

Media, Arms Dealers & Killer Video Games

by Alexander Hartmann

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For years, it has been known that violent video games are among the driving forces behind the “New Violence” in our societies and schools. This was demonstrated again in Erfurt, Germany, on April 26, [2002], when a drop-out pupil who was obsessed with “point-and-shoot” video games, shot and killed 16 people and himself at his former school. The terrible events of that day have triggered huge demonstrations and a national debate in Germany, over the media products of the “New Violence.”

Prompted by the Erfurt events, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, a candidate for the German Bundestag (lower house of parliament), renewed her call, first made in February 2000, for an international protocol banning violent video and computer games (published in this section).

A closer look at the business networks involved in the production and marketing of such games indicates why, despite a mass of evidence, no such action has been taken. Behind the slime-mold of video game-producing studios being created, dissolved, merged, renamed or taken over, there are several big media and even armament corporations that, apparently, no one in the Western governments dares to touch.

‘Military-Industrial Complex’

The largest European producer of such games, presently, is the French Infogrames SA. According to its website, Infogrames was co-founded in 1983 by Bruno Bonnell, who earlier had been involved in developing “the Thomson T07, one of the first computers designed for domestic use.” Thomson is France’s leading defense electronics producer. Sitting on the board of Infogrames, is Thierry Dassault, representing the Dassault Group’s multimedia division. Dassault also is one of the largest defense contractors in France.

In January 2000, Infogrames bought up U.S. toy producer Hasbro’s on-line and off-line interactive game divisions. Since then, Infogrames sucked up Eden Studios and Shiny Entertainment, and is now marketing games like Stuntman, MXRider, Spy Hunter, Terminator, Mission: Impossible, Unreal, and Backyard Sports. Also bought from Hasbro by Infogrames were the rights to the Atari games, which were prominent in the early days of video games, in the 1980s. Hasbro has a link to the American defense establishment of

its own: Before entering the current U.S. administration, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz served on Hasbro’s board.

The big media conglomerates share part of the business with the biggest military producers. The first-person-shooter video game Counterstrike—which apparently was instrumental in programming the young Erfurt killer Robert Steinhäuser—is a product of Sierra Entertainment, a subdivision (studio) of the world’s second largest communications group, Vivendi Universal. Other such studios owned by Vivendi Universal include Blizzard Entertainment and Universal Interactive, all of which produce a large variety of interactive, online, PC and console-based computer games, often of the most violent character.

Many of the games are based on Hollywood film scripts, like Terminator or Mission: Impossible, and rely on “intellectual property rights” sold or leased by the original film producers, who share part of the royalties income and have a lot of political clout. It is no secret that Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.) could bury his Presidential ambitions without Hollywood’s money, and he is not the only one dependent on money and other support from Hollywood.

Vivendi Universal was formed in 2000, through the merger of Vivendi, a French multimedia group, and Edgar Bronfman’s Seagram Co. Ltd. Seagram’s had, in 1995, bought MCA, including MCA’s Universal movies division, with its 14.7% share of the U.S. box-office market. Under the leadership of his son, Edgar Bronfman, Jr., Universal Music bought up PolyGram, and now owns the copyrights works by to Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, the Jackson Five, U2, Elton John, Marilyn Manson, and, among others, 50% of the “Gangsta Rap” label Interscope. Among Vivendi’s own assets brought into the merger, was the French pay-TV channel Canalplus.

As of now, both Edgar Bronfmans, Senior and Junior, and a third person representing Bronfman’s interests, are listed as “non-executive board members” of Vivendi Universal—obviously, the Bronfmans still own a substantial share of Vivendi Universal.

Vivendi’s boss Jean-Claude Messier himself was, from 1986-88, responsible for the French government’s privatization program. Then, he joined the influential U.S.-French investment bank Lazard Frères, before he took over the Lyon-based water utility Générale des Eaux, which he transformed into the Vivendi media group.

Too Big To Take On?

In the cartelized “entertainment industry,” the relation to the financier powers—and government sponsorship—makes or breaks a company. In this light, Messier’s creation of the Vivendi cartel (and its entry into such product lines as killer video games) must be seen as a sponsored initiative of the Lazard bank. Felix Rohatyn, Messier’s mentor at Lazard, went on to become U.S. Ambassador to France.

A parallel project is Sumner Redstone's Viacom, assembled with the forceful backing of the same Lazard bank. Viacom owns CBS and Paramount Studios. A group of Redstone's executives was hired in 1999, directly by the U.S. military, to set up the Insitute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California. There, Pentagon-financed video-game programmers now design *both* killer games for kids, and training simulators for soldiers to fight heretofore "unthinkable" imperial wars.

The world's biggest producer of video games is Electronic Arts, which only recently procured the exclusive rights to offer games through America Online. Seagram owned a 15% share of Time Warner, before the latter's merger with AOL. Among AOL/Time Warner's affiliates are *Time* magazine and Warner Brothers. Through joint ventures, AOL/Time Warner is connected to Germany's media giant Bertelsmann, which controls the German RTL and RTL 2 and RTL plus TV stations, known for their often pornographic contents. One of the biggest players in the market of TV and movie rights is the—recently bankrupted—German Kirch Group, which controls Germany's ProSieben, Sat 1, Kabel 1, N24, and Premiere TV stations.

Another powerful sector profitting from the killer games are the producers of both the hardware and the software needed to run them, like Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft. Obviously, for most of the current political elite, this combination of economic and political clout is simply too much to take on.

Yet the biggest entities in this criminal business, such as Vivendi and Viacom, are drowning in unpayable debt and crashing stock values. A resolute public attack against them would collapse this whole sordid side of the "New Economy" bubble.

A Cultural Crisis

Under the shock of the Erfurt mass murder, Germany is going through a profound process of rethinking the direction in which the nation has drifted over the past decades—in culture, education, and economic policy. That process of national soul-searching will have a major impact on the national elections scheduled for later this year. This became visible on May 3, when over 100,000 Germans, mostly from the eastern region near the scene of the school carnage, gathered in Erfurt for a memorial service.



State Government of Thuringia

More than 100,000 Germans gathered in the city square of Erfurt days after the killings; with the national shock, came growing national demands for banning violent videos and computer games, including their importation.

This massive showing of the population is putting pressure on the political class, to act against the culture of violence. Both President Johannes Rau and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder addressed the Erfurt gathering, and delivered frank assessments of the deep cultural crisis that the killing incident had spotlighted. Earlier in the week, the Federal Ministry for the Interior issued a preliminary report on the incident. It warned that as many as 170,000 German youth are so deeply involved in the same culture of video-game violence and pornography, that any one of them could repeat the Erfurt incident.

Helga Zepp-LaRouche's proposal to ban the killer video and computer games internationally now hits the center of the debate. One Chancellor candidate, Christian Democrat Edmund Stoiber, has now made a more limited call to ban the killer products. Christian Pfeiffer, Minister of Justice of the state of Lower Saxony, said in radio interviews, that a ban of killer games must hit the producers in the first place. Sanctions against the producers of such games, not just sanctions against the sellers and distributors, must be considered, Pfeiffer said; otherwise a ban will never be effective. A ban should also affect adult players, otherwise children will have access to killer games through older brothers and sisters, or their parents and friends of the family.

In a related initiative, Werner Glogauer, one of Germany's leading media experts, said that producers should be held responsible for atrocities resulting from "playing" with their killer games; and that if that case can be proven, they should have to pay.