

Violent Video Games Rated for ‘Everyone’

by Donald Phau

In the wake of the April 26 massacre of 17 students and teachers by a student at a high school in Erfurt, Germany, Schiller Institute Chairwoman Helga Zepp-LaRouche has called for an international United Nations protocol to ban violent video games. Her call followed by two years her February 2000 speech showing that mass slayings like that at Columbine High School in 1999 were a “new violence” encouraged and “trained” by violent movies, videos, and computer games. Unlike in the United States, the national debate in Germany has resulted in initial steps against the “new violence” game market.

On Aug. 1, 2001, the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* had printed a study entitled “Violence of E-Rated Video Games,” confirming Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche’s warnings. The study was conducted by Prof. Kimberley M. Thompson of the Harvard School of Public Health. To be assigned an “E” rating by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) championed by Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.), means the video game is claimed to be suitable for “everyone” six years old and up. The Harvard study showed that 35 games, out of a sample of 55 E-rated video games, “involved intentional violence, and that injuring or killing characters is rewarded or required for advancement.” “Violence” was defined “as acts in which the aggressor causes or attempts to cause physical injury or death to another character.”

That such “ratings” have made video-game regulation more lax in America, during the years that several high-school and middle-school slaughters were committed by youths hooked on violent games, contrasts directly with the case in Germany. In May, the Bundestag (parliament) approved a new amendment to its Youth Protection Law, which put violent video games on an index, which forbids any public promotion and advertisement, as well as sales to Germans under age 18. The German Federal Agency for the Control of Youth-Endangering Material will also be provided with extended powers, staff, and funding, under the amendment. The Erfurt student killer, Robert Steinhäuser, was addicted to violent video games and regularly participated in Internet competitions of the game Counter-Strike, where the player gets points and can win money by either hunting down and killing terrorists, or by playing the

role of a terrorist himself. In the United States, by contrast, the ESRB gave an “E” rating to the video game *Rat Attack*, which Professor Thompson’s study showed to have an average of 8.4 deaths per minute.

Professor Thompson spoke with Don Phau on June 17. An interview with Lt. Col. David Grossman, to whom she refers as an expert, appeared in *EIR*, May 24, 2002.

Interview: Kimberley Thompson

EIR: I found your study startling. I thought that when you buy or rent a E-rated video, it isn’t violent; but your study showed that they can be quite violent. What reactions have you gotten? Many people, for example, Sen. Joe Lieberman, in Congress, say that “ratings” is how we solve the problem with violent video games.

Thompson: The first thing I want to tell you about our study is that we actually quantify the violence, which no one has ever done before; it was unique in the method we set up. We’re going to define violence and then we are going to quantify it. Let’s give people, then, a more informed awareness and actually pay attention to what your kids are actually seeing, playing, and experiencing in the games. Previously, people have only looked at content by subjectively assessing it and not quantifying things the way we did. We quantified the use of weapons, the number of characters that were killed. That’s a very different way of looking at it. I think it’s very important to look at this. Let people have a more informed awareness of what kids are seeing and experiencing in the games.

A lot of times, entertainment just comes in right under the radar screen; parents are not paying any attention to what’s coming in. They make assumptions about it being OK: “It’s fun.” “It’s entertaining.” They make a dichotomy between entertainment and education, which the young kids don’t make. For them, everything they are experiencing is educational and entertaining at the same time. . . .

The reactions that we have gotten span the whole spectrum. You get people saying, “Oh my gosh! We had no idea there’s so much violence.” That’s one group; and then there are other people who say, “This is just fun, it’s entertainment. Why are you looking at it like this? People are just having fun.” We get this whole range.

EIR: You said that *Rat Attack* had 8.4 deaths per minute?

Thompson: Yes. . . . In *Rat Attack*, what you’re trying to do is kill the rats. You’re using nuclear weapons. So, basically, you surround the rats, and then you blow them up. But you don’t know that, as a kid, if you’re just putting boxes around the rats, so maybe it’s not such a big deal. But, because we knew what the game says it’s doing, that

that was violent, and we counted them all. This is what we were doing, that was really different.

Some people said, “Well, there are differences between animals and humans.” And we said, “Yes, you’re right, but these were E games, rated for kids six and above.” We don’t know where children can distinguish, really well, between fantasy and reality, and what the impact of these messages are on them, so we’re going to count it all. So you can react a lot of different ways, but the main thing was, it made people think, and that’s what I hoped for. Is the long answer helpful?

EIR: Yes, but it raises questions. Before the ratings, if you were a concerned parent and wanted to know what your kid was watching, you would have to get the video game and watch it yourself. But, if you have a big “E” for “Everyone” on the video, wouldn’t you say to yourself, “Well, I don’t have to watch it. This prestigious Entertainment Software Rating Board has viewed all this stuff and they’re saying this is good for everybody, so why would I have to watch it?”

Thompson: Right. There are certainly some people that would approach it that way, and they may do the same thing for movies; i.e., if it’s “G” (for “General Audiences”), it’s fine for everyone.

I think that people don’t pay as much attention as they should. There is a lot of education that is happening, not just for kids, but from all media, to the extent that people read too much into the ratings, they need to definitely be more informed to what the ratings do or do not tell them. That’s why we did the study, because we wanted to make sure that people took a different look at it.

EIR: How did the entertainment sector respond?

Thompson: They wrote a letter to *JAMA*. That was the one formal reaction that we got from them. They, in general, didn’t have a problem with our study. We didn’t say that video games are bad, that this is the worst thing for kids, ever. We’re not saying that, and I would never say that. But what’s important, is that, as the entertainment media take more and more of our children’s time and attention, and if you compare that to the amount of time they actually spend interacting with real people, including their parents, and that ratio continues to become less and less favorable toward real people, we really need to think carefully about what’s in the media. I think the best way to do that is to raise people’s awareness to what they don’t know and try to make them look. That’s been the strategy that we tried.

EIR: I think it’s very important that people should know this. At a conference two years ago, Helga Zepp-LaRouche presented Pokémon as being quite violent.

Thompson: But it’s still very popular with, especially, very young kids.

EIR: I went out and got the game. I asked myself, “Okay, what is there about this thing?” Well, one character after another obliterates the other character. What’s the difference between Pokémon and Mortal Combat? That you don’t have blood flowing everywhere?

Thompson: Well, it’s cartoon violence. The industry—and this is true of movies, too—they tend to think that cartoon violence is OK, because it’s entertainment. That’s the question that people should ask: “Is it OK? What is it doing? What kind of message is it giving to kids?” I’m not going to presume to answer that for everybody’s kids, but I certainly think that one should ask.

Did you see the Pokémon movie? Because, the movie is all fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting, until you get to the very end. Then, they make this point at the end that fighting is not the answer. People were claiming, “It’s a great movie, because it’s got this great message.” It’s such an irony. Go rent it and see. It’s the first one—not the second one—which is extremely violent. People were writing these reviews about this great message about not fighting. But you have to watch the whole movie just to get to that message. It’s just fighting, fighting, fighting, fighting. I think a lot of people just don’t see the world the way their kids do. I think it’s important to really get the dialogue going.

EIR: A kid named Robert Steinhäuser just murdered 17 students and teachers in Erfurt, Germany. He was totally immersed in the video game, “Counter-Strike.” The Germans are taking this very seriously, and they just passed a law banning advertising and promotion of these type of games.

Thompson: I know, I saw it. I saw their statement, I’ve been getting e-mails about this. But it’s not isolated. Columbine set off the whole Federal Trade Commission investigation of the media, under Clinton. The problem is, we don’t know how many incidents, where video games have had an impact or not. We just don’t know that, because no one is studying that in a quantitative way. There are some very strong advocates. You might want to talk to Lt. Col. David Grossman.

EIR: I have. The problem in the United States, is that the entertainment business has such a tremendously powerful lobby, Hollywood, with a lot of money. Look at the effect of the rating system that Senator Lieberman set up, right after Columbine. After Columbine video-game sales were continuing, each year, to fall; but after Lieberman’s rating system was set up, sales shot up again, sales doubled.

Thompson: Mmmm!

EIR: With Lieberman’s rating system, it put the stamp of approval that these video games are OK, and we can get them for our kids. If you look at where Lieberman got the funding for his campaign, the big money from Hollywood came, after he set the rating system up.