

Do "Killergames" kill people?

Germany, April 26th, 2002. Students at Gutenberg Gymnasium in Erfurt were awaiting their Abitur exams when Robert Steinhäuser (19) decided to take his life along with that of his teachers and schoolmates. 17 people died in this tragedy^{1,2} erupting vivid public discussions about the motives, reasons and consequences for this action³. Long before the official investigations were completed, politicians quickly found a scapegoat in computer games which glorify violence and the brutal killing of simulated people. But nothing has been done against those later polemically marketed "Killergames" that millions of kids play every day, ever since that incident. Four and a half years later, Bastian B. (18) ran amok in his school in Emsdetten, injuring a few dozen people in the shooting and committing suicide afterwards⁴. Although the prosecution concluded general life frustration as the motive⁵ some politicians again demanded a prohibition of "Killergames". The hot tempered argument of a law against those "Killergames" is still ongoing today, shifting the focus of those unimaginable human tragedies toward a political debate on whether "Killergames" actually inflict violent actions, stimulate the lust to murder or even make penguins fly. Shouldn't we look more closely at the actual reasons behind those killing sprees? Is playing or even owning a "Killergame" reason enough to be seen as a potential mass murderer? And is there any scientific evidence at all linking violent computer gaming to violent real life behaviour?

When a person decides to kill another person or many others, reasons may be manifold, but there is always a comprehensible motive behind such a horrible act. Especially when the offender is still a student who goes to school and hasn't even turned 20 yet, but yet eager to kill his teachers and fellow students, one has to ask even more thoroughly what the motivation was. In a way to prevent those happenings from ever occurring again, the motive has to be clearly investigated, drilled down to its source and addressed reasonably.

¹ Complete report of Kommission Gutenberg-Gymnasium - http://www.thueringer-allgemeine.de/ta/ta_media/ta_KomGut.pdf

² Press release 22/2004 of Thüringer Justizministeriums - <http://www.thueringen.de/de/homepage/presse/12251/uindex.html>

³ Das Erste - Reportage/Dokumentation, 04/21/2004: „Amok in der Schule - Die Tat des Robert Steinhäuser“ - <http://www.swr.de/das-erste/doku/20040421index.html>

⁴ Press release of Innenministerium NRW of 12/14/2006 - http://www.im.nrw.de/pm/141206_1018.html

⁵ Der Tagesspiegel, 11/21/2006, page 1

What would be more helpful than asking the murderer himself why he committed such an action? Clearly, this is naïve and inapplicable in most cases, but in the case of Bastian B., he left us a farewell letter explaining his reasons toward his decision and his view on life⁶. He complains about his unhappiness in a caged world: Forced to adjust to the main-stream society published by the media and told what to do by his teachers, he was restricted to live a life of freedom. Experiences many pupils have despite doing good or bad in school. It was the social background and constraints that led to a situation with no way out and nobody who provided a way out. So, it is and should have been our responsibility (whether we are associated to Bastian B. or not) to help those lost people to find the right path again. In the case of Bastian, it failed and he saw his situation as a battle, in which he had to take revenge on. It is to mention that Bastian B. himself asked for psychological advice several years before he made his decision but he never received any professional help.

By the way, there is no mention of violent computer games or anything of that kind in the letter at all.

Nevertheless, excessive support for a law prohibiting "Killergames" has come from the Bavarian CSU fraction. Günther Beckstein (CSU) even draws the comparison to legally treat "Killergames" like child porn⁷. To come to such a distasteful comparison one has first to define "Killergames". In fact, the propagated term "Killergames" has first been introduced in §131a StGB in November 2002 only to define real-life games like Gotcha, Paintball and Laserdrome. Even so it was widely used in public to defame violent computer games. Only recently in the draft law to propose an accentuation of §131a, the meaning has been extended to virtual "Killergames" and gaming computer programs, that depict barbarous and inhuman violent acts against humans or humanlike characters⁸.

Secondly one may ask what institution will be in charge of determining if a game is worth being a "Killergame" or not. Instead of making the distribution of violent computer games criminally liable,

⁶ "Ich will R.A.C.H.E" by Bastian B. at Telepolis - <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/24/24032/1.html>

⁷ Interview with Günther Beckstein in ZEIT-Zünder - "Auch im Netz gibt es Grenzen" - <http://zuender.zeit.de/2005/48/beckstein>

⁸ Gesetzesantrag des Freistaates Bayern zum Entwurf eines Gesetzes zur Verbesserung des Jugendschutzes - http://www.bundesrat.de/cln_050/SharedDocs/Drucksachen/2007/0001-0100/76-07_%20templated=raw.property=publicationFile.pdf/76-07.pdf

as proposed by the CSU, family minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) has proposed a different approach⁹: An accentuation of the Jugendschutzgesetz to enable indexing violent games prior to a revision by the Bundesprüfstelle für jugendgefährdende Medien (BPjM). It is questionable who will be in charge of that given that the BPjM is responsible for indexing so far. Furthermore movies and games have to undergo a revision by the Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) prior to an indexing anyway. This makes the proposal even more doubtful because the USK, which is in charge of rating computer and video games based on their suitability for certain age groups, has been praised several times by Ursula von der Leyen herself for their excellent work.

Generally speaking, the purpose of laws is to govern the conduct of people as a system of rules to tell them what they are allowed to do and what not. It is not about what they should do or should not do. This is the premise of a liberal democracy. So, to make this difference clear: Killing actual people is something that is not allowed to be done. Playing "Killergames" is something that should or should not be done and therefore responsibility switches from government to parents or that sort. For educational principles the lawmaker may provide assistance but no dictation. Only in severe cases should the government be allowed to intervene but not in general.

From a different perspective the German legal protection for children and young persons is one of the strictest in the world. Yet other European countries do not have the problem to dispute about "Killergames" which again leads us to the question if this is the right stone to turn.

The current debate boils down to the question whether the depiction of violence makes people aggressive. As Edmund Stoiber (CSU) alleges "Killergames stimulate teenagers to kill other people"¹⁰ while on the other hand neutral observers, experts, gamers and the gaming industry disclaim those statements. They state that there is no connection between those games and aggressive behaviour and that shooting games even improve the ability to concentrate and personal

⁹ Heise Online news, 02/13/2007 - <http://www.heise.de/newsticker/meldung/85234>

¹⁰ Spiegel Online report, 11/22/2006 - <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,449970,00.html>

reaction rate as well as develop common visual attentiveness and problem-solving strategies. Adversaries again warn of social solitariness and addiction resulting in declined school achievement. The only sure thing is that shooting games and other video games have experienced a popularity setback and stereotyped for that matter.

On the one hand, gamers often argue that games help to blow off steam and therefore turning one peaceful not aggressive. This is known as "Catharsis"¹¹ used by the Greek philosopher Aristotle: a method of emotional release (in this case: aggression) to avoid the emotion being expressed inadequately (in this case: running amok). But scientists today refute this thesis and say that piling up emotions does not necessarily lead to boiling over with anger. Instead people who bottle up anger and frustration often show depression later on. That's why there is no such aggressive potential that needs to be reduced but there is no evidence that depression leads to violence either.

On the other hand, Wolfgang Bosbach (CDU) fears that the constant consumption of violence in public media lowers people's inhibition level to use violence¹². Sociologists call this phenomenon "Habitus", where non-discursive knowledge is anchored in the body. While the "Habitus"¹³ effect is observable in society, Bosbach's worries of it related to violence are uncommon. It is more the high ideals and expectations of society that causes problems: overdrawn sought-after beauty pressures girls to eating disorder and anorexia; the compulsion to wear certain brands affects financially weaker social classes and causes cliques and gang behaviour, which again trigger mobbing and discrimination; and the immense pressure for scholastic achievements may also turn teenagers in a wrong direction. Furthermore violence in public media may give the audience a differentiated view on violence in real-life, as distasteful war coverage in news seldom affects people to act more violently.

¹¹ Catharsis at Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharsis>

¹² Interview with Wolfgang Bosbach at Spiegel Online - "Wir wollen den Zugang so schwer wie möglich machen" - <http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/0,1518,450173,00.html>

¹³ Habitus at Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitus>

This shows us the power classic media coverage has on society nowadays. In the case of video games, however, not only the depiction or violence causes problems but also the simulation and execution of violent acts in a virtual context. It is still unclear how such circumstances affect people's everyday life and whether simulated actions have connections to real actions at all. So, scientifically we know nothing except the fact of our ignorance. But if those connections do exist, they are based on imitation of virtual consumption. And although imitation is mostly accounted as the result of media consumption, media is only the trigger not the reason. Moreover it is not the solely trigger, as it is the combination of many factors and characteristics that lead people to imitation. This affectation is also known as the psychological term "Suggestion"¹⁴ or in a more special case called "Werther Effect" or "Copycat Suicide"¹⁵, after an increased number of people committing suicide after the release of "The Sorrows of Young Werther" by Goethe. So according to the debate on "Killergames" should the work of Goethe also been prohibited to prevent numerous people from dying?

"Killergames" has become a vivid term to explain the incidents in Erfurt and Emsdetten and because of its vividness it has spread through all media channels and political debates and pushed along. It has become the number one explanation for the school massacres but it is not. Whether the "Killergames" are responsible for those actions or not is not entirely clear. And certainly they are not the only justification to change things. The main problems and reasons leading to this situation lie deep in the structure of our society. They are not that easy to change like passing a law against "Killergames" but they are the ones we should focus on. Society issues and "Killergames" are two different problems but focusing on the latter does not solve the first. We should work on better conditions in schools, show teenagers a good way to handle media coverage and put the teaching in the hands of professionally trained teachers and parents instead of coming to rash decisions based on prejudices and half-truths. It is also the responsibility of politicians to come to a uniform understanding of the underlying problem and to work out a

¹⁴ Suggestion at Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suggestion>

¹⁵ Copycat suicide at Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copycat_suicide

considered solution instead of going after political dispositions and plain populism.

Debating about a law to prohibit "Killergames" is not wrong at all. But as Bastian B. writes in his farewell letter: "No politician has the right to pass laws that prohibit me to do things", a law in this case would have not prevented anything on the contrary. I truly value a government that doesn't accept virtual murder to be common in my youth. But a government that comes to a decision based on imprudent facts and transient leading opinions scares me. Nonetheless all we want is a better place to live where hopefully incidents like Erfurt and Emsdetten will not repeat in the future.

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Afterword:

In an internet based survey which ran along the ARD-Panorama coverage on "Killergames" on Feb 22nd 2007, 99.37 % voted against a prohibition of "Killergames" ^[16]. The Bundesrat decided against an immediate admission of a prohibition of "Killergames" introduced by Bavaria until fall 2007 ^[17].

¹⁶ Das Erste - Panorama Sendung, 02/ 22/2007: „Morden und Foltern als Freizeitspaß - Killerspiele im Internet“ - http://daserste.ndr.de/panorama/umfrage/t_spm-11790_pol-3711494 .html

¹⁷ Heise Online news, 02/21/2007 - <http://www.heise.de/newsticker/meldung/85662>