

The Columbian Life

Section D

SUNDAY, JULY 2, 2006

Today's weather picture by **Connie Zhu, 9**, Vancouver, Ilahee Elementary School



Castles, sheep and The King

I recently spent a week in Ireland, and I can honestly say that I have never been to any place in the world where it's so easy to partake of the local culture, by which I mean beer.

Ireland also contains history, nice people, enormous quantities of scenery and a rich cultural heritage, including (more on this later) Elvis.

DAVE BARRY



Geographically, Ireland is a medium-sized rural island that is slowly but steadily being consumed by sheep. It consists mostly of scenic pastures occasionally interrupted by quaint

towns with names such as (these are actual Irish town names) Ardfert, Ballybunion, Coole, Cullybackey, Dingle, Dripsey, Emmoo, Feakle, Fishguard, Gweedore, Inch, Knockaderry, Lack, Leap, Lusk, Maam, Meentullynagarn, Muff, Newmarket-on-Fergus, Nutt's Corner, Oola, Pontoon, Rear Cross, Ringaskiddy, Screeb, Sneem, Spiddle, Spink, Stradbally, Tang and Tempo.

These towns are connected by a modern, state-of-the-art system of medieval roads about the width of a standard bar of hotel soap; the result is that motorists drive as fast as possible in hopes of getting to their destinations before they meet anybody coming the other way.

The only thing that prevents everybody from going 120 mph is the nationwide system — probably operated by the Ministry of Traffic Safety — of tractors being driven very slowly by old men wearing caps; you encounter these roughly every two miles, rain or shine, day or night.

As an additional safety measure, the roads are also frequented by herds of cows, strolling along and mooing appreciatively at the countryside, reminding you very much of tour groups.

A typical Irish town consists of several buildings, one of which is always a bar, called a "pub." Next to this there will typically be another pub, which is adjacent to several more pubs.

Your larger towns may also have a place that sells food, but this is not critical.

Inside the pubs, you will usually find Irish people, who are very friendly to strangers, especially compared with the British, who as a rule will not voluntarily speak to you until you have lived in Britain for a minimum of 850 years.

The Irish, on the other hand, will quickly start a conversation with you, and cheerfully carry it on at great length, with or without your help.

Just happy to be here, sir

One evening, in a busy Dublin pub, I watched an elderly, well-dressed, cap-wearing gentleman as he sat in the corner and, for two solid hours, struck up a lively conversation with every single person or group who sat within 10 yards of him, including a group of German tourists, only one of whom spoke even a little English.

The man spoke to them in a thick brogue on a variety

BARRY, page D8



Photos by MIKE SALSBURY/The Columbian

The Dukarts of Hazel Dell have the kind of family room setup that sparks debate among scholars, scientists and doctors concerned about the potential effects of video-game playing on our society. From left, parents Stephanie and Matt play games religiously with their children, Briayne, 9, and Katja, 12. Briayne, standing, is using an EyeToy component to immerse herself in a virtual world.

The family that games together

More parents and kids are finding common ground at the video-game controller, but some experts are wary

Gavin Klug, 7, left, plays a game on a Nintendo Game Cube with his mother, Molly, as his 5-year-old sister, Kitty, plays on the computer in the family's Salmon Creek home.



By **BRETT OPPEGAARD**
Columbian staff writer

Consider video-game play as a giant cultural experiment in progress and Stephanie and Matt Dukart among the surprising results so far.

Dinner at the Dukarts' means a meal made from scratch. Homework has been done. The dining room table has been set, and the Hazel Dell family is sitting together, under a large picture window, lit only by the sun, talking about the day.

When that evening ritual is done, the two girls — 12-year-old Katja and 9-year-old Briayne — politely pick up the dishes and put away leftovers.

"I'm going for a smoke," Stephanie says to her husband, Matt. "What are you going to do?" He responds with a dramatic pause, strictly for comedic purposes, "I don't know. ... Let's play some games!"

Katja begins clapping. This part of the nightly routine is as ingrained in the Dukarts' schedule as eating together around the dinner table. While Stephanie finishes her cigarette on the front porch, Matt and the children file into the family room for a scene that only could be happening in the most modern of times.

The curtain is drawn. Computers in three side-by-side cabinets and a 27-inch TV flash and flicker with different video games. The Dukarts will be in this spot, physically together, most of the night. But they'll surge apart into marvelous new worlds, exploring the mysteries of ever-expanding cyberspace. On weekends, unless something really pressing arises, this becomes an all-day affair.

Matt, 30, and Stephanie, 40, heavily played video games as children, and their passion remains steadfast as adults. The Dukarts turned out OK, they argue. They are happy with their lives. Their children are happy. So who's to judge how people should best spend their time? If their hobby were baseball-card collecting or antique shopping, would anyone be concerned about what they are doing? Besides, as video games are spreading nationally among a second generation of heavy users — 30 years post "Pong" — the Dukarts have first-hand experience to guide them through the parental choices for their children.

The Dukarts are among the third of American parents who now play video games, with 80 percent of those players involving their children, according to a recent study by the Entertainment Software Association. Gamers, regardless of age, typically play an hour a day, while parents and children are doing this activity together for an average of nine hours per month.

The Dukarts blew up "Space Invaders" as children, fought characters to the death in "Mortal Kombat" as teenagers and now, as adults, play "Diablo II." They haven't committed any violent crimes, nor have their children. Instead of anti-social behavior, the Dukarts enjoy parties. And when they are gaming, just stay at home and keep to themselves.

Dimitri Christakis, co-director of the Child Health Institute at the University of Washington as well as a pediatrician, says he considers the

Did you know?

More than 60 percent of parents surveyed by the Entertainment Software Association say that video games are a positive part of their children's lives.

FAMILY, page D8

Comedians take talk shows to Internet audience

Bill Maher, Tom Green explore fledgling medium

By **ROGER CATLIN**
The Hartford Courant

The comedian who hosts HBO's "Real Time With Bill Maher" is supposed to be taking a hiatus until Aug. 25. But Maher is spending part of his time off behind the desk of another talk show, appearing on a different screen.

Tom Green, meanwhile, had trouble amassing a big audience with his talk show on MTV three years ago, so he's starting another one, also on the same new medium — broadband computer.

Their Internet-only talk shows come as TV networks experiment with making scripted shows available online for free.

Initial reports found that shows available at ABC's Web site (www.abc.com) were viewed more than 11 million times the first month of the experiment. That compares with 6 million downloads of "Desperate Housewives," "Alias" and "Lost" for \$1.99 each on iTunes since October.

Even more heartening for the network was that 87 percent of those responding in an exit poll in the first week of the two-month trial could remember the advertisers who sponsored the episodes watched.

As on the ABC site, advertising on Maher's show, which debuted this month at Amazon.com, may be more subtle and less frequently interrupting than on commercial TV. But it's still there, down to its title, "Amazon Fishbowl With Bill Maher."

It's no secret that most of the guests are authors or musicians who have products being sold at Amazon.

But like his cable show, Maher is still free to write his usual topical monologue to start the show and throw irreverent questions at his guests.

"Fishbowl" is an amusing enough way to pass a half hour if you're sitting

at the computer shopping for books. But Green's show on ManiaTV.com, also shot in Hollywood, is something else altogether.

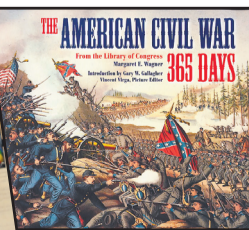
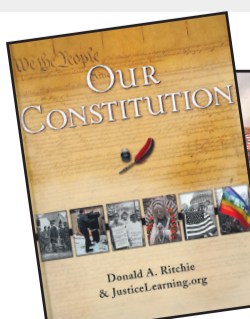
He uses the same desk from his failed MTV show, this time installed in his apartment, which has been retrofitted with lights and cameras to become a modest studio. Most of "The Tom Green Show" is spent sitting around, waiting for calls to come in from whatever guests Green can get.

The first week featured cranky skateboarder Jeremy Klein, who nursed a beer while all the calls came in for "American Idol" contestant Ace Young.

your Guide:



Travel: Angling traditions endure in remote Maine village /D4



Books: Coffee-table books worth perusing for the Fourth /D10

Coming Monday:

Your guide to the area's free outdoor movies /D1

DAVE BARRY is a columnist for the Miami Herald. His classic column was originally published Aug. 6, 1995. He is currently taking a leave of absence from writing his weekly humor column. Write to him c/o The Miami Herald, One Herald Plaza, Miami FL 33132.

Barry:

From page D1

of topics for several minutes while they looked at him with the bright, polite smiles of people who do not have a clue what is being said to them. When he finished, they conferred briefly in German, and then the one who spoke a little English said, quote, "Everyone is pleased that he or she is welcome."

You definitely feel welcome in Ireland. But there's more to do there than just talk to Irish people in pubs. You can also drive around the countryside, alternately remarking "Look, sheep!" and "Here's another tractor!" You can visit a bunch of old castles built by the Normans, who at one point conquered Ireland despite being called the "Normans," which is, let's face it, not an impressive-sounding name. It's kind of like being conquered by the "Fred's."

Probably the best-known castle is the one in the town of Blarney, which contains the famous Blarney Stone. To get to it, you have to climb steep, narrow, tourist-infested steps to the top of the castle; there, a local man holds you as you lean out over the castle wall and kiss the Blarney Stone. Legend has it that if you do this, you will give the man a tip.

Also at a castle in a town called Kilkenny I saw a local radio station doing a live remote broadcast, featuring a Frozen Food Challenge in which a resident had to answer a multiple-choice question on the history of refrigeration. She got it right and won a hamper of frozen foods.

"Brilliant!" she said. But in my opinion the cultural highlight of the trip occurred in the town of Ennis, where a pub called Brandon's

had a sign outside that said "Traditional Irish Music."

This turned out to be a traditional Irish Elvis impersonator.

I realize that there are literally thousands of quality Elvis impersonators, and I'm sure you've seen some excellent ones, but I am here to tell you that this one, in this unremarkable town in western Ireland, was beyond question the worst Elvis impersonator in world history.

He sang along to a tape of instrumental Elvis tunes, which he played on a sound system that he never, not once in two solid hours, got adjusted right.

Every time he'd start singing a song, the sound system would screech and honk with feedback; Elvis would then whirl around and spend minutes at a time unsuccessfully adjusting various knobs while he mumbled the lyrics, so that for most of the evening all you saw was Elvis' butt, accompanied by screeching and honking and vague off-key singing.

Often, by the time he'd finished twiddling the knobs, Elvis had lost track of what song he was singing; he'd frown into the distance, trying various tunes until he thought he was on the right track, at which point the screeching and honking would start up, forcing Elvis to whirl back around, like a man being attacked by bees, and treat the audience to another lengthy view of his butt.

The crowd, which I will frankly admit was consuming alcoholic beverages, enjoyed this performance immensely, cheering wildly at the end of each song.

They like their fun, the Irish.

I'm definitely going back some day.

Maybe I'll rent a tractor.

Family:

From page D1

rise of video games in this country a curious outcropping of human behavior that deserves closer examination. The first wave of game players has grown up and had children. Technology, in turn, is being spread to the second wave even faster. No one is sure how this is going to turn out for society.

"There are video games now for kids as young as 2," he says. "Parents are being sold a lot of misinformation, a lot of outlandish educational claims that are totally unsubstantiated. ... We need to have a public discussion (about the issue). In the meantime, we should be exercising caution."

New technologies historically have raised suspicions. Socrates argued around 400 B.C. that writing was inferior to speech and that it would destroy the capabilities of individual minds. Similar condemnations have been made about radio, movies, popular music and television.

Academics, doctors and scientists today are struggling to understand and keep up with the frenetic innovations of the video-gaming industry, meaning mixed opinions and an array of potential impacts tend to muddle projections.

One of the country's prominent video-game scholars, Joshua Fouts at the University of Southern California, regularly plays "World of Warcraft" online with his father, a professor at Central Washington University, and a sister, a professor at the University of Tennessee. His other sister, Rachel Carrico, a former middle school teacher who lives in Vancouver, chooses not to play video games much while she stays at home to raise her children.

Fouts says he considers this era of human development rich with unprecedented opportunities perpetually being generated by new technologies. As a father of two toddlers, though, he limits television and video games in his household to an hour a week as a special treat.

"I think it's really important that our kids are fluent in technology, and part of that ability is being able to immerse yourself in it," he says. "Yet every parent has the responsibility to do that in a managed way."

Electronics everywhere

Children between the ages of 8 and 18 are spending about six hours per day with electronic media, according to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation study, with two-thirds having television in their rooms and about a third with computers. More than 60 percent of parents surveyed by the Entertainment

The debate

What is a parent's role in managing the video-gaming habits of their children?

■ On one side:

Kids love to play video games. It keeps them busy, contained and out of trouble. They are having fun, and it's an activity that families can do together.

■ On another side:

Just like television can be an ominous baby sitter, so can video games. There are concerns about what too much time spent in front of a video screen steals from the rest of life. Games, meanwhile, are being fingered as root causes of societal problems ranging from violent behavior to obesity to an inability for children to maintain focus.

■ How to get involved:

Carefully log your family's video-gaming activities for a week or two. Count up the amount of time spent with electronic media versus other things, including progress toward long-term goals. Evaluate the balance.

Software Association, in a different study, say that video games are a positive part of their children's lives.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, though, recommends that children spend no more than two hours a day engaged with electronic media, including watching television and playing video games. Christakis of the Child Health Institute says that the exposure children are getting to electronic media today should be considered a public health issue, akin to smoking. Overwhelming evidence also suggests that violent imagery in games — even cartoon violence, he says — promotes increased aggression. He claims that's a link just as strong from a scientific standpoint as the relationship between tobacco and lung cancer.

Fouts is one of those more skeptical about a connection between violence and video games, saying that society is always looking for a scapegoat, instead of taking ownership of its problems.

"(Video games) are not ruining our kids, ruining marriages, any more than any other device done to excess," he says. "If kids are locked away in their rooms, and parents are disengaged, I see that as the real issue. ... While I'm a big proponent of the fun and opportunities provided by video games, that should in no way be a substitute for parenting."

Fouts acknowledges that video games are "super-engaging," a synthesis of books, puzzles and television that connects the allure of a narrative story to gorgeous movie-like imagery to short-term goals that always seem to be reasonably within reach.

"It would be very easy to go from one hour to 14 hours in a day," he says. "I can see doing it, if I didn't have other obligations. ... We live in a very busy world. It's a challenge for parents to find quality time with their kids. I suggest everything (should be done) in moderation."

The Dukarts of Hazel Dell say they simply have a lot of free time and that video games are how they choose to entertain themselves.

They met online, and their lives predominately revolve around virtual worlds.

Matt, a mortgage banker who works on commission, acknowledges regularly spending more hours in a week playing games than trying to generate business. Stephanie, a homemaker, is president of the Lakeshore Elementary School PTA and often helps with other activities involving her children, such as soccer, a program for gifted students, track, the Science Olympiad and school plays. But even with housework, cooking and other domestic chores, she says she still finds a lot of time to play video games because that is what she chooses as her recreation.

The couple realizes not all parents feel the same way. When kids come over to play games, the Dukarts make sure the other parents approve of the choice just as they would with a movie or television show.

Video games are attractive entertainment options for many reasons. Molly Klug, 39, of Vancouver says she revels in the social aspects. She met her husband online, and when she moved here from Spokane in 2002, she found it difficult to meet people.

Feeling isolated and lonely, she started playing an online video game. That made her feel like she was part of a community again.

She met and interacted with people from throughout the world, for 30 to 60 hours a week, and had a lot of fun in the process. Then, she had children.

"For me, staying at home, is really kind of boring," she says. "It's a dull life. ... Something I keep in mind, though, is that I need to set an example. I could be reading or doing crafts. A lot of the (virtual) stuff is not very interactive. It's just performing a task that the people who designed the game have set out for you. A lot of it doesn't seem creative or innovative. It's just stimulus, response, stimulus, response."

Restricting game time

Klug volunteers at her children's schools and with the PTA, but she still plays 20 to 30 hours of games a week — usually when her children are sleeping, at school or playing their own games.

She generally restricts her children to an hour a day. Yet her 7-year-old son occasionally plays longer, as much as four hours at a time. Klug and her husband, Rob, discourage that.

"We don't want our kids playing computers for hours

and hours or sitting in front of the (television) for hours and hours," she says. "We want them to do something more constructive."

Christakis of the Child Health Institute believes that media, and video games in particular, are having a profound effect on today's children in a wide array of areas.

"Obesity, aggression, attentional problems, use of alcohol and drugs, early initiation into sex," he says. "These are important health issues. ... The real challenge is not to get rid of TV or video games, (which) aren't going away, but to define ways that media can figure positively in the lives of children."

Instead of focusing on arbitrary time restraints, he suggests spending more effort on examining content and the context in which the games are being used.

Central questions he asks: "Are children playing an inordinate number of hours on their own? Or are they playing an appropriate amount, with their parents, to foster development or just have plain old clean fun?"

The Dukarts contend that they are focused on the latter.

"We have good kids and know what their limitations are," Stephanie says. For them, that means their children, 9 and 12, can watch "CSI" but not "The Sopranos," go to movies such as "Braveheart" but not "Sideways." They can read Stephen King novels but not any of the works of John Irving. Video games that involve killing creatures or even war games, such as "Medal of Honor," are fine because the action has a positive and

sometimes historically based purpose. But the Dukarts stay away from the more racy or criminally minded titles, such as "Grand Theft Auto," and the negative connotations of that kind of content. The Dukarts say their kids are well-behaved, well-liked, talkative, friendly and physically fit and do well in school.

Most of the kids in Katja's program for gifted students are involved in games constantly, Katja says. She adds, "You can play video games a lot and still not be a lazy person or a slacker."

Matt says, "People like us are functional. It doesn't ruin our lives. Some people collect stamps. We play games. That's our release. ... I don't think this is going to damage (kids). There is no way to stop them from being exposed to (video games and the provocative issues they present). If we don't explain it to them properly, then someone else will explain it, maybe not properly."

Stephanie says she also is convinced that video games improve logic and problem-solving skills as well as hand-eye coordination.

She thinks that exposure to technology will be critical to her children's growth and even give them a competitive edge.

"I have never denied them technology, because that's what their lives are going to be," Stephanie says. "This is the future."

BRETT OPPEGAARD writes general-interest features for *The Columbian*. He can be reached at brett.oppegaard@columbian.com and 360-759-8028.


BEING MEDIA SAVVY

Five questions parents can use to evaluate the media that their children consume:

1. Who is the author and what is the purpose of this message?
2. What techniques are used to attract the child's attention?
3. What lifestyles, values and points of view are represented?
4. How might different people (women, children, various racial and ethnic groups) interpret this message?
5. What is omitted from this message?

Source: Renee Hobbs, communications professor at Babson College, from The American Academy of Pediatrics Web site, www.aap.org

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7/2

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