing up. I remember I beta tested World of Warcraft. I bought a new computer to play that game. And I remember my big transition was in junior year when I spent probably 12 to 16 hours a day, all two weeks of winter break playing World of Warcraft. And at the end of the two weeks I felt this sort of emptiness and I stopped. That's not everyone's path. And I was really obsessed and really sort of trying to squeeze all of the excitement juice out of the moment in this sort of perpetual instant gratification cycle of gaming. And I would also say there are many other games that really taught me how to think in systems. Because games are systems and you learn the system. And life is a system. A job is a system. And as you learn how to play the systems, you can contribute more. So there's nothing inherently wrong with games. It's just about the way we relate to games. And so the way I support parents in this through the gaming course, it might be helpful just to go through the first few weeks of that course. It's a four week course. The first week we spend time examining fears that the parents have about gaming and their children's gaming.

Debbie: What are, yeah, I can imagine, but I, you know, you hear from parents all over the world on this topic. What are some of the biggest fears that you hear?

Eric: Will they ever stop? Will they ever have a meaningful life outside of gaming? They're spending so much time gaming, is this going to impact their future? They're spending so much time gaming, is this going to impact their relationships, their friendships? So it's just a general fear, I think, uh, in many cases what I hear is just that this is going to impact the fulfillment and joy of their children going forward.

Debbie: Yeah. I know that even, you know, just me personally, like I, I see that connection and that sometimes obsessive behavior when there's a new game or you know, um, that focus is really all on one area. And I know that I, I will go to the future, like, what is this going to look like in, you know, five years if he's at college and he's got coursework to do, but he, he's discovered a new game or, or whatever it is. So I imagine this is one of those runaway fears of kind of worst case scenarios often.

Eric: Yes. And then we legislate sometimes from our fears and so we impose rules or whatever else that might create distance in the relationship between the parent and the child.

Debbie: Can you talk about that? Talk about the rules. You know, this is in every parent community that I'm in, there's, of course, the discussion around how much, right? How much is too much? I did an episode with my son, who used to be a regular guest on the podcast about whether or not it's okay for a parent to ever ban a

game completely or when is that appropriate? And also I hear from parents that they often will use the game as a reward or a consequence, you know, access if this, if you perform well here or we'll take it away if this happens. So what are your thoughts on parents trying to legislate their child's gaming?

Eric: Yeah, let's start with the reward piece. So life is an opportunity to, for us to explore, learn, create, connect with ourselves and others and express ourselves, right? So when we add reward and punishment around games, we are creating a dynamic where we make schoolwork, often schoolwork, this thing that you wouldn't inherently want to do. We make learning this thing that you wouldn't inherently want to do. And then if you do this thing that you wouldn't inherently want to do, then you get a reward. Which in my perspective ruins the desire to learn in and of itself.

Now that desire to learn is already not helped by our culture as it stands because the way we relate to work is that work is a pain and it's kind of a bummer. And life would just be better if we could spend all day, every day on the beach drinking, whatever it is that you drink. Right? And that's not true. It might be true if you're really in a painful place, but in a, in a bigger picture, when you're connecting with the world, when you're doing something that's making a difference, which not all of us have the privilege of doing, but that is what, what makes life fulfilling. And so my approach with parents and with kids who are gamers is that it all comes down to the relationship to their emotions. Which is how do you know you, you're enjoying something? It's a pretty simple question, but you know you're enjoying something when you're enjoying it, when it feels good.

Debbie: So it seems like a simple question, but it also seems like a profound question because I think it's something that we never consider, right?

Eric: Yeah.

Debbie: So how do you even, how do you encourage kids or parents to help their kids in tapping into, to that question?

Eric: Well first I just want to point out that on the surface it might say, yeah, it feels good. I really like, I'm really captivated. Right? And it might actually be that what the person is experiencing, whatever sort of addiction or compulsion they're in, is adrenaline. And if you actually sit with the experience for a longer period of time, you experience this tension, this sadness, this anger or frustration underneath it, this inadequacy or fear, right? So, so this is the big sort of pivot point in people's relationship to motivation, their relationship to their emotions, is that coming to understand that emotions are signals and that the surface most emotion or the, the thing that we see if we just take a glance at our emotions isn't necessarily the bigger emotion that's at play and at work in terms of what's going on.

So with parents, I encourage parents first and foremost to develop their relationship with themselves and their own emotions. And just take time noticing how you feel every day, right? If you, if there are things you

procrastinate on, we all procrastinate on things, in the moment that you are about to procrastinate or are moving to a distraction, pause and feel into your emotions in the moment.

And almost always what you find is some kind of uncertainty, some kind of, or some kind of emotion that's unpleasant that sometimes doesn't even present itself in conscious awareness. It stays sort of in the unconscious and we're just automatically on autopilot reacting to it. But if we pause and are able to feel into that emotion, listen in to that signal, it might tell us you don't have enough information to make this decision. So the next step isn't making this decision, it's going out and getting more information. And then you actually have your next action for whatever project you're working on. And that gets you back on your path. And this applies equally to students or to kids.

Debbie: So let's talk about the kid's emotional experience. This tension, this anger or frustration that might actually be going on underneath where it might on the surface look like enjoyment or they might just believe that they're enjoying it, but in reality there are all these other things going on. So for a parent to kind of get more connected with their process, their emotions, does that help us better identify what our kids are going through? Tell, tell me about that connection.

Eric: Yes, absolutely. So as we get more in touch with our emotions, we also, our senses of what another person is experiencing also get better. And so if a parent is trying to connect with their child and seeing how the child is relating to their emotions or their, their gaming, in the context of gaming, you can ask questions like how does it feel when you're gaming? And I notice that when you come to dinner sometimes you seem frustrated. Is there something that's frustrating you about the game? Things like that that start to connect the child's own conscious awareness to maybe their underlying emotions. Which is how we get unstuck in any aspect of our lives to begin with, right? It's all about connecting with emotion because emotion tells us what is right for us, what we want. We can use our mind to figure out what would be beneficial for us.

So let's go to a, maybe give an example. We can give an example of a child who is identified with their intelligence maybe, who feels like maybe even they have some amount of potential or or something where they want to, they feel this almost this need to do things, but at the same time they're spending a lot of time gaming. Does that sound like something that, an example that would be helpful to explore?

Debbie: Sure, yeah.

Eric: Yeah. So there is an inner sense of obligation to achieve. Often coming from, like I described it in my own process, that sense of of needing either validation or needing achievement to, to feel worthy. And that creates pressure and that creates obligation. And so that that obligation based motivation, it might express itself in what I call conceptual beneficial level assessment or 'shoulds', which is where you can sit there or a child who might deeply want to do something big in the world, can sit there and think about what would be beneficial to them.

And then that shows up as an obligation, which they might feel trapped by. And then that pressure from needing to, to succeed and, and follow all of these obligations they've pinned down creates an unpleasant overwhelming experience. Like they're on a, uh, they're trapped and then they turn away from that to some sort of distraction. And not all gamers have this pattern, but some do. And that's, that's sort of part of that process where gaming becomes unhealthy or when any habit becomes unhealthy, it's when we're using it as a coping mechanism for avoiding unpleasant emotions, unpleasant feelings.

Debbie: Makes absolute sense. And I think that that is going to resonate with a lot of listeners. So if we understand that that is what's going on. And I actually, I love this conversation because all of our guests and what we're often talking about on this show is there's always a reason for behavior and to kind of look at the underlying what's really going on with our child and how can we support them there. So if we recognize that this isn't just, you know, our child just not prioritizing or not being motivated or you know, all these things that we make up or they're ruining their future and they just don't care. If we can get to that place and realize, oh, this is, this is some sort of avoidance behavior because of areas of pain or insecurity or not feeling worthy, how do we move forward from there? How do we support them through that and, and I guess yeah, to use your language, come to peace with the way that they're using it, but also, or do you have strategies to help parents help them engage in the game in a different way?

Eric: So, yes. The reason that I work with parents in the gaming course is because it's all about the parents developing their relationship in many senses with themselves first. And the biggest thing parents can do is, is to live the life they want to live.

Debbie: Can you say more about that? I love that statement and I want to know what that means in your context.

Eric: Yeah. Well it means getting a sense of the things in life that they are tolerating and then seeing what, do they act, what do you actually desire in those areas? And there's not, obviously you can't work on all of these areas at once, but there'll be a few that'll stand out as as pain points. And by going through this process yourself, it's really, really helpful for your child because this is exactly what your child wants to be doing. They also have things in their life that they're tolerating. They also have things in life that they want, that they desire. So by going through the process and understanding your own sticking points and even being able to vulnerably talk about your own sticking points and not just show up as someone who sets the rules but actually connects in a vulnerable way. Not obviously using your child as a therapist and sharing too much, but sharing your process in a vulnerable way that feels appropriate to the moment, to the circumstance, to the age of the child. Because the child is going to be going through this whole process themselves in learning how to navigate life and navigate their own emotions and navigate their own emotions as signals.

And we all have coping mechanisms and coping mechanisms in most cases aren't bad. They give us a break from the emotions that are too strong to feel at the

moment. And starting to not hate ourselves for using them allows us to not add guilt or shame on top of already a situation where what we really are trying to do is get in touch with what we want. And if what we want is found in our own emotions then if we flood our, we'll say emotional space, with shame and guilt, it becomes really hard to get in touch with what we want. And so creating that same context with your child in terms of not making them feel ashamed or guilty, but also asking them, what do you want, what feels best to you? And it's tricky with gaming because if there's, if the child is in a defensive position, they might just say, I just want to play my game, leave me alone. This there that, that's sort of another can of worms in some sense, but the whole process does start to unwind as we start to become more open, emotionally self aware and, and vulnerable about our process.

Debbie: Yeah and what I'm hearing, again, it feels very much in alignment with what I believe and what many of my guests talk about that, you know, this isn't a, this also isn't a quick fix, right? This isn't like, okay, do this process and the battles are going to end. But this is, we're looking at the long game here. We're looking at helping our kids develop a healthy relationship with gaming and know themselves better, understand their emotions and help them eventually opt into things that, that feel more positive and that are less avoidant behaviors. But this is something that is not going to happen overnight.

Eric: Absolutely.

Debbie: And I'm curious, you know, in terms of the parents that you work with, especially surrounding the, the gaming piece, is there an age at which point this work can be more effective? You know, I think a lot of the parents I hear from who are really having those big battles, it's with younger kids where the parents might be giving their child less autonomy than a parent of a teenager might do. So I think it looks different for those age groups. Um, where do you find this work most effective or is it never too early to start?

Eric: It's absolutely never too early to start. It starts all the way back when a child, you know, is one or two years old, they're exploring their environment. They might not knowing any better push another child. And this is a beautiful sort of first opportunity or one of the first opportunities where you can connect a child's own awareness to their emotions. Which is, when they push someone or hurt someone, and I know this is going off topic but I think it's important, when they push someone that, the person who gets pushed or the baby who gets pushed, might fall down and start crying out of fear, out of scare. It probably didn't hurt, but it was scary. And then the baby who did the pushing in, in hurting someone else, right, there's emotional connection between all of us as humans, they're also scared. I didn't mean to do that. I don't know what's going on. And when they're scolded as being bad, don't do that, that is, is a problem.

Because it doesn't help the child connect their action to their emotion. It creates often this sense of, oh, I'm bad rather than, yeah, when you push someone it scares them. And then when you scare someone else, it's scary yourself because it doesn't feel good to scare someone else. It doesn't feel good to hurt someone else. And so you can take that process of, of helping or guiding your child to

connect with their emotions and their actions at any stage of development. So as an eight year old, it might be, you know, helping the child notice if they're sleepy or if they're frustrated or grumpy or whatever else. And as a 14 year old, you can talk about motivation. When, when do you feel motivated? When do you feel excited, when do you feel inspired, when do you feel stuck, when do you feel frustrated? And these are all conversations and questions that, because as a 14 year old, they're in a stage where they're really looking to start to find self expression and creativity in the world and find their own niche.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean, I am the mother of a 14 year old and it's been really interesting because we do not have, listeners know this, we don't have screen time limits. And I homeschool and there's a lot of merging of interests. And a lot of his, uh, his interests are related to gaming and he has learned a ton about systems and organizing ideas and he makes spreadsheets to go with his games. Like he's, you know, it's, it's a whole thing. But, um, it's just been interesting to notice when he's, he's also got a lot of creative projects and if he's feeling creatively stuck, he'll not want to do anything. Right. He, and then he gets, he's feeling unmotivated and that's when he'll grab a game that he hasn't maybe played in a year and just kind of go all in.

So in some ways it might seem like it's an avoidance behavior, but really for me, I'm looking at it now as it's him kind of resetting. And he often after you know, a couple of days of that, will come out the other side and be motivated to work on one of his projects again. But I kind of am recognizing that cycle and I guess I'm just supporting it. Is there anything, you know, if other parents are listening and they recognize that in their kids as well, that they kind of turn when they're feeling bored or they're feeling like they don't want to do anything. Do you have any advice for parents, um, how to, how to just kind of be with their child in that kind of a circumstance?

Eric: It can be tricky, right? I mean, the first time he did that, how did you feel?

Debbie: Um, well I think I probably felt concerned, you know, like is this just a, it felt like almost giving up, you know. And I was concerned that it was such avoidant behavior that it was going to bring him down more. You know, it was going to not get him where he wanted to be and he might end up feeling even more blue than he was.

Eric: Yeah. It sounds like what you did was you observed maybe, you stayed connected. Did you have conversations with him about it and how it felt or at least just let it happen and observed and?

Debbie: Yeah, I mostly let it happen, observed. Oftentimes it wouldn't lead to any more happiness. So we might have talked about that, you know, just like, oh, it seems like this has been kind of frustrating or you know, that kind of thing. But not, I didn't go too deep into it because he wasn't in the state to have a mom conversation.

Eric: Yeah, totally. Totally. Totally. Yeah. Well, and so that's, that's perfect. I mean, just what you just shared, I feel is, is perfectly appropriate. Because sometimes

they're, they're wanting that support, the mom conversation and sometimes they want to figure it out on their own. And being able to sort of feel into the truth of what's going on in their inner experience. And maybe I think the hardest thing as a parent is to let your child suffer.

Debbie: Yeah.

Eric: Because if you try to help them avoid suffering, they never learn how to navigate suffering themselves.

Debbie: Yeah. Pretty much. I think you just nailed it. You know, who wants to see their child feeling down and uh, turning to something for comfort that we might deem as a bad choice or an unhealthy choice.

Eric: Yeah.

Debbie: Yeah.

Eric: And it might actually make them feel worse because they're avoiding the thing that they want to work on or that they, they might feel obligated to work on in some way. Right. But this is the exact same pattern that, as adults, we have. Where we have our coping mechanisms and we turn away from things. And so I really want to draw that parallel, which is that our child, our children are in many ways going through similar things that we go through. And so when we look at what they're doing, we can look at how we've had that go on in our lives, how we might actively have this going on in our lives in the moment. And, and that might even inspire some reflection or some experimentation with how we act in our lives and creating a life that we want.

Debbie: That's great. Wow. Okay. So before we say goodbye, is there kind of, if there's one thing you hope that parents take from this conversation, one thought that they can ruminate on over the next day or the next week if their child is involved in gaming and they're concerned, what would that be?

Eric: So, yes. There is one thing that I think would be the biggest thing, which is we often engage people that we love when they are experiencing pain, whether it's our partners or our children or friends, with the, the desire to reduce their suffering. And typically we throw ideas or suggestions at them, sometimes even rules, in the context of parenting. And my suggestion for exploration is rather than doing that, if you can be aware of that happening, to open yourselves up to just connecting with the other person and feeling what they're feeling, if they're able to. Which is a really brave thing, especially if it's your child and they're suffering. And being with them. And maybe even if they're in a moment of vulnerability, ask them, you know, what do you want from here? Right. Parenting is, is guiding another human being in learning how to navigate their life. It's not forcing them to go down a train, a set of train tracks that will somehow continue on into a happy future, right? Because if you force them down a set of train tracks they don't want to be on, they're going to go way off the rails as soon as they can.

Debbie: Thank you for that. That was great food for thought. And I love that question, what do you want from this? I've never heard that before. You know, we talk about empathizing and holding a space for our child a lot, but I think that question it's, it feels nonjudgmental and it feels supportive and it sounds like it has the potential for some great discovery. So I love that. Um, okay, so before we go, would you just let listeners know where they can connect with you and learn more about your work?

Eric: Sure, ericlanigan.com, that has links to the gaming course, my other personal growth course called The Big Shift, which is for teenagers up to adults and uh, and then ericlanigan.com has my own one on one coaching work as well.

Debbie: Fantastic. Well, Eric, thank you so much. This was a really interesting conversation. We, as I said, I've done episodes on screen time, I had Jordan Shapiro here on the show recently to talk about his book, The New Childhood, and we talked about helping our kids engage with technology and, and games in a healthier way. But I think this took that conversation to a completely different emotional level, which I just really appreciate. So thank you again for coming onto the show today.

Eric: Thank you for having me, Debbie.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Eric Lanigan's website](#)
- [Making Peace with Gaming online course*](#)
- [The Big Shift online course](#)
- [Blake Boles](#)
- [A Conversation with Blake Boles on Unschooling and Self-Directed Learning](#) (podcast episode)
- [Asher Talks About the Pros and Cons of Banning Video Games](#) (podcast episode)