

Gabrielle Giffords and NRA are both right about one thing: US culture of violence

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Whatever else is said about the murder of 20 elementary school children in [Newtown, Conn.](#) last year, let no one say – especially at the [Senate Judiciary Committee](#) hearings on gun control today – that those killings were “unimaginable.” Every day, mass killings are imagined, rehearsed, and enacted – virtually – by millions of children and young adults, mostly boys and men, in violent video games. One segment of *Bioshock 2*, for example, invites players to kill defenseless, cowering girls (called Little Sisters) or lure them into a trap where they are mowed down by a machine gun.

[Adam Lanza](#) didn't have to imagine the [Sandy Hook](#) massacre on his own. Others had already imagined it for him.

When [Wayne LaPierre](#), head of the [National Rifle Association](#), pointed a finger at video games and media violence during a news conference after the shootings, it was a calculated effort to distract attention from the gun industry and its powerful lobby. As former [Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords](#) and her husband [Mark Kelly](#) wrote in their [USA Today](#) op-ed announcing the launch of their gun-control superPAC, “We saw from the NRA leadership's defiant and unsympathetic response to the Newtown, Conn., massacre that winning even the most common-sense reforms will require a fight.”

But Mr. LaPierre was also half right. [Glock](#) and Bushmaster give troubled teens and young adults like Lanza the means to kill. But antisocial video games and a wider culture of militarism give them the script.

What LaPierre neglected to say is that the arms industry, the video game industry, and the military are deeply entwined with one another and even, one could argue, allied in values. In many ways, their work together is eroding the distinction between virtual and real killing.

During the [Iraq War](#), [Marines](#) relaxed after conducting search and destroy missions by playing [Call of Duty 4](#) and *CounterStrike*, fielding the same weapons and tactics. [CIA](#) agents and Air Force personnel today kill real people in distant countries using remotely piloted drones, on interfaces modeled on video games, while [US](#) soldiers hone tactical combat skills on video game simulators and use [Xbox](#) joysticks to control real machines in the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the video game industry works closely with the military and gun manufacturers to ensure that their virtual weaponry, from the PM-63 submachine gun to the [C-130](#) gunship, behaves just like the real thing. Some game companies have direct contracts with the [Department of Defense](#), manufacturing hardware and software for military applications.

It's easy to see why the [US Army](#) runs recruitment ads in gamer magazines and maintains a popular online game called *America's Army*.

While the industry denies any link between violent interactive media and real-world beliefs and behaviors, studies have shown that playing violent video games is associated with higher rates of hostility, more pro-violence attitudes, and a decrease in players' ability to empathize with others, particularly those who are suffering.

Computer video games are in fact the most powerful medium ever devised for altering perception and behavior. That's why psychologists use them to help patients overcome post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), why pilots are trained on flight simulators, and why the military uses them to train soldiers.

So what does it mean that millions of boys and young men are spending their free time "training" to kill?

Whether knifing or setting fire to prostitutes in Grand Theft Auto, or mowing down scores of racially stereotyped Arabs in some fictional Middle Eastern country, male video-game players are being taught to associate representations of mass slaughter, torture, and other antisocial acts with play and pleasure. They are being told that to be a "real" man is to come to others heavily armed.

The very idea of moving from room to room with an assault weapon, "clearing" the room by shooting victims in the head, as Lanza did in Newtown, is a convention of the First Person Shooter video game genre. The first such game, Doom, proved so successful at teaching soldiers how to kill that the Marines quickly adapted it for their training program. Prior to their massacre, the [Columbine](#) killers spent countless hours playing and even designing levels on a modified version of the same game.

At his trial last year, [Anders Breivik](#), the Norwegian extremist who murdered 69 people, most of them teenagers, on the island of Utoya, boasted that he had done his weapons training on the military-style First Person Shooter game, [Call of Duty: Modern Warfare](#), which he had played for up to 16 hours a day as "part of my training-simulation." The special gun sight Breivik installed on his rifle was the real version of the virtual one he had used in the game.

The Breivik case reveals how narrow the US debate over gun violence really is. [Norway](#) has stringent gun control laws, and Breivik did his killing with a hunting rifle, not a semi-automatic assault rifle. So tightening restrictions on guns, in a nation that already has hundreds of millions of them in private hands, is both admirable and arguably beside the point. Banning guns alone won't address a pervasive culture of militarism and violence – one that has diminished the ability of children and young adults to distinguish between real and virtual violence, or to care about the difference.

Despite a landmark [Supreme Court](#) decision in 2011, which protected commercial video games as free speech, the Newtown massacre has renewed debate in the Congress and [White House](#) over what, if anything, should – or can – be done to regulate the \$60 billion video game industry, the largest media business in the world.

To his credit, President Obama recently ordered more federal research on possible links between violent video games and real-life violence, and asked Congress to fund it. But he declined to take stronger action.

Two weeks ago, [Vice President Joe Biden](#), who had earlier expressed concern about violent video games, suddenly backed down, after intense lobbying pressure from the industry. He and others seem to have accepted the industry's position that the research linking violent video games to real violence is too "inconclusive" to justify new legislative action.

The industry is fond of saying that no one has yet been able to prove that a specific act of violence was "caused" by someone playing a video game. However, that's like my claiming that cars don't contribute to global warming, because no one has proved that my own SUV has caused the glaciers on [Kilimanjaro](#) to melt. The sources of climate change, and of violence, are in fact multiple. Video games may not cause violence on their own, but they contribute to a culture of violence by modeling antisocial acts and diminishing players' empathic response to others.

They also promote a virulent militarism that subordinates democratic and civic values to a culture of war-making. And here, perhaps, lies the rub. A cynic might ask whether a deliberative body that routinely authorizes billions of dollars for real-world weapons, real-life wars that in just the last decade have left more than 100,000 real people, not virtual ones, dead, is terribly likely to go after an industry that spreads only make-believe violence.

Let us give our elected representatives the benefit of the doubt, and assume that they would. Even so, it is not far-fetched to ask whether our representatives' reluctance to rein in the industry might not stem, at least in part, from their tacit appreciation of how deeply entwined cultures of symbolic violence now are with our national identity and self-understanding as a great military power.

Yet a nation that lives by the sword dies by it, and it matters less and less whether that sword is virtual or real. So long as America continues socializing its young people in a culture of violence and war, whether in video games or in military campaigns abroad, we are unlikely to see an end to tragedies like Newtown or Aurora.

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