GUYLAND

The
Perilous
World
Where Boys
Become Men

MICHAEL KIMMEL

HARPER

For Mitchell Tunick

We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going—North and South excursions making,
Power enjoying—elbows stretching—fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless—eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.

—WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

7 | BOYS AND THEIR TOYS: GUYLAND'S MEDIA

The brothers of Alpha Beta Gamma at Colorado State University are an affable bunch of guys—clean-cut, all-American jocks, attired in the general issue uniform of Guyland: faded baseball cap, T-shirt, cargo shorts, and flip flops. On the day I visit, four of them are sitting around the TV. One is wearing headphones, and, a joystick in hand, is rocking and reeling to an online game of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (GTA)*. Beer bottles sit open on the coffee table. In an adjoining room, five more guys are huddled around a computer monitor, relaxing over a game of online poker. As if to show they are serious about their gambling, their baseball caps are turned backward. The stakes, they inform me, are relatively low, about $100 to over $1,000 a pot. (This does not strike me as low.) One guy's laptop is streaming a porn video, almost as an afterthought. Occasionally one of the guys glances at the screen. It is 11:00 A.M. on a school day. Not a book in sight.

Take a leisurely stroll into any college dorm room or fraternity, any apartment or house shared by a bunch of guys in any city or town in America. Whether they are white-collar young professionals or blue-collar workers, chances are they're all doing the same thing—staring at their TV or computer screens, or operating their PlayStations and Xboxes and other consoles. The only differences will likely be by class or race, and will revolve around how fancy their equipment is: The TVs are plasma flat screens or older models, their computers are cable-linked or dial-up, and they have the latest game consoles and fabulous speakers or not. Walk into any video arcade, Internet café, or "adult" video store. Cruise the poker tables in any casino, or look through the door of your neighborhood sports bar. Who's there? Guys.

Guys Watching Screens

Today's young people—from little kids to adults in their late twenties and early thirties—represent the most technologically sophisticated and media savvy generation in our history. The average American home—where most of these guys grew up—has three TVs, two VCRs, three radios, two tape players, two CD players, more than one video game console, and more than one computer. And when we leave home, we take this media with us in our laptops, iPods, MP3s, Gameboys, and portable DVD players. American kids ages 8 to 18 spend about 7 hours a day interacting with some form of electronic media; the average 13- to 18-year-old spends two hours a day just playing video games.

The most avid consumers of this new media, from video game consoles and online technologies to television and movies, CDs, DVDs, and MP3s, are young men, 16 to 26. It's the demographic group most prized by advertisers who dole out major ad revenue to popular "guy" radio shows such as Jim Rome, Howard Stern, and Rush Limbaugh; guy magazines such as *FHM* and *Maxim*; and TV stations including ESPN and "Spike" ("The First Network for Men").

As we saw in the last chapter, much of the television and radio content watched in Guyland is sports related, and as we'll see in the next chapter, many of the digital downloads are pornographic. But guys are also playing video games, gambling online, and buying up the majority of rap and heavy-metal CDs on the market. Guyland is big business in the entertainment industry.

Video games are its fastest-growing segment, outselling movies, books, CDs, and DVDs by a landslide. In the United States, video games earn about $6.35 billion on sales of over 225 million computer and console games every year. That's nearly 2 games purchased *per household* every year since 2000. Three-fifths of Americans age 6 and older play video games regularly—and three-fifths of those players are male. .

Another favorite activity of guys, online poker, has now become one of America's favorite "sports," and has taken off on college campuses, where hundreds of thousands of guys are playing every day—and for hundreds of millions of dollars. According to PokerPulse.com, which tracks online poker games, some 88,000 players were betting almost $16 million in online poker every day when the first World Poker Tournament was held in 1997. Today, those figures have increased by a factor of ten—1.8 million players bet $200 million online every single day.

Guys are Instant Messaging (IM), watching TV and videos from their cell phones, digitizing music, photographs, and everything else they touch. They don't buy records; they download songs. They don't make phone calls; they text. They don't read books; they . . . well, let's just say they don't read very many books. Instead, they lock themselves in their rooms and stay up until all hours of the morning surfing the web, chatting online, downloading music, and playing video games. Sure, not all guys are hooked up to technology 24/7. But almost all guys have at least a passing familiarity with most of the media I've mentioned.

True, boys have always had their toys: I remember the guys in high school poring over *Road & Track* and discussing the thrills of four on the floor. And the college guys who played pinball for what seemed like days, or the guys who spent their time researching the flattest and simplest turntable for their immaculate high-end stereo systems. But the size and scale are different now. Those guys I knew were a bit outside the mainstream, less concerned, I thought, with the drinking, sports, and girls that preoccupied everyone else. The car guys were working-class Fonzie wannabes; the stereo junkies were campus geeks. Now those media-obsessed and media-savvy guys *are* the mainstream. The new weirdos are often more likely to be the kids whose parents didn't let them watch TV, or who don't gamble online, talk about sports, watch porn, or play video games for hours.

If you ask guys about the appeal of all this media, most will give you the same answer: They do it to relax, to hang out, to have fun. It's entertainment. Like sports, they do it as a way to spend time together without actually having to talk about anything significant that might be going on in their lives. In fact, in many cases they do it to avoid what's going on in their lives. All these distractions together comprise a kind of fantasy realm to which guys retreat constantly—sometimes sheepishly, sometimes angrily—because it's a way to escape, even for a few hours a day, their tedious, boring, and emasculating lives. They're avoiding the daily responsibilities of adulthood that in their minds first begins with being a conscientious student and then morphs into being a loving and attentive husband, an involved father, a responsible breadwinner. They are escaping what they think of as the burdens of adult masculinity. And in a world where guys are afraid to grow up at all, the Guyland Arcade helps them delay adulthood for a few moments more. "Here we are now," shouted Kurt Cobain, of the band Nirvana, with more of an anthemic challenge than a simple embrace of consumer culture, "entertain us."

So what exactly are they consuming? Why? And what are the consequences?

Before answering these questions, let's go back for a moment to the guys at Alpha house, hanging out at 11:00 in the morning in the middle of the week. Being a professor, I asked about reading for classes. The guys looked at me blankly, almost patronizingly. "Not a problem," said Blake, not looking up from the computer screen. "But when do you guys study? And don't you have to go to classes?" I asked. At this point several guys sort of rolled their eyes and looked up from their various screens. "And what about writing your papers? How do you get them done?"

The guys looked at each other, knowingly, but with a questioning look, as if deciding whether or not to tell me. Todd shrugged. They smiled and said in unison, "Brainiac."

"Brainiac?" I asked.

"Uh, a.k.a. Andrew. A pledge. He's the man."

I caught up with Andrew later that afternoon, where you might have

expected to find him: the library. At first glance, Andrew didn't look like he stepped off the set of *Revenge of the Nerds*. In fact, he looked like the other guys in the fraternity: shorts, flip flops, CSU football T-shirt, glasses, and an easy smile. The giveaway was the Dodgers hat.

"Yeah, I'm from LA—well, the Valley actually. So I'm an out-of-stater, and for us admission is a whole lot harder than if you're from here, you know? Like I had really good grades and SATs, but I just wanted to get away from the whole LA scene, and I wanted to ski. So I came here. And when I wanted to pledge a frat, the guys said, 'Great! You can be our DH.'"

"DH?" I asked, "like 'designated hitter?'"

"Designated Homeworker," he laughed. Andrew's acceptance was conditional on his accepting the assignment as the house's DH. "It's okay. I mean, I don't exactly love it. But I do get out of a lot of the bullshit of pledging, like having to drink till I puke on the other guys. I just tell them that I have to go write their papers and they pretty much leave me alone. It works out, I guess."

Having a DH makes it possible for the rest of the brothers to do what they came to college to do: play video games, hang out, gamble online, drink copious quantities of beer, and hook up with girls as often as possible. If, on the one hand, contemporary students are increasingly professionalized—narrowly constructing their educations to prepare them for their eventual career—their actual experience of collegiate life remains remarkably juvenile.

Across the country, the guys I talked to spent most of their time playing at what are essentially escapist games. In video games, guys can play at being ideal versions of themselves in fantasy worlds. In aggressive music and violent movies, guys can see manifested the anger they feel inside. At online poker tables, guys feel empowered and skillful, as they do in few other arenas.

Though entertainment has always been escapist, the level of dedication—of time, of money, of energy—that guys today exhibit is astounding. Escape from daily life often becomes their top priority. So is it any wonder that these guys, on their way to manhood, so closely resemble boys?

What's All the Fuss?

Most guys react somewhat defensively when they hear the latest dire warnings about media use—that the anonymity of Internet chat rooms is deleterious to social development, or that violent rap and heavy metal music encourage violence in the real world, or that video games are so highly addictive they often result in players gradually disengaging from real life. Since they know that *they* are unlikely to play *World of Warcraft* for so long that they lose track of what day it is, and since they know that *they* aren't likely to use violent films as a prelude to mass murder, they are easily and casually accepting of media saturation. And, by and large, the rest of us go along with it. We rely on facile explanations like "consumer sovereignty" to justify the violent content, or we think, "No harm, no foul" and accept that there are no deleterious incremental effects of all that media consumption. Or we focus only on the form—the game playing, the porn watching, the radio shows—and resignedly shrug our shoulders and sigh that "boys will be boys." But such shrugs are often ways to shirk our own responsibility. We need to look at what guys are watching, listening to, and downloading because the media they are engaging with is not just entertainment. It is entertainment with a vengeance.

The dominant emotion in all these forms of entertainment is anger. From violent computer games to extreme sports, from racist and misogynistic radio show content to furious rap and heavy metal music, from the X-rated to the Xbox, the amount of rage and sensory violence to which guys have become accustomed is overwhelming. It doesn't even occur to them that all this media consumption might be extreme.

Jeff, a 20-year-old junior at the University of Illinois who dedicates a large part of his time to playing GTA, is an example. "Oh, no, not another grownup telling us that this stuff is all bad for us!" He looks at me skeptically. "I mean we all know the PC drill, blah blah blah. But c'mon, man. It's only a goddamned game after all. It's just entertainment."

"Yeah, so what, I play video games," says Dave, the 24-year-old behind the counter at my local video store. "I don't care that they're not PC; I like that. It's the one place I can go—well, that's not exactly true, since

I listen to Rush and Howard Stern and all those talk show guys—but it's one of the places I can go where I feel like I can just relax, be myself, and not worry about offending anyone. I can offend everyone!"

Why are these guys so angry and defensive? In part because they feel a little guilty that they are spending so much time doing something they know is so purposeless. And all their macho blustering about being proudly not PC is belied by the fact that most of them wouldn't dream of expressing such blatantly racist and sexist opinions in the company of women, for example, or in the presence of a person of color, or in front of their parents or teachers. They know these attitudes are wrong and indefensible: that, in part, is what makes them so attractive. Adolescents have been "proving" their independence with rebellion against their parents' values for generations.

But it goes deeper than that. Guys' defensiveness also has to do with the rage that's both covert and overt in much of what passes as entertainment in Guyland. Because as it turns out, the fantasy world of media is both an escape *from* reality and an escape *to* reality—the "reality" that many of these guys secretly would like to inhabit. Video games, in particular, provide a way for guys to feel empowered. In their daily lives guys often feel that they don't quite measure up to the standards of the Guy Code—always be in control, never show weakness, neediness, vulnerability—and so they create ideal versions of themselves in fantasy. The thinking is simple: If somebody messes with your avatar, you blow him away. It's a fantasy world of Manichean good and evil, a world in which violence is restorative, and actions have no consequences whatsoever.

Is a Steady Diet of Violence Dangerous?

The moment some violent event involving young men captures the headlines, we immediately blame—or defend—the media and its hold on young people's consciousness as if it were somehow the cause of all evil. Yet the public debate is often simplistic and ill-informed. On one side are the shrill jeremiads against "the media"—some vague, amorphous, yet simultaneously monolithic and omnipotent force corrupting the minds of young people, seducing them away from more wholesome pursuits with postures of badass gangstas, or hypermuscular technology-laden gladiatorial avatars blowing away enemies. People have been blaming the media for decades, and for a wide variety of problems—from voter apathy to random school shootings. They argue that media violence serves as a set of user manuals for rape, random acts of violence, crime, and generally represents the decline of civility in modern life.

On the other side of the argument are those who suggest that media simply reflect the society we live in, and that, in many cases, engaging with media has valuable effects. Some argue that watching violent movies or playing a violent video game enables one to experience a kind of catharsis, to safely express anger and aggression *without* actually acting it out. Others, like Steven Johnson in his bestselling book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, argue that video games, for example, may be more cognitively challenging and beneficial than reading a book; they make elaborate cognitive demands, requiring players to "manage a dizzying array of information and options," process massive amounts of information to make complex decisions, and interweave complex narratives while increasing eye-hand coordination. *The Economist* recently chimed in with the opinion that plenty of games "far from encouraging degeneracy, are morally complex, subtle and, very possibly, [intellectually] improving."

While modern games, movies, TV shows, and other media may indeed offer more complex plot lines and make greater cognitive demands, these laudatory comments are really celebrating form not content. Even those who believe that media technology has cognitive value would certainly not attribute any value to using those cognitive skills in the service of murder and mayhem. In many video games geared to guys, violence is not punished; indeed, it is regularly rewarded. Women are prizes to be collected, conquered, and then discarded or murdered. In some games, the steady stream of explosive, lethal, and strategic doses of what Anthony Burgess called "ultra-violence," in his harrowing, futuristic tale, *A Clockwork Orange*, are the only way for the avatar to move to the game's next level.

The claims of the preservers of wholesome family entertainments

are equally myopic. The virtual world of new media is hardly the mono-tonic avalanche overwhelming America's children that these contemporary Chicken Littles would suggest. Even if every single video game taught family values, and if every online porno site was transformed into a feminist seminar, many critics would still be unhappy because they think the technology itself is mind-numbing.

Current debates about the negative effects of video games, music lyrics, and other forms of Guyland entertainment are the latest installment of a debate that has been going on in our society for decades. Does the media *cause* certain behaviors, or merely reflect what is already going on in society? Would censorship reduce the actual (as opposed to virtual) problem, or simply create a new problem that would be, politically speaking, far worse?

Unfortunately, social science research hasn't been much help thus far in informing the debate. That's not from lack of trying, but rather because the findings have often been so complex and inconclusive that few partisans feel they need to pay any attention. To be sure, the research has shed significant light on different aspects of the subject, but light does not translate well when those debating the issues only want fuel for their heatedly polarized positions.

As a social scientist, I'm not convinced that a steady diet of violent video games leads inevitably and inescapably to increased violence by young teenage males. These critics almost always propose a sort of "monkey see, monkey do" model of behavior that reduces human complexity to a series of operant conditioning experiments: If we see it, we'll want to do it, and if we want to do it, we will do it. Most of us are clever enough to create wide gaps between what we see and what we want, and especially between what we want and what we do. There is "little evidence of a substantial link between exposure to violent interactive games and serious real-life violence or crime," observes Cheryl Olson, a professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media. Mark Griffiths, a psychologist and professor of gambling studies at Nottingham Trent University in Britain, and perhaps the leading researcher on online games also finds "little evidence that moderate frequency of play has serious adverse effects."

Nor, even, is the research that proposes that repeated viewing of violent media leaves us numb particularly convincing. Craig Anderson, the Iowa State psychologist, finds that kids become agitated and aggressive after playing video games. That's something virtually any parent could tell him. But to conclude that such agitation will persist for more than a few minutes is an illogical leap—again, as most parents could tell him. Nor can one infer that after watching violent films a kid will then be prompted to pick up a real gun and open fire. Nor can one claim that playing a game or watching a porn video provides enough catharsis to actually reduce anger or sexual aggression. There is absolutely no empirical evidence for any of these claims.

It's certainly true that repeated exposure to terrible, disgusting, or traumatic images leads to a certain amount of "psychic numbing," but this kind of self-protective indifference does not necessarily carry over into real life. After viewing 40,000 car crashes and 10,000 murders in movies and television, a guy will certainly not feel "numb" if he witnesses a car crash or murder in real life.

This link between watching and doing, or even between watching and justifying, may not be definitively proven by researchers, but that doesn't mean that there aren't moral issues in question. What does it mean that so many young men find images of ultraviolent urban mayhem so exciting that they stay glued to their video consoles for hours at a time? What does it mean that the portrayal of women not only in pornography but also in video games and music lyrics (and on TV, and on the radio, and on the Internet, and in every single type of media that is geared toward young men) is not only sexist and denigrating but also often outright and unapologetically hateful, violent, and misogynist? What does it mean that people of color continue to be portrayed by stereotypes that have been recognized as racist, offensive, and unacceptable for more than thirty years? These are questions about how guys view *masculinity*, not simple questions about the "effects" of some media on people.

So if it isn't a "license to kill," what are guys getting out of all their media consumption? They're getting a parallel education to the formal curriculum—complete with its own Three R's: Relaxation from the weight of adult demands and of the rules of social decorum (also

now known as political correctness); Revenge, against those who have usurped what you thought was yours; and, Restoration to your rightful entitled position in the world.

Let's look at how these Three R's play out in some of the most popular media in Guyland.

We Got Game(s)

Video games began innocently enough with a computer generated ping-pong game in 1972. Who would have predicted that video games would become what they are today? Video games outsell movies, books, CDs, and DVDs by a landslide.

While the age range of gamers is wide—the median age is 28—they tend to appeal most to guys in their teens and twenties. The average teenage boy plays video games for about 13 hours a week; girls play about 5 hours a week. More than one-third of Americans rank computer and video games "the most fun family entertainment."

The games vary a lot: by type, by format, and, of course, by gender. Some games are played by one or two (or a few more) players on a console box, hooked up to the TV. Others are played online, on a computer. And some, called Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (or MMORPGs), are played live, with thousands of people all over the world playing simultaneously.

Of video games, sports games, like Madden NFL or the various baseball and basketball games, command a large share of the market. Adventure and action games, like *GTA* and *Halo*, are by far the most popular genre. And strategy games, like *The Sims*, involve players in real-life decision making and strategic thinking, not simply adventures in the land of blood and guts.

While the majority of players of every game format and genre are male, the percentages vary enormously. At a recent World Cyber Games competition (WCG) in Singapore, 700 boys and men—and one woman!—crossed cyber-swords in online game competition. According to Mark Griffiths, console games (75 percent male, 50 percent over 19 years old) are only slightly more gender-equal than online games (85 percent male, 60 percent over 19 years old). Sports and adventure games come close to 95 percent male players; while strategy games, like *The Sims*, are the only genre where female players have made any inroads. In *The Sims*, the "action," such as it is, has to do with domestic situations. People get jobs, get married, have kids, and even clean the house. "All the men in my class HATED that game," comments William Lugo, a sociology professor at Eastern Connecticut State University, who studies video games and teaches a college course on them. "It was a little too realistic for them."

A new online game, *Second Life*, provides people with an alternative life. Currently, more than 8.5 million people have signed on to a site where they buy and sell real estate and other goods and services (using real money), develop relationships, get jobs, and create families. About $1.6 million real dollars are spent every 24 hours in the game, and the site recently celebrated its first millionaire. Over half of all players are under 30. Many players say they have more authentic experiences in their second lives than they do in their real ones. When fantasy becomes reality, one's real life can only pale by comparison.

Nina Huntemann certainly understands the gender of gaming. A punky feminist professor of communications at Suffolk University outside Boston, she's an avid lifelong gamer and a keen observer. Her research informs a documentary, *Game Over: Gender, Race and Violence in Video Games*, that she created for the Media Education Foundation.

"I constantly got the message that gaming was for guys," she told me. The computer labs in college were "completely dominated by guys and the fact that I liked games, and liked them for the same reasons that they did, made more than a few somewhat uncomfortable." The gaming world, many gamers believe, is part of Guyland, and for women to enter this virtual men's locker room is unacceptable. Recently, a female gamer complained to the video games columnist for the *New York Times* that "the frat boys have taken over video games" pandering to "the lowest common denominator."

Much of Guyland's media is restorative, designed to provide that sense of power and control that men do not feel in real life. There is

an old psychoanalytic maxim that what we lose in reality we re-create in fantasy. And what men believe they have lost is their unchallenged privilege to run the show. Guys play video games, gamble, or pose and posture to the musical stylings of inner-city black youth because these poses give them the feeling of being in control. They spend so much of their lives being bossed around by other people—teachers, parents, bosses—it's really a relief to be the meanest, most violent, and vengeful SOB around. And they spend so much of their lives in a world that is, if not dominated by women, at least is characterized by women's presumed equality, that it's nice to turn back the clock and return to a time when men ruled—and no one questioned it.

Both in their form and in their content, games give you the feeling of power and control. They take the control out of the hands of the director and put it in the hands of the consumer. That's why Dan Houser, 31, one of the cofounders and creative vice-presidents of Rockstar Games, predicts that "games are going to take over from movies as the mainstream form of entertainment." Books, he explains, "tell you something. Movies show you something. But games let you *do* something."

By and large, of course, video gaming is harmless fun. My son, Zachary, just turned 9 and is already in love with video games on his PSP. Every one of his male friends—and not one of his female friends—is already playing what seem to be innocuous computer games, sports games like MLB and World Cup Soccer, and *Star Wars*. And when he's not playing games, he checks out YouTube videos of teenagers lip-synching Weird Al Yankovic parodies or backyard *Star Wars* light-saber battles.

"What I like about video games is that you get to play as someone else, you get to pretend to be someone else," he explains to me. "It's like playing dress up. And you get to decide what the person does. Like in skateboarding, you get to decide which side he goes on, or if he does an Ollie or a grind. So I like that I get to make the decisions."

And it doesn't seem to cut into his love for playing sports—he plays on soccer and hockey teams, and plays other sports with me—or his school work, or reading, playing the drums, or guitar, or singing, or any of the other things he loves to do. It's a big part of his life, but

it hasn't displaced any other parts. Yet, because gaming is so gender-asymmetrical, his mother and I worry that these videos will create a false fissure between the play worlds of boys and girls that becomes a chasm by middle school. The signs are already there.

"There are a couple of boys in my [third grade] class who I think are already playing too much," Zachary says. "Like, every single lunchtime they say that they just beat the seventh level on *Lego Star Wars*. It's ridiculous. It's like the only thing they can talk about."

The problem is less about form—how much they play or how often. These sorts of discussions distract us from the important conversations we need to have about content. We need to engage with the steady diet of violence, fighting, and misogyny. If that's their steady diet, they're consuming cultural junk food.

But it's junk food that packs a punch. Reality is disappointing; video fantasy is exciting. "Video games have the quality of being so explicit, so blatant, in their representations of men, women, of power, of control, that they lay out some of the key ideologies of the culture in absolutely unmistakable, vivid ways," comments Michael Morgan, a professor of communications at the University of Massachusetts, in the documentary *Game Over*.

The characters are almost always massively exaggerated gender stereotypes: The male characters in their torn T-shirts and army fatigues have biceps that would make GI Joe look puny; indeed their upper torsos are so massive, their waists so small, and their thighs so powerfully bulging that there is no way that most of these characters could actually stand up. They're cartoons, in the same way that the characters embodied in professional wrestling are cartoon versions of hypermasculine stereotypes.

While they may look like they just left the shower room of a Christopher Street gym, all the avatars in game-land are straight. And so are the women: powerful, strong enough to be threatening, but always straight, always with blond disheveled "bedroom" hair—a sort of recently sexually ravaged look—with breasts so large and a waist so small they make Barbie look well proportioned. And they're eternally grateful to their hypermasculine muscle-bound rescuers. In one game, *Duke Nukem*,

the "Everyman American Hero," finds a landscape in which all the men have been killed and only Duke can rescue a million "babes" who have been captured by aliens. The women are, of course, swooningly grateful. Even Lara Croft, the female action-game icon, is a hypersexualized babe—who happens to know how to handle a grenade launcher.

Let's return for a moment to *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, among the most popular and widely discussed video games on the market. The set-up for the game, what the producers call the "cinematic," is a thin justification for the violence and mayhem that your character, or avatar, then creates. After the introduction, it becomes back story, never again referred to. In the fictionalized cities of Los Santos and San Fiero—Los Angeles and San Francisco—your goals are to sell drugs, build your crime empire, kill cops. You can kill anyone you want. You can increase your health by picking up a prostitute and having sex with her in your car. And you can recoup the money you paid by following her out of your car and killing her.

GTA has been so popular that its creators, Rockstar Entertainment, have created a new, East Coast urban setting, based on the 1979 cult classic, *The Warriors*. Like *GTA*, *The Warriors* is a "dark urban fantasy set in a dystopian city dominated by gangs." The cinematic offers a multiracial street gang that has been falsely accused of murder. They then have to fight their way from the burned-out projects in the Bronx to Coney Island. Unlike many games, in this one they don't use assault weapons, rocket grenades, or other heavy artillery; in *The Warriors*, it's baseball bats, chains and knives, and lots of hand-to-hand combat.

Of course, most guys who play *The Warriors* will never find themselves in a rumble in real life—and this, too, is part of the appeal. Games offer safe risk-taking, power without pain. You can be a master of the universe, a gangsta blowing away the police and scoring the babes, without ever leaving the comfort of your dorm room or apartment, let alone venture into the real hood. The thrills are visceral and exciting, yet safe and contained. For young white guys playing *GTA* in their suburban dens, rapping and posing in their family-room mirrors, some of the thrill comes from being a badass dude with no real consequences.

Gaming for Real

That boundary-blurring between game and reality also seems to be part of the thrill of online gambling, especially the dramatic proliferation of online poker.

The single largest group of online poker players is young men, 14 to 22 years old, according to the National Annenberg Risk Survey (NARSY) in 2003 and 2004. In 2004, 11.4 percent of high-school and college males reported betting on cards at least once a week, nearly double the number from the year before. These increases were similar between high-school gamblers (5.7 percent in 2003 to 10.8 percent in 2004) and college guys (7.3 percent in 2003 to 12.5 percent in 2004). That means that one in eight college guys is betting on poker games online at least once a week. In fact, it's increasingly younger guys. In 2003, 25.9 percent of youth who bet on cards weekly were under 18; by 2004, it was 43.2 percent who were under 18.

A front-page story in the *New York Times* recently profiled Michael Sandberg, a 22-year-old senior politics major at Princeton, who's won more than $120,000 this year alone at PartyPoker.com, and paying for four years at one of the nation's most expensive and prestigious universities. Playing up to ten hours a day, Sandberg considers his poker playing more of a career move than collegiate recreation. "I don't think I can make $120,000 doing anything but poker," he told the reporter. "I was half-studying for my politics exam today, but I got bored and started playing poker on my computer instead."

Poker parties are now standard fare on campuses all across the country. This past December, a sorority at Columbia held an 80-player tournament; they expect triple that next year. At North Carolina, 175 players anted up $10 minimums to play in one tournament. At the University of Pennsylvania, private games are advertised every night on a campus email list.

Routinely, guys at MIT and Cal Tech work out complicated algorithms to stack the odds in their favor, and many of them end up winning a lot of money. But online poker is a sophisticated pyramid scheme—some at the top win big, while hundreds of thousands of less-clever guys

wager more modest amounts and end up losing the money they were supposed to be spending on books, clothes, laundry, or food.

Recently, I changed planes in Las Vegas, and had a two-hour layover, which would have enabled me to gamble in a variety of ways without ever leaving the airport. Instead, I watched as plane after plane disgorged its passengers. About half the arrivals resembled the Las Vegas I had seen during my last visit, about twenty years earlier: old ladies with silver hair and a twinkle in their eyes as they headed off to slot machine heaven; middle-aged and overweight couples, there to renew their marriages and hopefully pay off their crushing mortgages; young starry-eyed couples off for the shows and the drive-through weddings.

But at least half the arriving passengers were guys in their twenties, with nary a hatless head among them (baseball caps outnumbered cowboy hats by about 4 to 1). They were already somewhat rowdy, checking each other's poker strategies, ready for action. Like Dave, a 26-year-old who said of his job "it doesn't matter, just put that I work in an office." According to Dave, he and his six friends saved for a year for this trip, and they were each carrying several thousand dollars. They would splurge on a suite (into which they would all cram), and were hoping to "put all that nickel-and-dime-poker-every-week knowledge to good use" in Vegas.

Would they take in any of the shows, or try and meet girls? He winced, and looked at me as if I were asking if he intended to get a bikini wax. "Uh, we're here for the money," he said. End of story.

Guy TV and Guy Radio: Politically Incorrect and Loving It

All day long, in every waking sphere of life—at work, in school, at the dinner table—guys feel like they have to be so polite, socially acceptable, respectful, and politically correct. In the fantasy world of Guyland media they can re-create what they feel they've lost in reality—entitlement, control, unchallenged rule, and the untrammeled right to be gross, offensive, and politically incorrect. Many of the radio and television programs specifically geared toward the Guyland demographic are unapologetic about (and even proud of) their offensiveness. *Spike*

TV appears to take the attitude that television has been so effectively colonized by women that guys need a room—or a network—all their own where they can be themselves.

Some Guy TV is simply regressive. More than one-fourth of all viewers of *SpongeBob Squarepants* are over 18 years old, according to Nickelodeon. "I'm 22, and my favorite show on TV is *SpongeBob*, and I watch Jimmy Neutron all the time," says one guy.

In the car, at work, or during those few minutes a day when the TV is off at home, young men are tuning into "Guy Radio"—the steady stream of right-wing political pundits whose main stock in trade is outrage. From the liberal Howard Stern to the ultraconservative Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, the radio hosts and their legions of fans spend most of their time fuming at lost privileges, seething that white men are now society's victims, arguing that "they" are enacting injustices on "us." "They" refers to pretty much everyone not like middle-class white men—minorities, gays, women, and, of course, a "feminizing" government bureaucracy. The participatory town meeting quality of Guy Radio, with its steady stream of callers, ups the emotional ante. Sure, there's plenty of defensive anger to go around. But the tone expresses a sense of aggrieved entitlement.

Matt, 22, and a senior at Vanderbilt who has just been accepted to law school tells me:

I was raised to believe in the whole enchilada, you know, like truth, justice, and the American way. Fairness and equality. And I busted my ass to get in here, and to get good enough grades to go to a good law school. And did I get into Duke or Virginia? No. And are there guys in my classes who had lower grades than me and lower LSATs and did they get in just because they were minorities? Uh, yeah. And girls?! Unbelieveable. More of them than guys applied and yet they get in because they're girls? They're richer than shit, and their daddies paid for everything. I'm fed up with it. It's not fair. My family didn't own slaves. We're from Pennsylvania, for Chrissakes. I'm not racist; I don't care what color you are. But I shouldn't be penalized because of my race, my color, right? I mean, that's just not fair.

Matt was among the more articulate when it came to discussing substantive issues like affirmative action or race and gender preferences in admissions. Most of the guys mouthed platitudes they took directly from the radio shows, without so much as actually thinking if they applied to their situations or not, lines like "it's not the government's money, it's the people's money" in response to tax policy.

Of course, not all guys subscribe to this "white-man-as-victim" mentality. Many are more thoughtful than that, were raised in households where such talk was unconditionally unacceptable, and are intelligent enough to see through the rhetoric. Yet so many of them do buy into it, that it demands our attention. And, to be fair, guys didn't come up with these attitudes all by themselves. This kind of outrage is learned—and the "teachers" are both the adults in guys' lives and, perhaps especially, media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh and other members of the furious media punditocracy. Guys are seduced by such easy answers to the problems that face them as they come of age in an economy in which they will probably never be able to live up to their parents' standards. The rhetoric of Guy Radio assures guys that the problems in their lives are not their fault. Yet rather than point to the actual causes of these problems, rather than take a well-informed and thoughtful approach to looking at the world around them, these media personalities point instead to the easiest and most available scapegoats—those just below "us" on the social ladder.

Despite modern advances, the idea of white male privilege still hasn't disappeared—it's simply found a new home in and anger-and-resentment-fueled "good old days" rhetoric. "Man, you got screwed. In the good old days you would have a great job by now. You would have had a nice house, a nice car, a wife who takes care of you. You got robbed. In fact, now you're even worse off, because if you're white and you're a man you don't stand a chance. Everybody hates you. Everybody blames you for their oppression. Women, gay men, blacks, Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, everybody. And you didn't even *do* anything!" And while none of this is actually true (even the good old days were only good for a very few), that's not the point. The point is that angry right-wing radio personalities give permission for a very low level of discourse and a very high level of rage. This permission not only allows but encourages guys to be as angry as they want to be, boosting guys' sense of entitlement and importance.

Macho Stylin' in Black and White: Music in Guyland

When guys are not being angry white guys, they often adopt the stylings of angry black guys, in speech, dress, and culture, particularly rap music.

The rap on rap music has long been its vile misogyny, its celebration of gangsta thuggery, predatory sexuality, and violence. In its defense, rap's promoters and fans argue that the genre's symbolic assertions of manhood are necessary for an inner-city black youth for whom racism and poverty have been experienced as so emasculating. Rap is a "loud scratchy, in-your-face aesthetic" that "sprang off the uptown streets of New York City" and has come to represent to the world the current generation of black male teenage life. So what if rap basically confirms every vile stereotype of African Americans—violent, out-of-control, sexual predators—that racists have long held. It's an "authentic" expression.

Besides, rap's defenders argue, rap's misogyny and homophobia are not all that different from the violence and macho swagger of heavy metal, hard rock, or punk music. They do have a point. Indeed, in response to the success of rap and hip-hop, hard rockers have ratcheted up their own misogynistic proclamations of manhood. But debating whether heavy metal or hip-hop is more misogynist is an empty debate, one that skirts the key similarity between them: Both genres celebrate a particular image of masculinity—an image that seems to appeal to middle-class white guys. What does it mean that so many white guys appropriate inner-city musical genres—as well as the fashion, language, and physical gestures and idioms? Mark Anthony Neal argues that "hip hop represents a space where [white guys] work through the idea of how their masculinity can be lived—what they literally take from the hypermasculine 'black buck.'"

True enough, but I also think that an essential element of this masculinity is that it is seen as *authentic*. White suburban masculinity has

become so safe and sanitized, the lives of these guys so tracked—school, college, job, marriage, family, death—that they search for something that feels "real." "We spend our entire days trying to fit into a perfect little bubble," said one young man to author Bakari Kitwana. "The perfect $500,000 house. The perfect overscheduled kids. . . . We love life, but we hate our lives. And so I think we identify more with hip-hop's passion, anger and frustration than we do this dream world." And, in a psychological flurry worthy of Freud, they project that credibility and authenticity onto inner-city black youth, and then consume it in the form of hip-hop music, Sean John clothes, and appropriation of ghetto jargon.

"We love life, but we hate our lives." An astonishingly revealing phrase. What is it that white guys hate so much about their own lives? And what does their consumption of African-American cultural styles mean—culturally and politically? What they hate is the inauthenticity, the requirements that they be good, polite, and decent toward women, that they suffer through experiences they feel are emasculating and humiliating. Defiant rebellion is what they project onto black culture—because they subscribe both to the surface reading of badness being cool, and because they accept the racist idea that black people are "naturally" like this—i.e., that such a "cool pose" is actually a gendered response of black men to racial inequality. They embrace the badness, but avoid engaging with its historical origins. Repackaged as music, black anger is sanitized for white consumption.

And consume it they do. According to market researchers and music impresarios, between 70 percent and 80 percent of hip-hop consumers are white. While young white guys also buy the majority of hard rock and heavy metal CDs, those same young white guys are in rather scarce supply at hip-hop concerts. Consumption of the inner city stops at the borders of the ghetto. As media critic and journalist Kevin Powell puts it, white fascination with hip-hop is "just a cultural safari for white people." It's safe because you "can take it off. White hip-hop kids can turn their caps around, put a belt in their pants and go to the mall without being followed," noted one observer. The "Afro-Americanization of White Youth," as Cornel West calls it in his bestselling book, *Race Mat-*

ters, turns out to coexist easily with white guys' opposition to affirmative action. Cultural identification does not necessarily lead to political alliance, which might explain the meteoric rise of Eminem to the pop pantheon.

Eminem's got credibility—he may be white, but he's the real deal, an authentic rapper not just a fabricated product of white music producers like Vanilla Ice was. Eminem's credibility is based on class, not race. His impoverished, downwardly mobile working-class Detroit background matched that of many other whites who had drifted to the far right; but Eminem took himself into the urban ghetto rather than into the woods with the Michigan Militias. In his autobiographical film, *8 Mile*, his ultimate success comes as he defeats a middle-class black rapper, thus asserting class solidarity over racial divisiveness.

Eminem speaks to young white guys as few others of their generation, capturing their anger and malaise-driven angst while maintaining his credibility among inner city blacks, who are the arbiters of the musical genre. Like other rappers, he draws from a deep well of class-based, gendered rage, as well as adolescent declarations of manhood that are part protest and part phallic fluff. But unlike other rappers, Eminem is white, and thus enables guys' identification in a way that doesn't feel like they're ventriloquists, staking a claim to authenticity by speaking in another group's tongue.

White Guys as Winners—Finally!

What it all adds up to is that guys—young guys, guys in their teens and twenties—are sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. One might expect this sort of thing from middle-aged men who feel as if they've been sold a bill of goods and feel ripped off by a system that cares not a whit about them. Older men who have watched their meager savings trickle up to monstrous corporate salaries, who land with a thud after being downsized or laid off, who watch their bosses float happily in their golden parachutes. But you wouldn't expect it from young guys, guys full of the promise of their entire adult life ahead of them. What have they lost?

Their sense of entitlement. Their sense that the world is their oyster, their home, their castle. It no longer feels like "this land was made for you and me," as Woody Guthrie sang, but for somebody else. They're tired of "being made to feel like losers," as many of them put it. They're tired of feeling that the game is over before they've even started to play. They're tired of putting the damned toilet seat down every time, of saying "he or she" on their term papers, of calling people of color "people of color." They're tired of feeing like there is no mobility—or, if there is, someone else is climbing over them on the ladder of success. They want to escape to a world where men rule and where reality doesn't get in the way. "Where else can you get the chance to storm the beach of Normandy or duel with light sabers or even fight the system and go out for a pizza when you're done?" asks David, an avid gamer for over twenty years.

In the gaming world, they get the world as they wish it would be, the world as they had imagined it would be if they played their cards right and subscribed to the Guy Code. They get the world they feel entitled to.

In their media world more generally, they turn the tables. More, they turn the tables over. They do it angrily—but they also do it in disguise. In some of their media consumption—rap music or some video games—they do it in blackface, symbolically appropriating the idiomatic expressions of the racialized "other" to gain access to and express their own emotions. Video games in which your avatar is an inner-city hood on a drug-propelled crime spree, or gangsta rap in which newly minted millionaires grab their genitals and flash their bling-bling while surrounded by gyrating big-bootied babes in g-strings—these are racialized fantasies in which white suburban youth do more than play at being "bad."

At the turn of the last century, as historians have explained, young white male performers would don blackface to express their anxieties and emotions, especially as lonely immigrants in a bewildering new world. They longed for the comforts of home and family—"de ol' folks at home" and "Mammy," a "universal lamentation for homeland and birthplace," as one historian put it—but the demands of masculinity required stoic emotional sturdiness. Blackface gave them access to their feelings, a way to express their anger, impotence, confusion, and longing.

GTA and gangsta rap are racist not simply because they traffic in every single racial and sexual stereotype that have now been banned by campus hate speech codes or workplace harassment rules. The safe and secure white middle-class guys project their needs onto these others, and then take those feelings back. Appropriation "allows Whites to contain their fears and animosities toward Blacks through rituals not of ridicule, as in previous eras, but of adoration," writes University of Hartford communications professor Bill Yousman.

In fact, much of white guys' appropriation of black styles says more about whiteness than it does about racist projections of blackness. For white guys, blacks are all violence, athletic prowess, aggression, and sexual predation—that's what they adore about it. It's all so utterly unapologetically politically incorrect, a massive middle finger to the forces that constrain free speech and make us feel guilty about the racist and sexist stereotypes that we "know" everyone still holds but no one has permission to say. It's *The Man Show* 24/7, with buxom blondes bouncing on trampolines and men with permission—again! finally!—to ogle.

Despite the ubiquitous presence of babes in guys' media world, the presence of real women is often seen as an invasion. Few things provoke more anger than women's invasion of this last all-male world. Whether it's a mother asking her adolescent son to do his homework or wash the dinner dishes, a young woman who wanders into the game zone and wants to play, or a girlfriend or young wife asking that her partner actually spend time with her, men resent the intrusion of real women into their fantasy worlds.

Guyland's expansive and expanding entertainment arcade is to the beginning of the twenty-first century what the western novel or the adventure yarn was to the beginning of the twentieth century: an untrammeled world of homosocial purity, a pristine natural landscape where men can test themselves against the forces of nature and other men, uncorrupted and untainted by the feminizing influence of women. It's a world of surface thrills and excitement, masking a growing disquiet with guys' roles in life, and a gnawing sense that what they were told would be theirs is no longer their birthright.

The electronic environment of Guyland structures the fantasy lives

of young men. Instead of embarking on this new stage of life with energy and enthusiasm, as they face the future, these relatively affluent and certainly privileged young guys seem defensive and angry, listless and indifferent. Instead of actually taking control of their lives—exploring career paths, lifestyles, and relationships that might leave them with an authentic feeling of power—they opt to live in a world that grants the illusion of control, as if to say, "It doesn't matter if I'm in control, as long as I get to feel as if I am." Guyland is seductive, easy, and suggests you never have to grow up. Peter Pan now has a joystick. Why would he ever leave Neverland?

But Guyland is also crippling young men, making it more difficult for them to negotiate real relationships with real women, or to commit to careers and family lives. And nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to fantasies about sex.

8 | BABES IN BOYLAND: PORNOGRAPHY

Guys are preoccupied with girls. But sometimes, they just can't show it. Or, rather, they can show they are girl crazy, but not that they actually *care* about girls. It's a fine line. If a guy isn't preoccupied with girls, then other guys might begin to wonder about him (and his sexuality). Being girl crazy reminds the other guys, with whom he is spending virtually all of his waking hours, that he's not interested in *them*, the other guys, not like that. The homosociality of Guyland, the fact that so much of guys' lives take place with and is judged by other guys, requires the relentless assertion of heterosexuality. At the same time, a guy can't appear too eager, too needy of girls' attention, or he'll come across as desperate. He must remain cool, calm, in control, both for the sake of appearances among the other guys and to increase his chances of success with a girl. It's the guys who appear the most disinterested who end up being the coolest, the ones that the girls find most attractive.

The time-honored way for a guy to prove that he is a real man is to score with a woman. It indicates both his desirability and his virility, and proves that he's succeeding in the often complicated task of attaining manhood. The problem, however, is that for guys, girls often feel like the primary obstacle to proving manhood. They are not nearly as