By Jeff Graham

The world of video games has all the glitz and glamour of show business: expensive company parties, celebrity guests, and trendy offices with amenities galore. Obviously, the glitz is hard for many prospective employees to ignore, but behind the oversized flat panel monitors and indoor basketball courts are the difficulties: an ultra competitive work environment, long hours, and an atmosphere generally indifferent to faith and spirituality.

For Mark Matthews, who works as a software engineer at Electronic Arts Burnaby campus, it's a constant challenge to integrate his Catholic faith into such a secular environment.

"Many of the highest grossing video game titles can pull in hundreds of millions of dollars a year. That can put a lot of pressure on people to perform, and can sometimes subtly threaten your faith. With my work, I have to keep Christ at the center, because only He can help me to do the best possible work that I can, but more importantly, He keeps me focused on the eternal things in my life, and keeps the rest of my life in balance too."

Matthews explained that it isn't always obvious how his faith should be integrated into his work, but does his best when opportunities arise. During one such occasion, he saw a co-worker watching EWTN on their computer and he promptly started asking questions about faith. He said his co-worker was excited upon learning that Mark was Catholic, and Mark explained that their conversations about faith became a welcome break in an environment where sensory overload is the norm.

"Most of these companies do fantastic and glamorous work," he said. "But because these games are so polished and well done, it's really easy to get distracted from spiritual things."

The distractions come from more than just the video games. At the Electronic Arts offices in Burnaby, employees are treated to haircuts, dry cleaning, an indoor and outdoor basketball court, multiple weightroom facilities, beach volleyball, as well as outdoor soccer. The offices also feature small living room type areas for employees to relax, and full coffee bars to indulge a craving for a latte or an Americano.

"It's a very competitive environment, and studios want to attract talent. Many strive to make their employees very comfortable and offer things like free meals, on site fitness facilities, free classes, and movie nights," he said.

Matthews explained that the company tries to make their employees as comfortable as possible, because of the long hours they often have to put in.

"I think it's very much like any other secular workplace, but maybe a bit more difficult because I find there are fewer Christians around than in other industries I've worked in. I try to pray daily for opportunities to share my faith, and usually find them in the little

things. Being honest about who I am and trying to live a life of virtue are both vital to witnessing in the workplace. It can also be discouraging when I encounter people with anti-Christian values. It's only been through my regular prayer life with Jesus that I've been able to keep things in balance and maintain a hopeful optimism."

Matthews also sees pitfalls in letting work consume too much of his day to day life.

"The artistic work in and of itself is inherently good, but there's sometimes a temptation from pride to work too hard, and let it consume your life, and make success at your career more important than God. However, I try to keep a regular prayer time and let my faith organize the events of my life. Much of the time that means not working too much overtime and turning work into an idol."

Originally from Saskatoon, Mark did his undergraduate studies in engineering physics at the University of Saskatchewan before moving on to the University of Calgary for his Masters and Doctoral studies in computing science. Interspersed in those years was one year of campus ministry and one summer spent at Madonna House in Combermere Ontario. An avid traveler, Mark even spent a couple months doing missionary work in the Gambia, in Africa.

For Matthews, the contrast between the poverty in Africa and the simplicity of Madonna House with his current place of work is shocking.

"I've heard many people say that making games is a dream job, and in many ways, I suppose it is, but it's a huge shift from my experience in Africa where people there might get paid $100 a month at a job if you were extremely lucky."

He said his missionary experience in Africa has done more to shape his life than many people realize.

"The biggest thing I learned from my Missionary work was to simply just do it. There's nothing magical about being a missionary, it just means simply getting your butt in gear and organizing practical ways to spread the gospel. I realized that's something I could do anywhere, and many of my gifts would be unused if I became a full time missionary in Africa and so I decided to focus my efforts at home where I could be most effective. Everyday I go to work with a missionary mindset, looking for spiritual conversations, and looking to evangelize while striving to be the best in my field."

Matthews also explained that living at Madonna House, a community of lay people and priests with houses across Canada, gives him perspective on his work, and on the value of the gifts and talents God has given him.

"My time at Madonna House taught me how to have a reverence for Gods created things, and helped me realize they are inherently good, and to be thankful for them. At work that translates into reminding myself daily to not become unthankful for the perks that I do have at work and ensuring that they don't interfere with being a good Catholic."

Despite the contrast between being a devout Catholic and a video game developer, there is an interesting connection for Mark between a love for the Catholic Church and his current job. Since high school, Mark had a love for art, and during his university years Catholic art inspired him to begin creating his own religious art. His love for art also inspired him to do his masters thesis and doctoral work on computer graphics.

Matthews explains that a love for art fed his faith, and played a huge part in his career path.

"As a kid growing up I was always mesmerized by computer graphics and the virtual worlds that could be created purely through the expression of the science of light. I've always been a very visual person and being able to create beautiful image gives me a real sense of reward. Being interested in sciences growing up, computer graphics seemed like a natural choice for me. However, it wasn't until university that I got more into the traditional arts, and through this I gained a real sense of appreciation for our Catholic heritage of art."

Matthews also explained that working in the video game industry has had some notable positive effects on his faith, in that it gave him an outlet for his creativity, which in turn, gives him a greater appreciation for God's creation.

"I don't think that man is complete unless he has a chance to create. God is a creator and we share in Gods image, therefore we are creators. What I do in my specialty of graphics is take my understanding of Gods created world, and try to re-create a small part of that inside of a computer. It's a very poor replica compared to His creation, but it gives me a greater appreciation of the created world."

"Computer graphics are perfect for me, because they combine my love of science with my love of art. There's a natural beauty in creation, and studying science and graphics lets me appreciate that. It may sound odd, but making video games incorporates a lot of science. There's a strong desire to make the graphics more and more realistic, and to do so, you need to incorporate more and more science, and more and more art," he said. "I think it's a real desire written on the human heart to create, be it music, machines, art, or whatever. I feel a great sense of fulfillment when I can create something that looks great. I personally find a lot of reward in being able to use my education in physics to create realistic graphics games that are a lot of fun, and it's also great to be able to work on something that I am proud of and has some public recognition."

Fortunately for Matthews, he has been able to work on games that have had little to no violent or objectionable content in them. He said the question of violence in video games is a complicated one, and may not be as clear cut as some people think.

"Both Shakespeare's plays and the Bible contain violence, yet are regarded as good. I think there are times when violence is acceptable in movies: when it's not gratuitous, and there to support a story that teaches a moral. Similarly, I think the same thing could be

said of violence in video games. When it's used to support a good plot, and isn't gratuitous, it could be acceptable. Unfortunately, I think very few games fall into that category, and often the violence is present to satisfy some baser desire for revenge and power that isn't healthy at all."

Matthews isn't convinced Christian games can gain a stronghold in the industry, but feels they are probably worth the effort, saying that he thinks more people should try to produce those types of games.

"Making Christian games is akin to saying you want to make American games. It's such a wide genre that it's really hard to nail it down, so what we really need are more Christian game designers with well formed consciences making games about everything from A to Z. Then I think you would have Christian games permeating the industry."

Matthews sees potential in the much maligned gaming industry to have a positive effect on youth, but is well aware of the negative effects they can have.

"A video game can have a positive effect in the same way that a movie can have a positive effect. But, one always has to keep in mind that any technology which has a great ability for good, usually has an equal ability for evil. The scalpel blade that so quickly help the surgeon to heal can become a killing instrument in the hands of another," he said. "The single greatest negative effect that I've seen video games having on people is escapism and time wasting. It's so easy to get sucked into these things and spend a great deal of time on them, when they really should be living a real life, instead of a simulated life. Massively Multiplayer Role Playing Games are notorious for these, with rare cases of people dying in Korea from playing too long. I think it's important to limit the amount of time we play and I personally wouldn't want my kids playing a lot of video games some day."

"By the same token, a video game might allow you to experience something, such as parachuting off a plane into a WWII battlefield that you may never be able to experience so vividly, and so perhaps doing this might give you an appreciation for what war vets have done for our country. Games engage our imagination, and offer a new form of entertainment, and entertainment is good, when it's moral and within reason."

Matthews feels that video games, like many other of Gods gifts, are meant to be enjoyed within reason. He encourages people to play video games, but said that the amount of time spent on them, and which games are chosen to be played, should be governed by prudence.

"I'd say play edifying games within reason. There' nothing inherently wrong with video games in and of themselves, but watch how much time you spend playing them," he said. "Prayerfully consider if there's something else better you couldn't be doing with your time if you find yourself spending a lot of time playing them."

Matthews has words of encouragement for Catholics considering getting involved in gaming and the gaming industry, saying that companies need more people to stand up for what's right.

"Live out your faith boldly and don't sacrifice on anything, neither in your personal conduct nor in the quality and morality of work that you do," he said. "When you are in a position to make creative decisions, make decisions that will uplift people. Although it may sell, don't appeal to people baser desires of sex and violence. Sell your game on a good story and quality of gameplay, and be creative and passionate about what you do. If you feel this is a calling from God for you, then follow it!"