

Chapter 11

Banning Violent Video Games in Switzerland: A Public Problem Going Unnoticed

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Violent video games have been considered ‘problematic’ in Switzerland since the turn of the century, and the issue has become political. The situation can be seen as a ‘public problem’ (Gusfield 1980): It falls within the horizon of its resolution by public action, with deputies seizing the ‘problem.’ A law is being drafted and seeks a total ban on violent video games without any significant social movement to contest it. While politicians are seizing this issue, the general public, including video game players, seem detached and are not involving themselves in its resolution. In this chapter, I describe the internal structure of the problem and its endogenous categories, thus preventing myself from taking a stand in the issue, and I invite game scholars to adopt the same intellectual posture. Although game researchers often seem appalled by the morally-charged statements, discourses, and policy on violent video games, some of them might even “call for responsible science communication and policy recommendations” from researchers and policymakers (Ivory and Holz Ivory in this volume). Instead, this approach takes seriously the expression of the troubles, worries, and arguments exchanged as well as the different stances in the controversy, thereby going beyond the “ironic stance” (Hacking 1999) taken by the ‘constructionist’s view’ of a public problem (Spector and Kitsuse 1977) or the notion of political agendas (Stone 1989). In this chapter,¹ I discuss three aspects of the video game policy in Switzerland: First, I argue that violent video games are considered a public problem; second, I discuss the different phases and positions adopted during the emergence of the problem—showing how the descriptions made during its “natural history” define its *theme*, give it a new *intelligibility*, and articulate a

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new *temporal experience*; and third, I focus on the absence of public mobilization, stating that a public problem can be dealt in restricted political spheres.

Violent Video Games As a Public Problem

To examine how violent video games have become a public problem in Switzerland, I first turn my attention to theories of public problems in general. Sociologist Joseph Gusfield offers a witty definition of a public problem: It is something that “someone ought to do something [about]” (Gusfield 1984, 5). In other words, an issue or problem may emerge as one with a public status. Public problems have to be distinguished from private or social ones. While all of them find their genesis in troubles expressed by individuals (Emerson and Messinger 1977), they do not necessarily transform into public action. The existence of a ‘problem’ is the result of a process by which the violent video games issue has, for example, been construed as a problem of societal concern to be acted upon by public officials and agencies. Dewey (1927) would say that groups start a social inquiry concerning unrest and worries experienced in order to find solutions. In this case, the ban on violent video games in Switzerland becomes a target in the resolution of the problem. Gusfield notes that target character is not a given but represents “a selective process from among a multiplicity of possible and potential realities” that can be seen as influencing the wider problem of “youth violence” (3). It is also vital to recognize the multiple possibilities of its resolution: “who and what institution gains or is given the responsibility for “doing something” about the issue” (Gusfield 1984, 5)?

Furthermore, a public problem is created by constituting a public as a group that is “gaining a better understanding of itself, its environment and of the means it is likely to implement” (Bovet and Terzi 2011, 172). Tensions and conflicts in the configuration of

violent video games as a problem give rise to public, political, legal, and media “arenas”²: Politicians, members of players’ associations and representatives of the gaming industry compete to problematize and advertise the case.

The ensuing confrontations solidify the groups that *own* the problem:

The concept of “ownership of public problems” is derived from the recognition that in the arenas of public opinion and debate all groups do not have equal power, influence, and authority to define the reality of the problem. The ability to create and influence the public definition of the problem is what I [Joseph Gusfield] refer to as “ownership.” The metaphor of property ownership is chosen to emphasize the attributes of control, exclusiveness, transferability, and potential loss also found in the ownership of property. (Gusfield 1984, 10)

One of the key operations for the owners of the problem is to assign responsibilities. That said, Gusfield distinguishes causal responsibility from political responsibility: We think, for example, that tobacco and alcohol cause health problems (causal responsibility), but we also think that the producers or the State hold a political responsibility in this regard. In ownership of the problem, causal and political responsibilities are interrelated and subject to debate. Ownership of the problem can be challenged as well as causal and political responsibilities (Gusfield 1984, 13- 14).

Eventually, the problem ends up being handled by authority figures as it hits its routinized stage. However, according to Cefaï and Terzi (2012), a public problem does not necessarily follow these stages mechanically. Some phases may be skipped, others aborted, and others overlapped or reversed. It may happen that the treatment by the public authorities precede civic initiatives or that everything is played on institutional scenes with very well-

² For an analysis of public and media arenas, see Cefaï (2002).

informed audiences (30). One could thus go further and state that each sequence reconfigures previous sequences (Emerson and Messinger 1977). Accounting for the “natural history” (Park 1921) of a public problem does not amount to describing a linear sequence of phases. The emplotment of problematization and publicization processes cannot be rigidly formalized. The phases of this dynamic have relationships that are not unilateral but reciprocal (Terzi and Bovet 2005). First, the elaboration of solutions is made possible by the ways of defining the problem, of circumscribing it, and of elucidating it. Second, the solutions that are elaborated upon during the process have feedback effects on the definition of the situation and its problematic character (Cefaï and Terzi 2012, 30). The history of the public problem and more specifically its “emplotment” (Ricoeur 1984) can theoretically be conceived as a proactive and retroactive series of sequences that are gradually enhanced.

Moreover, the actions of individuals engaged in a public problem contain a part of indeterminacy and of inventiveness (Lemieux 2007, 193; Callon, Lascoumes and Barthe 2009); the situations are both problematized and publicized on the experimental mode. The experience of politics takes place in the implementation of institutionalized procedures and in the invention of new ways to solve a problem. Cefaï and Terzi then suggest that the experimentation can be equally consisting of newly formed publics as of political-administrative institutions experienced in the exercise of policy processes.

Following the Descriptions Made in a Controversy

The problem of violent video games becomes a *problem* well after the elements, such as questions and indignations, were set in motion. A classic sociological approach would seek to describe the stages of the problem by showing the causal links between each step. Such an approach is either interested in the *arguments* exchanged in the context of a controversy or in the *strategies and objectives* of each camp. Sociology is often tempted to rely on an

exhaustive corpus of discourses and stances. But it is a chimera. No corpus can completely cover the emergence, publicization, problematization, and resolution of violent video games as a problem; yet no description can summarize it fully either. Terzi therefore proposes to focus on discourses related to the public problem (2003, 33). For the sociologist, social order is equally comprised of actions, objects, actors, *and discourses* that take them into account. Sociological analysis must present possible descriptions of the violent video games phenomenon as they have appeared over the discussion. On this basis, I show how they contributed to the individuation of the question, or how it became the ‘issue of violent video games’ that has conferred it a new *intelligibility* (Terzi 2003, 37). Within the course of these different stances, the public problem of violent video games is drawn. In doing so, these descriptions have shaped both a problem and the solutions that have been brought to resolve it and their publics. Moreover, the descriptions of the public problem have set its normative background (2010, 215). The dynamics, the concrete actions and the discourses of the problem of violent video games have eventually refigured its new *temporal experience* (Ricoeur 1984).

In this chapter, I relate the ‘natural history’ of the problem and focus on descriptions made available during its different stages. As soon as we follow a problem, we observe that it defines itself its endogenous categories. The classic political and journalistic categories such as the “politicians” and the “media” pre-exist the process.

Specification Time: When the ‘Problem with Video Games’ Becomes the ‘Violent Video Games Problem’

The problem of violent video games originates in troubles not always expressed or politicized. Indeed, mobilization in connection with the subject did not occur instantly. The first characteristic is that it’s a “low noise” problem: The subject is discussed from time to

time and is only marginally present in the media and political arenas. It rather seems to bounce from case to case. The 1990s were marked by a few news stories that illustrate the problems experienced in connection with the violence of video games. At this time, the issue was trivialized when compared to the risk of epilepsy related to the gaming practice. One could even say that video games caused a series of problems to the Swiss community well before the onset of the violence problem. If the risk of epilepsy and control concerned parents and the general public outside the phenomenon, the early 1990s marked a turning point in the appreciation of video games in particular and “youth culture” in general. The release of *Mortal Kombat* (NetherRealm Studios) in 1993 and *Doom* (GT Interactive Software) in 1994 raised some concerns in the media and public opinion. This trend follows what is found throughout Europe³ and in the United States at the time (Donovan 2010, 225 - 35). These games were subsequently mobilized as explanatory factors of violent behaviors. *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* disturb the public opinion because of their violence and enters the background of the “space of experience” of publics sensitized to the violent video games issue (Koselleck 1985).⁴

Troubles reached new heights when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, two senior students in high school, perpetrated a school shooting on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School, Colorado, U.S. The massacre gained international status and was fairly mediatized in Switzerland. It sparked debate in the U.S. over gun control laws but also on the effect of violent video games as the two students were known to play *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992). The Swiss media often mentioned the link between their homicidal behavior

³ See political scientist Olivier Mauco on the French case (2012).

⁴ The media reception of *Mortal Kombat* and *Doom* was different than other video games at the time. Far from being exhaustive, I would simply point out that these two games were treated in other sections than the usual video games’ columns or programs. For example, David Rosenthal wrote an outraged article about *Mortal Kombat*, named “A bloodbath” (“Que du sang”) (*L’Express* 1995); or the use of the latter as an explanatory factor in a news item in the U.S. (“Teenager stabbed because of a game,” *Le Matin* 1994).

and the use of violent video games. Three years later, a nineteen-year-old expelled student entered his former high school in Erfurt, Germany, armed with a shotgun and a pistol, killing sixteen people on April 26, 2002. Media emphasized his musical taste in metal and his playing habits as secondary explanations for his killing behavior, downplaying the fact that the student was expelled a few months before. The case gained more fame in the Swiss-German part of Switzerland due to language proximity.

The Problem Becomes a Political Issue

Politicians were not officially involved in the problem until the beginning of the 2000s. On October 6, 2004, Parliamentary representative of the rightwing Swiss People's Party Jean-Henri Dunant filed a question to the Federal Council—the Swiss executive council—asking whether it considered “taking measures against the violent video games proliferation?”⁵ Dunant compares them to child pornography and argues that both are “equally unwholesome.” This question highlights two elements. First, Dunant makes a causal link between gaming and gamers' potentially aggressive behaviors: “Studies show that gaming causes a distorted representation of the world amongst young people, making them insensitive to human suffering. Their behavior later becomes more and more aggressive, and they become less and less capable to establish human relations.”⁶ Second, he deplores the current lack of restrictions, which push more young people “to purchase games as violent as possible.” The Federal Council, recipient of the question, replied that the existing legislation can address the problem; a law of the Criminal Code already represses “representations of cruelty.”⁷ While the Dunant question received little reaction outside of the political arena, it

⁵ Question Dunant 04.1123 “Violent video games.”

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Art. 135 of the Swiss Criminal Code

resonated with other parliamentary actions that aimed to jointly contain ‘youth violence’ and protect youth from violent video games.

In 2006, the Swiss Interactive Entertainment Association (SIEA), founded three years before, issued a code of conduct for the interactive entertainment industry, emphasizing the protection of minors. More specifically, manufacturers, suppliers, and importers united within the SIEA and published minimum age recommendations based on the code of conduct and on the “Pan European Game Information” (PEGI) system (see Ruggill and McAllister in this volume for further discussion).⁸

While the problem is mainly discussed in the political sphere until 2007, this sectoring fades after various events. On April 16, 2007, a student opened fire on the Virginia Tech campus in the U.S. and killed thirty-two people before turning his weapon against himself. The following days, most of the American and European media made the connection between the killer’s alleged use of violent video games and the school shooting. Parliamentary interventions related to youth violence in general and to violent video games, specifically increased accordingly in Switzerland. Questions and postulates came together in 2007,⁹ before a motion¹⁰ was deposited in December to ban violent video games. The motion states: “The Federal Council shall submit to Parliament a message in order to block the access of computer games with violent content for children and adolescents (that is, games where the

⁸ Switzerland officially supports PEGI since its beginning in 2003 and is represented in the PEGI Council.

⁹ Question Heim 07.5190 “Violent electronic games”; Postulate Galladé 07.3665 “Entertainment media. To protect children and adolescents from violence.”

¹⁰ Intervention designating the Federal Council to submit to Parliament a draft act of the Federal Assembly or to take a particular action. Transmitting a motion to the Federal Council requires the approval of the National Council (the legislative power representing the people) and the Council of States (the legislative power representing the 26 cantons of Switzerland).

¹⁰ Motion Hochreutener 07.3870 “Ban on violent computer games.” The name of this motion is further normatively loaded in its original language: “Verbot von elektronischen Killerspielen.” Violent video games will then be mentioned in German as “Killergames” or “Killerspiele,” or “Brutalo-Spiele.” Such a nomination makes no doubt about the commitment of some MPs to ban them at all costs.

customer can shoot on targets, and reserved for 16 + or 18 + age groups according to the classification of the Pan European Game Information [PEGI]) by prohibiting or restricting sales. ”¹⁰

The motion is grounded on a description of a tragic incident that occurred a month before its filing. In November 2007, a young recruit of the Swiss army shot a sixteen-year-old woman with his military rifle in a bus shelter in Zurich. At the time, a popular initiative to ban possession of military weapons at home was under consideration. The “Tragedy of Zurich” or the “Mordfall Hönnggerberg,” as described in the media, fell within the problem of weapons possession. This topic was much more publicized and discussed than the issue of violent video games at the same time. Hochreutener would nevertheless back the case as an explanatory factor of his motion to ban them: “The murder committed in the Hongg neighborhood in Zurich shows that personality disorders associated with media representations of violence can have dramatic consequences.”¹¹ He claimed that the existing rules, namely Article 135 of the Swiss Criminal Code and the PEGI, were no longer sufficient to ‘protect the youth.’

In his motion, Hochreutener describes what he considers as the problem with youth violence and its solution: Using Gusfield (1984) as a lens, Hochreutener’s rhetoric can be understood as employing both the causal responsibility (people being exposed to violent contents leads to violent behaviors) and the political responsibility of the problem (the State aims to make sure young people won’t access violent content by banning and prohibiting them). The solution proposed—the ban of violent video games for people under eighteen—greatly influences the “horizon of expectation” on the outcome of the problem. The description of the problem narrows the choices amongst the multiple possibilities of its definition and resolution. However, at the time, the Federal Council considered that the

¹¹ Motion Hochreutener 07.3870 “Ban on violent computer games.”

legislation against depictions of violence is effective and invited the Houses of Parliament to refuse the motion, which would be brought before them two years later.

In the following years, local troubles led to the ramping up of political action. Several cantonal initiatives were issued between 2007 and 2011, some asking specifically for the ban of violent video games¹² and others for taking strict measures to “prevent youth violence.”¹³ The latter included violent video games as a motive or a reason for violent behaviors among youth. With the Hochreutener Federal motion, the local initiatives did strengthen the definition and the recommended resolution of the problem into something homogeneous. At this stage, the ban seemed to be the primary solution to ‘protect youth’—and this was the deputies’ biggest argument—from escalating violent behaviors. Because of their ongoing status, the initiatives received relatively little media coverage. But it didn’t last long.

Violent Video Games Go to Court

In May 2008, Bernese local deputy Roland Näf sued Media Markt, Europe’s largest retailer of consumer electronics, for selling *Stranglehold* (Midway Chicago 2007), a third-person shooter video game in which players take on the character of an Asian crime boss with a mission of “bloody revenge,” according to the game’s website. He decided to bring the case to court because he was able to buy the video game in a Media Markt store in Müri (BE). Näf, located at the center-left Social Democratic Party, claimed that violent games such as *Stranglehold* violated Article 135 of Switzerland's Criminal Code. The article forbids representation of sound or visual recordings that emphatically illustrate cruelty towards

¹² Cantonal initiative, Bern 08.316 “Ban of violent video games”; cantonal initiative, Tessin 09.314 “Revision of Article 135 PC”; cantonal initiative, Freiburg 09.332 “Ban of violent video games”; cantonal initiative, Zug 10.302 “Ban of violent video games.”

¹³ Cantonal initiative, St. Gallen 08.334 “Revision of the penal code”; cantonal initiative, St. Gallen 09.313 “Against killer games for children and adolescents. For an effective and consistent protection of children and young people”; cantonal initiative, Luzern 11.301 “Protecting young people against violent games and sports.”

humans or animals. According to Näf, the article is a “paper tiger” because its ambiguous wording makes it difficult to apply. The Councilor complained that the Swiss Interactive Entertainment Association (SIEA) was not able to take the necessary measures to comply with the criminal law. By doing so, Näf assigned a place to the SIEA in the problem (Favret-Saada 1980). SIEA was criticized for owning political responsibility on the violent video games problem. But it did not endorse this responsibility. Näf, however, was mainly aiming at the existing law. The outcome of the hearing could have precedential value for the distribution of other Mature or Adult Only video games.

The case is a strong example of how a political institution or, a political agent can run a public inquiry about a ‘problem’ by using known political tools such as initiatives (Näf was the co-author of the Bernese cantonal initiative, from that in the same period), motions, and so forth to experiment with new techniques simultaneously. Cefai and Terzi insist on the experimental aspect of an inquiry, stating that it is unpredictable for the most part and has to be tested constantly (2012, 26- 28). A month later, the local court of Bern ruled on the sale of violent video games, declaring the game *Stranglehold* as insufficiently violent to be banned. The trial gained media and public attention. In the Swiss-German part of Switzerland, online content dealing with the subject received many comments. Players voiced their discontent through the comments section of online media and forums, both reacting to the trial and to the larger issue of violent video games. Commentators questioned the definition of the problem (“how are violent video games a problem?”), the politicians’ definition of the causal responsibility (playing violent video games leads to violent behavior) and the relevance of such a trial. Most of the time, the ‘politicians,’ as they were categorized in a generic way, were to blame. Moreover, the use of the category “politicians” in the comments section is employed most often to emphasize their incompetence in the field.

Näf brought another case to the court the following year. This time, *Manhunt 2* (2007)—a stealth-based psychological horror video game published by Rockstar Games—was in his sights.¹⁴ The complaint concerned five retailers: It stated that the game circumvented Article 135 of Switzerland’s Criminal Code because of its “depictions of brutal violence” reaching unprecedented levels. At the time, the media covering the lawsuit were skeptical of the outcome,¹⁵ but not Näf. He aimed to ban violent video games, so he attempted legal precedent. He did not succeed, though, as the action was ruled out once again. Nevertheless, Näf emerged as an important actor within the Killergames’ issue. He co-founded the “Verein Gegen Mediale Gewalt” (“Association Against Media Violence”) the same year and carried the cantonal initiative of his canton for it to be adopted. He would also be the speaker of choice for the news media when the topic re-emerged later.

Meanwhile in the National Council, Evi Allemann, a Bernese social democrat, deposited another motion—this time requiring the total ban of violent video games.¹⁶ The motion states: “The Federal Council shall submit to Parliament a legal basis for prohibiting the production, the advertising, the import, the sale and the distribution of game programs in which terrible acts of violence against humans or human-like beings contribute to the success of the game.” In her motion, Allemann contends that the practice of violent video games causes violent behaviors:

¹⁴ The SIEA advised against the sale of *Manhunt 2* a year earlier. In Switzerland, SIEA’s president Roger Frei said the move showed the industry was no longer prepared to accept just anything. Originally scheduled for North American and European release in July 2007, the game was suspended by Rockstar’s parent company Take-Two Interactive when it was refused classification most notably in the U.K. and Ireland, and given an Adults Only (AO) rating in the U.S. In response to these ratings problems, Rockstar edited the game and came out with its newly censored version in 2008.

¹⁵ For example, Martin Steiner (2009), a journalist in Switzerland’s biggest selling newspaper *Blick* wrote in his paper that “the new *Manhunt 2*-complaint stood little chance, especially since the graphics are even weaker and the representation of violence is even less realistic than in *Stranglehold*.”

¹⁶ Motion Allemann 09.3422 “Ban on Killergames” (“Verbot von Killerspielen”).

“The causes of youth violence and adolescents cannot be reduced to a single factor. However, recent studies show an empirical link between violent behavior and consumption of violent games. This is largely explained by their ultra realistic game design and the many opportunities they offer to exercise violence. The success in the game increases depending on the use of terrible weapons against humans and anthropoids.”

Furthermore, her ‘space of experience’ is filled with tragic school-shooting examples:

“Isolated cases such as those of Littleton (U.S. 1999), Erfurt (Germany 2002), Tessin (Germany 2007), Tuusula (Finland 2007) or Winnenden (Germany 2009) strengthen the hypothesis that violent games contribute to push some consumers to cause real violence.”

Allemann refers to the ruling of both of Näf’s lawsuits to harden Article 135 of the Swiss Criminal Code. At the time, the Federal Council issued a long and detailed response. It invited the Chambers of Parliament to reject the motion, arguing that a total ban based on vague application criteria would be hard to implement.

These interventions forced the Federal Council to get involved in the issue. For the latter, the problem belonged until then to the cantons, and Federal Council had always maintained that the laws, combined with the national prevention program were sufficient to address the problem. The Federal Council took several provisions in the space of a few months, which may indirectly contribute to solving the problem. Following the postulates formulated between 2003 and 2007, the Federal Council submitted a plan for violence prevention among children and adolescents in 2009. A national prevention program for youth and violence was launched in 2010, lasting until 2015.

The position of the Federal Council is interesting to analyze. The Members of Parliament have a strong idea of who owns the violent video games problem: the State. In their various texts, they ask the Federal Council to act responsibly on the problem, but the

latter keeps repeating that the cantons are in charge of applying Article 135 of the Criminal Code. The Federal Council refuses to be both the owner and the politically responsible member for the problem, or as Favret-Saada would say, it momentarily refused to take its “assigned place” in the development of the issue (1980). Yet while everyone seems to agree that some games are too violent, it seems difficult to impossible to take action. Something would be done though as the two chambers of the Swiss Federal Assembly voted on the motions Hochreutener and Allemann between 2009 and 2010.

The Ban Is Approved: Oppositions and Skirmishes

In June 2009, the National Council approved both motions against the opinion of the Federal Council. As the Swiss Federal Assembly is bicameral, the vote of the motions is provided for the Council of States in March 18, 2010. The event would gather plenty of attention. Groups representing young people were able to speak in opposition to the vote that was going to take place. The youth organizations of several Swiss political parties militated against the ban of violent video games. Young Social Democrats, for example, prepared a website called “Protecting Youth Instead of Banning Video Games!” for people to sign a petition against the ban, launched in August 2009.

Philippe Nantermod, Vice-President of the Young Liberals of Switzerland, expressed being annoyed by the possibility of a total ban on violent video games in the media. Several newspapers quoted him when he called the Councilor of States “a bunch of has-beens” that know nothing about youth culture. The same day, a flash mob occurred in front of the Federal Palace. Pro Juventute, a charitable foundation dedicated to supporting the rights and needs of Swiss children and youth, organized the flash mob, which was attended by 150 people.

Players’ associations were also active during the adoption of the motions and some were founded during that time, but most of them never had an impact among the players and

have been inactive since then. The Swiss Gamers Network, for example, defines itself as the largest community of players; however, since 2010, they have only planned two new events. In the Swiss-German part of Switzerland, GameRights, the Swiss consumer organization representing the interests of adult gamers, seems to fare better. The organization, which defines itself on its website as “not a cranky fringe group” is quite active in informing parents, teachers, and politicians about video games culture. GameRights is still active and took a stance on this possible ban, stating that Switzerland “requires a legal anchoring of the PEGI age classification system” so that distributors only sell age-appropriate games for children.

As an ongoing issue, the problem of violent video games is not enclosed and is constantly subject to debate. When the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting took place in Newtown, Connecticut, U.S. in 2012, the controversy of violent video games re-emerged. The link between violent games and this killing was widely used in the media, and Näf’s actions had good media coverage during that time as he advocated for the on-going ban of violent video games. From time to time, the issue reappears, but so far, the proposed solutions are unambiguous: the ban seems like the only possible outcome. [

The descriptions’ analysis highlights the categories used in the stances in relation to the problem of violent video games. Members of Parliament in their documents and through the media coverage of their actions are alarmed by ‘youth violence’ while offering to protect children, adolescents, or young people from violent video games. The category “youth” is used here as a hetero-category “where the character of the category is that it’s used by non-members of the category and not by members of the category except when members are identifying themselves to non-members” (Sacks 1979, 8).

Typically, young people are often the object of the discourse, but they are hardly the subject. In the case of violent video games, they rarely appear in the media as subjects,

particularly the print media, and when they do, as in TV programs, it is most often used as an argument for youth violence policies. Sociologist Jean Widmer claims that this status—being the object of the discourse and not the subject—suggests the “excommunication” of the “culprits”: can they give their view on the matter? We would find a few similar traits to the drug problem that occurred in Switzerland the early 1990s when communities were shocked but baffled by the deviance of their children and adolescents who still remained largely constituted as objects (Widmer 2010). Furthermore, Kline, Dyer-Whiteford and de Peuter (2008) notes that demonizing the category “young people” is risky because “rather than encouraging social and historical understanding of a cultural practice,” it creates a militarized masculine gamer culture that excludes women (Ibid268

The categorization of violent video games as “killergames” has social implications. First, the category’s name carries judgment about playing those games, and carries also the evocation of the normative background that establishes this judgment (Widmer 2010, 214). Second, an intimate link exists between categories and category-bound activities and features that do not have to be mentioned explicitly. To play a “killergame” implies a deviant and potentially dangerous behavior. In her motion, Allemann notes that “recent studies show an empirical link between violent behavior and consumption of violent games. This is largely explained by their ultra realistic game design and the many opportunities they offer to exercise violence” and that “isolated cases strengthen the hypothesis that violent games contribute to push some consumers to cause real violence.”¹⁷ Also, the expression “violent video games’ problem” or even “killergames’ problem” focuses on the product. Debates could have named it differently: The reference to the “problem of video gamers” would, for example, put at its center the individuals concerned, their motives, what they experience, and what they want (Ibid., 214). It also could have been the ‘problem of parental control,’ perhaps

¹⁷ Motion Allemann 09.3422 “Ban on Killergames.”

suggesting a different set of actions to resolve it. To categorize certain type of games with such an ambiguous name as ‘killergames,’ has provided for their players an enterprise which is doomed “simply by the virtue of the fact that that sets up an administration of the phenomenon that is not theirs” (Sacks 1979, 14).

On the Absence of Public Mobilization

Direct democracy as practiced in Switzerland permits that an issue should be passed to the public consultation via the right of referendum.¹⁸ However, not all draft laws end up being voted by the people. In our case, debates were kept to a minimum and after a while, there has been a rapid consensus on the definition of the problem and its possible solutions. In order to protect youth from violent representations, the ban seems like the right thing to do for the Swiss community. This homogeneous consciousness of the ‘violent video games problem’ appears as a salient form of social control. To quote Gusfield, “It eliminates conflict or divergence by rendering alternative definitions and solutions unthinkable. This subtle, unseen implication of cultural ideas is perhaps the most powerful form of constraint. Unlike the conflict of power it goes unrecognized. What we cannot imagine, we cannot desire” (1984, 7).

This ‘low noise’ public problem is interesting in that it shows “how debates are conducted in Switzerland, which tend paradoxically to restrict or even stop questioning and explorations” (Bovet and Terzi 2011, 174). The way the problem is conceived is ‘depoliticizing’ in that it does not call for the formation of a political public invited to discuss issues that concern itself. This implies that not everyone has the same chance to initiate an inquiry. As Gusfield notes: “The public arena is not a field on which all can play on equal terms; some have greater access than others and greater power and ability to shape the

¹⁸ In the context of the Swiss participative democracy, the referendum allows the people to vote on the decisions of Parliament. The referendum must be requested within 100 days after the publication of the text by 50,000 voters or by eight cantons.

definition of public issues” (1984, 8). The players’ associations and other groups confront bigger and more experienced opponents—represented by the deputies—in the political, the legal, and the media arenas.

The use of hetero-categories such as ‘youth’ and ‘killergames’ suggest that the subjects of the problem are kept on the periphery when trying to solve it. The dimension of depoliticization is an explicit and a recognized component of the problem’s definition. Doing nothing seems to be one of the traits granted in the problem of violent video games. It is seen as a dysfunction to which a *technical solution* should be provided, supported by politicians, and not what Dewey (1927) called “an enigma to solve.”

The opposition to the future law does not crystallize so far into a political public. The players don’t seem to be in a hurry, perhaps because the law is not yet drafted or because it seems doubtful that players perceive themselves as a political public capable of action. If the players, both young and old, were not treated as the subject of the public problem, they are clearly consumers able to find how to source games themselves. With platforms such as Steam, one can acquire video game content on the Internet. Online retailers can also provide games to players. The latter seems to prepare for the ban with mercantile cynicism, and players’ forums treat the subject ironically. Throughout this chapter, I explore the possibility for players to be inexperienced when facing a public problem related to them and their difficulty when participating in a ‘public’: To be a player is to be a consumer before being a political agent.

Conclusion

The stances have circumscribed the *theme* of the debate. They presented the issues discussed in the mid-90s as facets of the same problem, which may be designated by the term “youth violence.” Inside it, violent video games seem to play a major role. The theme is

defined by groups located from outside: Politicians and various worried groups named a problem to try to resolve it.

These descriptions have not only circumscribed the theme of the debate, but they also have conferred it a new *intelligibility* (Terzi 2003, 37). The issue was encapsulated in a larger one: youth protection. In order to protect young people from violent contents or to prevent youth violence, politicians deposited such motions in the Parliament. Various parliamentary actions and the echoes found in the media define who is the temporarily owner of the problem and who owns the causal responsibility and the political responsibility of the latter (Gusfield 1984). At first, the Federal Council, named by many inside the Federal Palace as the owner of the problem, tried to withdraw from it by stating that the cantons were accountable of Article 135 of the Criminal Code. But with the approval of the two motions,¹⁹ the Federal Council was forced to both own the problem and also find a solution. A bill will be submitted to the Chambers in 2015.

Finally, these descriptions have articulated a new *temporal experience*. Based on the “space of experience” of several tragic news stories and the causal link made between violent behavior and consumption of violent video games, they opened the “horizon of expectation” of a possible ban on sales and distribution of violent video games (Koselleck 1985). Moreover, the analysis highlighted the open and closed nature of public experience, as social inquiries about problems can be re-launched from time to time (for discussion on violent video games in the U.S., see Ivory and Holz Ivory in this volume).

The various descriptions and activities surrounding the violent video games issue defined it as a unified public problem. Thus, it created a way to determine conduct and measures for implementation. Sociologists can monitor the inquiry, giving it the shape of an object of interest, of attention, and of action. It can therefore be traced as “the controlled or

¹⁹ Motion Hochreutener 07.3870 “Ban on violent computer games” and Motion Allemann 09.3422 “Ban on Killergames.”

directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (Dewey 1938, 104-05). Instead of focusing on the “social construction of the causal stories” (Stone 1989) given by the troubled publics in this case, or even what politicians might gain, these discourses analyze both the strategies and the arguments given in the course of activities in order to define and resolve the problem. Such a praxeological analysis shows how the Swiss community thinks and what questions it asks itself. In that regard, the violent video games issue deserves to be raised collectively by those who see it as a problem.

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