Grand Valley State University

From the SelectedWorks of John R. Kilbourne

April 12, 2012

What does the popularity of the Hunger Games say about our society?

John R. Kilbourne, *Grand Valley State University*

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/john_kilbourne/12/

By John Kilbourne

"The rules of The Hunger Games are simple. In punishment for the uprising, each of the twelve districts must provide one girl and one boy, called tributes, to participate. The twenty-four tributes will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last tribute standing wins.
— Katniss Everdeen from Suzanne Collins', The Hunger Games

For the past 30 years, I have been on a mission to know and understand the deeper meanings of the games we play.

My experiences include being a graduate assistant to then-head UCLA basketball coach Larry Brown, an assistant coach (strength and conditioning) with the 1982-84 Philadelphia 76ers basketball team (1983 World Champions), and the dance conditioning/choreography coach for figure skaters, which has taken me to four Winter Olympics. I have written a dissertation from The Ohio State University titled, "Building a Bridge Between Athletics and Academics," worked 25-plus years as a professor of sport studies and traveled to Rome and Greece.

I have gone on two sabbaticals to the circumpolar world (Inuit of the Eastern Arctic of Canada and Sami of Scandinavia), where I studied and practiced their traditional games. I examine the deeper meanings of the games we play in my recent book, "Running With Zoe: A Conversation on the Meaning of Play, Games, & Sport."

None of these game experiences has moved me more than my recent reading of Suzanne Collins' "The Hunger Games" and my witnessing the film a short time later.

Simply stated: There is something quite disturbing when adults are sitting in a movie theater with very young children nearby, watching other young children murder children as part of a game ("The Hunger Games" is rated PG-13).

Never in my experiences on or about games have I come across a game where this sort of murderous brutality is played-out by children, against children. I thought the video game "Grand Theft Auto Vice City," where young men score points for having sex with a woman in the back seat of a car and then beat her to death with a golf club, had maybe gone too far on the continuum of disturbing games. It now seems somewhat tame compared to "The Hunger Games."

In the motion picture "The Gladiator," Roman Senator Gracchus says, "I think he (the emperor) knows what Rome is. Rome is the mob. Conjure magic for them, and they'll be distracted. Take away their freedom, and still they'll roar. The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the Senate, it's the sand of the coliseum. He'll bring them death — and they will love him for it."

Like the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome, violence and death seem to be far too prevalent in today's modern games.

In addition to "The Hunger Games," we have the real-life behavior of Gregg Williams, the former defensive coordinator of the New Orleans Saints. In his well-publicized pep talk to Saints players, he says, "Kill the head, and the body will die. Kill the head and the body will die. We've got to do everything in the world to make sure we kill (San Francisco 49ers

running back) Frank Gore's head."

Throughout history, the games we have played have been a testament to who we were and are. From early Inuit bone and hunting games, to the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome, to the modern American game of baseball, the games we play have served as a statement of, and a rehearsal for, the life-world of that period and place.

Moreover, at the root of our games is play. Two important sensations of play, especially for young children, are imitation and pretending.

As adults, we need to take a serious look at the messages our games are sending to our youth. Are we rehearsing our children for a life-world where murdering other children as part of a game is OK, where trying to injure or kill professional football players is encouraged?

We all have a responsibility to learn about and understand the consequences of what may emerge if we bombard our youth with games that glorify killing other humans.

Have we become part of a group that as Katniss' friend Gale Hawthorne says in "The Hunger Games," and Senator Gracchus from ancient Rome puts forward, "We want a good show, that's all we want."

John Kilbourne, Ph.D., is a professor of movement science at Grand Valley State University.