

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE DIALOGUE

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“VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES – NOT CHILD’S PLAY!” CHARGES THE INTERFAITH CENTER ON CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) is a powerful coalition of almost 300 organizations representing \$110 billion in combined pension and endowment assets; ICCR and its member organizations focus on important societal issues and exert influence at the corporate ballot box (and in other creative ways). ICCR notes that it is “passionate about peace and global harmony,” and frequently challenges large companies on issues such as militarization of space, weapon sales and nuclear proliferation. (United Church of Christ is an active member.)

Today, ICCR is focused on a violence issue that is very close to home – in fact, in our homes – and that is affecting America’s young in very negative ways: Gratuitous violence in many of the popular video games that our younger children play on a regular basis.

ICCR begins its focus by asking, “Why in a wartime environment with over 1,000 deaths and 16,000 casualties from the war in Iraq are we now focusing on violent video games...*child’s play?*” Because extensive ICCR research found that most video games marketed to children are rooted in a culture of sex and violence...with graphic murders, criminal strategies, hit man skills, exploitive sex...these are clearly not (and should not be) “child’s play!”

An ambitious campaign is underway to change the operating environment for game manufacturers and retailers, to prohibit violent games from being sold to young people (underage minors). This is the type of grassroots campaign that every parent and grandparent caregiver and other interested parties could join in – and begin to make a difference.

ICCR’s staff researched the interactive game industry, contacting the largest retailers and producers of video games for information, and for discussion. Regrettably, a pattern soon emerged regarding minors’ access to violent games:

- (1) Game producers said retailers are responsible for regulating age-appropriate games.
- (2) Retailers thought game “raters” and game designers had the power to control and oversee game sales.

- (3) Game licensors said they had no culpability in policing game sales.
- (4) Everyone involved in the huge interactive game industry expressed the belief that parents were responsible for protecting children playing video games.

OK – since no one is responsible, we can take charge! Each of us can play a role in this important societal issue and help to fashion acceptable resolutions – in order to protect America’s precious younger children. We can certainly join in an education campaign for parents. We can stimulate dialogue so that adults are more aware of the issue.

Consider this from ICCR’s report: One of the best selling games at retail is “Grand Theft Auto III,” which rewards players for stealing cars, assaulting police officers and beating workers.

Another – “Carmageddon” – requires game players to run down pedestrians, and to complete all levels of the game, one must “kill” 33,000 people! And this: “Ethnic Cleansing” features KKKers, Neo-Nazis and other social misfits “killing” opponents (such as Israeli settlers, or people of color). One million players have logged 7 million hours playing this on-line game.

Is this dangerous? To those who would say “this is child’s play, harmless fun,” ICCR would point them to the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, regular e-game players who were apparently obsessed by “Doom,” making a customized version of the simulation of the tragedy soon to play out: The Columbine High School killings (1999). The teenage Washington area sniper – Lee Malvo – was apparently trained to kill by playing sniper games, notes ICCR.

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“Violent Video Games – Not Child’s Play!”**Charges the ICCR****(continued)**

What about right here at home, in Riverhead Township? What are local, popular chain retailers making available to young people? What do we know about minor access to violent games? There are certainly many local outlets for the games; major retailers of video games include **Best Buy, Blockbuster, Circuit City, Hollywood Entertainment, Target, Toys R Us, K-mart, and Wal-Mart**. This is a big business for creators and retailers: The interactive entertainment industry has earnings of \$6+ billion for software and about the same amount for sales of console games just within the United States. To put this in perspective, about five years ago the *entire* home video retail rental business totaled roughly \$6 billion in annual revenues.

At retail, the **Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association (IEMA)** indicates sales in local stores top \$10 billion, not including hardware (equipment for game play). Some financial analysts peg total profits for companies involved as much as \$30 billion! The industry has four important components:

- Designers who create games to be played on video screens (TVs) or on computers;
- “Interactive” manufacturers who design and build the game devices;
- Retailers (such as Wal-Mart and Blockbuster, etc.);
- Licensing organizations that take the important “intellectual properties” represented in games or devices and license these to marketers and manufacturers.

There is a video game ratings system set out by the **Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB)**, consisting of two parts: (1) a rating symbol (age-appropriateness) and (2) content description (elements of the game, such as blood, gore, crude humor, nudity, sexual themes, profanity, intense violence and other attractive characteristics to players). But, says ICCR, this approach has not curtailed sales of “mature-rated” violent games to minors. Indeed, the Federal Trade Commission survey found that 81% of minors could purchase “R-Rated” DVDs.

What can be done? Representatives of ICCR are in dialogue with corporate leaders in the various elements of the interactive game industry; with retailers; individual

organizations within ICCR are filing shareholder resolutions to try to gain broader support for change within [individual] corporations; are attempting to educate corporate boards of directors; and have just sent “request for disclosure” letters to the heads of major retailers. Letters were also sent to manufacturers **Hasbro, Mattel and Nintendo of America**. (The dialogue continues, without real resolution.) Other member organizations are writing articles, discussing the issue in local churches and church councils, and bringing the issue to the attention of parents and caregivers.

Says **Sister Claire Regan of Sisters of Charity of New York** to our Old Steeple community: “We can’t underscore enough that parents are the key gatekeepers for this issue. They need to know the ratings system, be there when children purchase video games to read the packaging, and ultimately observe regularly their children as they play. Parents make better purchasers of these products than their children, who may lack the necessary judgment or maturity. Basically, the industry is not doing a good job to assure that youngsters under 17 cannot buy ‘M’ rated games.”

Concludes ICCR: “So long as corporations in the interactive entertainment industry continue to act without social responsibility in regards to the welfare of children, [ICCR] will continue to prod Corporate America toward serving the common good and protecting ‘our child’s play’.”

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The dialogue is intended to help further understanding
of current events and trends in social and economic justice,
and in corporate social responsibility.

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