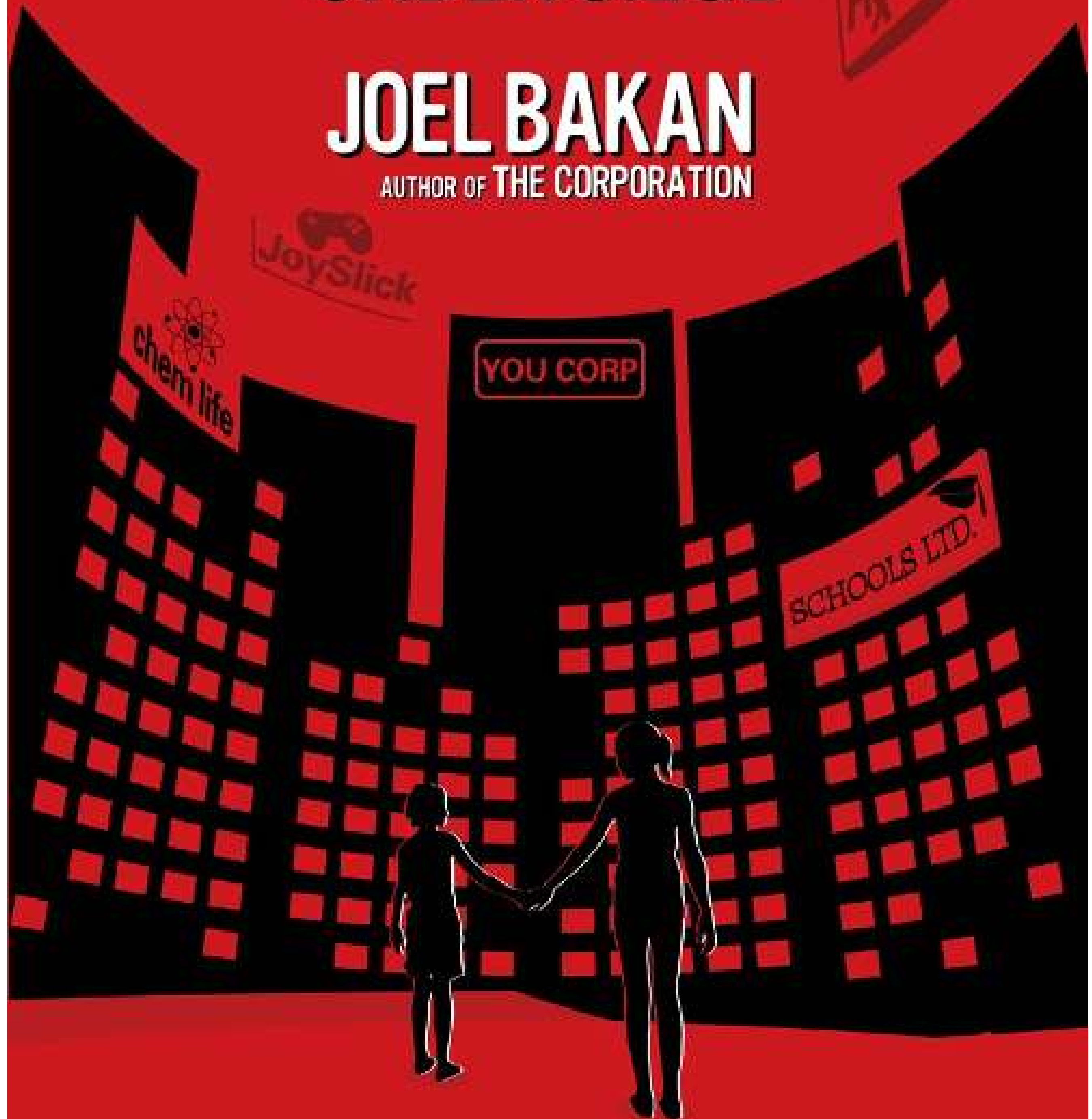
CHILDHOOD UNDER SIEGE



HOW BIG BUSINESS TARGETS CHILDREN

CORPORATIONS HAVE FOUND A NEW RESOURCE TO BE MINED FOR PROFIT: OUR CHILDREN. In this shocking and indelible behind-the-scenes journey, Joel Bakan, acclaimed author and award-winning maker of the renowned film and international bestselling book *The Corporation*, uncovers the astonishing degree to which companies exploit the special vulnerabilities of children, manipulate parents' fears, and operate with callous disregard for children's health and well-being.

The number of children taking dangerous psychotropic drugs has skyrocketed as pharmaceutical companies employ insidious, often illegal tactics to inflate diagnoses of disorders and convince parents their children require medication. A highly sophisticated marketing industry deploys increasingly subtle and powerful tactics to play on children's intense emotions and desires and to lure them into obsessive consumerism. Computer game designers craft techniques to titillate children with sex and violence, while social media developers infiltrate and shape children's social and emotional worlds to compel them to spend more and more monetizable time online. America's schools are being transformed into profit centers while children are subjected to increasingly regimented teaching that thwarts curiosity and creativity, numbing the joy of learning. And children's chronic health problems, from asthma to cancer, autism, and birth defects, steadily escalate as thousands of new industrial chemicals are dumped into their environments.

Nelson Mandela once sagely remarked that "there can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats its children." The problem today, as Joel Bakan reveals, is that business interests have made protecting children extremely difficult. Corporations pump billions into rendering parents and governments powerless to shield children from an unrelenting commercial assault, with the result that after a century of progress, during which protective laws and regulations were widely promulgated, children are once again exposed to substantial harms at the hands of economic actors.

Childhood Under Siege leaves no room for doubt that this assault on childhood is a major crisis of our time. A powerful manifesto for urgent change, it empowers us to shield our own children while offering concrete and realistic proposals for legal reforms that would protect all children from these predatory practices.

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *CHILDHOOD UNDER SIEGE*

"*Childhood Under Siege* is an essential read for anyone who works for or cares about children because we simply can't advocate for and teach them effectively if we don't know what we are up against. As a mother and a teacher, it was sometimes overwhelming to read this book, but for my own work and parenting I forced myself to keep going. At times it was deeply frightening—and I do media literacy training as part of my work. It's very simple: If you want to be relevant in a child's life, you need to read this book." —Rosalind Wiseman, author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes*

"*Childhood Under Siege* outlines the powerful strategies at play in the corporate war against children. This engaging, carefully researched, and important book is a call to action to those who believe we have a responsibility to protect all our children with our laws and public policies as well as our hearts."
—Mary Pipher, author of *The Shelter of Each Other* and *Seeking Peace*

"Separated by corporate design from their parents, kids have become capitalism's newest, most lucrative, and most vulnerable consumers. Joel Bakan offers an angry but careful analysis of how the market flourishes today by selling our children everything from dangerous drugs, toxic plastics, and unhealthy snack foods to violent and addictive video games and for-profit standardized tests. If they read Bakan carefully, once they get over their rage, both parents and policy makers may be ready to lift the corporate siege that is threatening not just our children but childhood itself." —Benjamin R. Barber, author of *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*

"*Childhood Under Siege* is a compelling call to arms in the covert war for our children's minds, health, and future. Joel Bakan empowers us all to stop lamenting the destruction of childhood and do something to rescue it." —Jane M. Healy, PhD, educational psychologist and author of *Different Learners: Identifying, Preventing, and Treating Your Child's Learning Problems*

"To be a child today, even in affluent countries like ours, is no longer a time of innocence, idyll, and discovery, as Bakan reveals in *Childhood Under Siege*. Most children today grow up on a planet in which billions of tons of toxic chemicals have been poured into the air, water, and soil; in a big city where the opportunity to encounter nature has been replaced by concrete, fast cars, video games, and shopping malls; in a world in which childhood represents a marketing challenge and opportunity. Read this important book and then start working for change." —David Suzuki, cofounder, the David Suzuki Foundation

"Joel Bakan documents and depicts a modern disaster-in-the-making as ominous as our society's assault on the natural environment: the social and economic destruction of the conditions for healthy childhood. An eloquent and prophetic work we need most urgently to heed." —Gabor Maté, MD, author of *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*

Also by Joel Bakan

The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power

Just Words: Constitutional Rights and Social Wrongs

Childhood Under Siege

How Big Business Targets Children

Joel Bakan

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For Rebecca
Myim and Sadie
Rita (in loving memory) and Paul
with all my love

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Introduction

I remember vividly one hot summer night in the early 1970s. I had escaped the cramped and humid hell a Catskills bungalow (my extended family had met there for a “vacation”), and made my way to the Tee Glow Ball Disco at the big hotel down the road. Girls, a mystery to me (I was thirteen at the time), h become intriguing over the previous year, and one of them on the dance floor caught my eye. Aft mustering the courage to ask her to dance—she said, “Yes”—I knew my luck was doubly blessed when slow number came on. We embraced, awkwardly, and began to move together to the music. I thought I w in heaven.

But suddenly the lights came on, the music stopped, and the glow ball ceased to glow. Two men, the necks craned and eyes squinting, made their way slowly to the middle of the dance floor. One of them, m father, had a flashlight tied to his head with a bungie cord; the other, short with bandy legs, knee-high whi socks, and Bermuda shorts, was my uncle Ben. Later that night I would learn the two men had be dispatched by my panic-stricken family to track me down and bring me home when they realized I had go missing. But at that moment, standing there stunned on the dance floor, my dark-adapted eyes stinging the harsh, unwanted light, I knew I had to do something, and fast.

I pulled my princess close, kissed her hard on the lips (a first for me), bolted the dance floor and fled th hotel. When I hit the unlit road, I took a last look behind me. There I saw the strangest sight— disembodied light bobbing eerily up and down, about six feet off the ground. It was, I realized, the flashlig attached to my father’s head.

“It’s me, I’m over here, I’m okay,” I shouted.

Now, for most kids, certainly for me that night in the Catskills, parents can be a real drag—clueles embarrassing, sometimes humiliating, overprotective, and always uncool. They make rules, curtail freedom spy and monitor, assign chores, require homework be done, limit computer use and TV watching, cu candy and soda consumption, forbid sex, alcohol and drugs, impose curfews, and vet friends. Even youn children, and certainly tweens and teens, understand that parents get in the way of fun.

But—and this is the tricky part of it all—kids still want their parents to parent. Despite all the eye rolli and door slamming, they want parents to care about where they are and what they are doing, to care abo them.[1] My father had ruined my night and humiliated me, but even my snarky teenage self knew that as parent, he was just doing his job. I hated what he did, but at some level I felt cared for, even loved, by th fact he had done something, however awful (did he really have to wear that flashlight on his head?), to ke me safe.

Parents, like my father that night, know their job is to keep kids safe, and to make sure they feel and a loved and cared for, protected. It is the most difficult job in the world.

I should confess: I was not a model child. There was nothing innocent, idyllic, or calm about m childhood. I shot squirrels with BB guns, pelted cars with rocks, taunted trains for the sake of a thrill and flattened penny—even blew up a small tree with a bundle of fireworks. I hung around the local drugsto plugging quarters into pinball machines and sneaking peeks at *Playboy*s on the magazine rack. Later, as teenager, I experimented with sex, drugs, and alcohol, played rock and roll, smoked cigarettes, drove ca before I got my driver’s license (my friends and I would “steal” our parents’ cars and drive them aroun town in the middle of the night), and attracted the ire of teachers, principals, and the police. I dismissed m parents’ warnings and rules (they were so uncool), felt invincible, fashioned myself a rebel, and railed again anything that smacked of adult authority or sensibility.

I made my parents' lives difficult with worry. "May your own children cause you as much grief as yo have caused me," my mother frequently cursed. But I was just a normal kid doing the things kids (or at lea some of them) normally do.

Now, watching my own teenage kids grow up, a boy and a girl—each making good on my mother curse in different ways—I remind myself, constantly, that this is how it goes. Childhood, the period betwee infancy and the end of adolescence, is not, and nor should it be, all purity and innocence. Danger, sexu curiosity, fascination with violence and horror, and intrigue with adult vices are all normal parts of growin up, as are rebelliousness, moodiness, acting out, and the belief that parents, teachers, and other adults a clued out and unfair most of the time.

So you will not find here a lament for youth's wayward ways, nor an ode to the lost innocence o childhood. Children, I believe, have stayed much the same over the generations, at least in terms of the essential needs and natures. They go through the same developmental stages, each with its own difficultie confusions, dependencies, abilities, and vulnerabilities, and they require the same things from adults—lov protection, guidance, freedom, and respect.

Parents, for their part, have also stayed much the same—profoundly, instinctively, and universally lovin their children; cherishing, nurturing, caring, and hoping for them. And because childhood is a dangero time, with children small, inexperienced, still forming and vulnerable, parenting can be as much about fe as it is about love. Indeed, the two are inextricably tied. Out of love we cherish our children, wanting the to be safe, healthy, and happy, and to grow up into well-adjusted, productive, and life-loving adults. Out fear we worry about anything that might deny them these things.

Knowing what to fear, and what not to—the "capacity to fear accurately," as psychoanalyst Erik Erikso described it in his landmark work *Childhood and Society*—is key to good parenting (and also to staying sa as a parent).[2] But it is not always easy to do, especially when, as in today's media-saturated culture, ne dangers to children, or avowed denials of such, are headline-grabbing news every day.

Fearing accurately is made all the more difficult—and this is one of my central arguments—by t tendency of corporations and industries to incite and diminish fears in ways that serve their own purpose Big business not only produces an inordinate amount of harm and danger to children, but also dictates t ways we fear (or do not fear) harm and danger. Whatever the issue—sex and violence in children's medi mental disorders among children, the ill effects of industrial chemicals on children's health, or failing schoo —business interests, with the help of marketers, media, and public relations firms, craft "information" th creates and downplays fears in order to help sell products and justify harmful practices. The problem further compounded by the fact the very institutions responsible for providing good and imparti information—government, science, medicine, and education—have, over the last few decades, come und industry's influence.

As a result of all of this, I argue below, we, as parents, are systematically misinformed, and our fea channeled to serve the interests of industry and corporations rather than those of our children. My hope f this book is that it will provide a corrective to this tendency; that it will help us fear accurately for the fat of children, and thus enable us, both as parents and citizens, to better protect them from harm.

I do not address every childhood issue, only those where for-profit corporations are centrally and direct involved in putting children at risk of harm. That is, however, a significant subset of issues, and one wi profound and wide-ranging effects on children's lives. Needless to say, corporations are not the only culprit Poverty, racism, sexism, neglect, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, exploitation, illness, and fami dysfunction also undermine children's health and well-being.[3] These factors are, in their broader dimensior

beyond the scope of this book, but I do examine their intersections with the book's core issues throughout.

By way of a brief overview, then, subsequent chapters investigate the facts that:

- A massive and growing kid marketing industry is targeting children with increasingly callous and devious methods to manipulate their forming and vulnerable emotions, cultivate compulsive behavior, and addle their psyches with violence, sex, and obsessive consumerism.
- More and more children are taking dangerous psychotropic drugs—the numbers have increased severalfold since 1980—as pharmaceutical companies commandeer medical science and deploy dubious and often illegal marketing tactics to boost sales.
- Children's chronic health problems, including asthma, cancer, autism and birth defects, are on the rise as corporations dump thousands of new chemicals, in increasing amounts, into the environment usually with the license of governments.
- Children as young as five years old are working illegally on farms in the United States, getting injured becoming ill, and dying on the job, while the *legal* age for farm work remains a shockingly low twelve years old.
- America's public schools are becoming lucrative private-sector markets as education is harnessed to the immediate and self-interested needs of industry and learning is increasingly regimented and standardized.

What unites all of these scenarios is that, in each, for-profit corporations are either exploiting or neglecti (sometimes both at once) children's unique vulnerabilities and needs. There are other areas where th happens, no doubt, and within each area investigated there are legions more issues, stories, and exampl than I can possibly explore. Hence, my aim is not to be encyclopedic, but rather to make and illustrate larger point about childhood and society today—namely, that as governments retreat from their previo roles of protecting children from harm at the hands of corporations, we, as a society, expose them exploitation, neglect their needs and interests, and thus betray what we, as individuals, cherish most in o lives.

I focus on wealthy countries, particularly the United States. While children undoubtedly suffer wor fates in poor and developing countries, where violence, dislocation, and hunger are pervasive and acute, it my belief—and an animating belief of this work—that the practices of wealthy countries must also scrutinized. Not only do children in these countries suffer too, and disproportionately so if they are poo but the countries wield tremendous power and influence in the world, shaping, directly and indirectly, th policies and practices of poor and less developed countries. These are good reasons to hold wealthy countri accountable for how they treat children.

Another good reason to hold them accountable is that in wealthy countries we *can* protect children; have the necessary means and resources to do so. The fact that we often choose not to, and instead allo children's interests to be sacrificed to corporations' self-interested pursuit of profit, is particularl objectionable. A society that refuses to protect its most vulnerable members from harm and exploitatio *even when it can*, after all—even where the fewest barriers exist to doing so—has truly lost its way. As Nels Mandela once stated, "There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way it treats i children." Following that logic, and on the basis of what follows, we should be gravely concerned about o own society's soul.

Chapter One

The Century of the Child

Over the course of history, societies have struggled with the question of how to deal with children an childhood. During medieval times, for example, there was little sense of childhood as a unique an vulnerable time of life. Children enjoyed few special protections or benefits and inhabited alongside adul the worlds of work, social life, and even sex ("the practice of playing with children's privy parts formed pa of a widespread tradition," states historian Philippe Aries).[1] "There was no place for childhood in th medieval world," according to Aries.[2]

Things did not improve with industrialization. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, children wer scooped from orphanages and workhouses to toil in the "dark satanic mills,"[3] as William Blake describ them, of Britain's early textile industry, places of "sexual license, foul language, cruelty, violent accidents and alien manners," according to the historian E. P. Thompson.[4]

In the United States too, child labor was common in textile mills, especially in the post–Civil War Sout where children as young as five years old worked long shifts in horrible conditions. "It's over eight o'cloc when these children reach their homes—later if the millwork is behind-hand and they are kept over hours according to one woman after she visited a South Carolina mill. "They are usually beyond speech," sh continued.

> They fall asleep at the table, on the stairs; they are carried to bed and there laid down as they are, unwashed, undressed and the inanimate bundles of rags so lie until the mill summons them with its imperious cry before sunrise, while they are still in stupid sleep.[5]

As industrialization progressed, children were moved from mills to factories and mines, where conditio were often even worse.

A broad-based child-saving movement began to emerge during the nineteenth century.[6] By the twentie century—the "century of the child," as one book published in 1900 prophesized in its title[7]—most mode nations had committed to the notion, historically rooted in the common law principle of *parens patriae* sovereign's duty toward children and other vulnerable groups), that societies, through their governments, a obliged to protect children and promote their interests. Legal systems were remade on a global scale reflect that idea, and children came to be recognized by the law as uniquely vulnerable persons with speci rights and needs.

Child labor was outlawed, as was the sale and marketing to children of adult vices such as tobacc alcohol, and pornography, and consumer protection laws were designed to pay special attention to produ safety and to advertising aimed at children. Governments undertook (to different degrees in different place to provide children with education and health care, and to ensure their general welfare. Parents along wi other adults were made criminally liable for neglecting and exploiting children, and juveniles who broke t law were spared the harsh treatment of criminal justice systems. Most modern nations embraced these kin of reforms, which were also entrenched in international law when the United Nations proclaimed *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* in 1959.

Despite flaws and limitations, the reforms of the century of the child were remarkable for their scope an impact. By the middle of the century it could no longer be doubted that society was duty-bound to prote children and invest in their futures; to help them survive, be healthy, and flourish as human beings.

The century's progressive momentum came to a sudden halt, however, near its end—in 1980 to be exac

That year, according to political historian David Harvey, marked "a revolutionary turning point in th world's social and economic history . . . [a remaking of] the world around us in a totally different image Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher swept into power in the United States and Great Britain, and a ne economic ideology, usually described as "neoliberalism," was catapulted from the halls of academe into th driver's seat of public policy.[8]

The new ideology's core idea—that free markets are the surest way to achieve the greatest good fo individuals and society—flatly contradicted century-of-the-child reforms. Society should have little authori to interfere with individuals and few responsibilities to help them, it held. Not even children should b coddled by an overbearing "nanny state," as Margaret Thatcher described it. Families along with othe private actors, including corporations, should be left free to make their own choices and decisions. "There no such thing as society," Thatcher famously pronounced, capturing the new ideology's essence. "There ar individual men and women, and there are families."[9]

Individual freedom is essential and desirable, no doubt. But the freedom delivered by neoliberalism wa and remains, partial and problematic. In the name of that freedom, corporations were emancipated fro regulatory constraints and enabled to ride roughshod over others' interests. Neoliberalism's freedom thu became a "freedom to exploit one's fellows [and] to make inordinate gains without commensurable servic to the community," as political philosopher Karl Polanyi has described it, and, as such, a threat to a range o social interests, including the well-being of children.[10]

Children's well-being was, of course, precisely the purpose of century-of-the-child reforms. Thos reforms extended protective rights and benefits to children, and entrenched the "best interests of the chil principle in law. Children were thus legally recognized as *persons* in need of special protection. Over t same period, however, corporations were also legally recognized as *persons*, and the "best interests of t corporation" principle was entrenched in law to protect *their* interests.[11] It was inevitable that the two ne legal persons, and the principles protecting them, would clash. Century-of-the-child reformers sought resolve the ensuing conflict in favor of children. The last thirty years of neoliberal reforms have reversed th priority.

In 2008 the economy nearly collapsed after years of reckless Wall Street adventurism. In 2010 the Gulf Mexico was nearly destroyed as a result of an explosion on a British Petroleum oil rig. Both crises we devastating, acute, and highly visible, wreaking havoc and destruction on massive scales. During the yea preceeding each, however, the recklessly self-interested behavior of the companies involved was open tolerated by governments. Under the banner of neoliberal-inspired deregulation those governments h removed, refused to create, or inadequately enforced protective measures that might have avoided t disasters. In hindsight, it was no surprise that financial institutions, driven by promises of huge profits an with no regulatory constraints in place to stop them, would carelessly grant risky loans, repackage t resulting debt as securities, and build exotic derivative schemes.[12] Nor was it a surprise that BP, a compar with a string of serious environmental and safety infractions dating back at least to the 1990s (thou strategically hidden by its carefully cultivated green image), would, if it could, cut corners to save mon when constructing and operating its deep sea wells.[13]

The crisis addressed in this book, however—the erosion and sometimes outright destruction of ou capacity to protect children from economic activities that might cause them harm—is arguably the mo chilling effect of the turn to neoliberalism. And though it may, unlike its more obvious and acu counterparts, unfold slowly rather than suddenly, take chronic as opposed to catastrophic forms, and engu us so fully it sometimes disappears from view, it is driven by the same dynamics.

In my earlier book and film, *The Corporation*, I argued that for-profit corporations are legally compell always and only to act in ways that serve their own interests. They are programmed to put their missions o creating wealth for their owners above everything else, and to view anything and everything—nature, huma beings, children, the planet—as opportunities to exploit for profit.[14] Unable to feel genuine concern f others, to experience guilt or remorse when they act badly, or to feel any sense of moral obligation to obe laws and social conventions, corporations resemble human psychopaths in their essential natures, I argue Free of regulatory constraints, they cannot help but act in dangerous and destructive ways—includi toward children.

I was at pains to explain in *The Corporation*, however, that my critique was not aimed at the individua who run and work for corporations, but rather at the institution itself. This is important to emphasize aga here. As human beings, corporate executives, managers, and employees are no different from anyone els They too are parents (and aunts, uncles, and grandparents), caring for children, loving, nurturing, an protecting them. They too are concerned about the issues raised in this book, likely even reading the boo My argument is not with them (or you).

Rather, the problem—and I believe the frustration for many who work in corporations—is that whatev may be our human inclinations, motivations, feelings, and beliefs, when we enter the corporation's world w become operatives for *its* imperatives, subsuming our own personal values to its institutional demands.

It is kind of like playing ice hockey. When you play hockey, you are in a different moral and legal worl a more brutish and nasty one than the one you inhabit off the ice. You do things—run people into th boards, trip them, punch them—that maybe get you two minutes in the penalty box. The same behavio off the ice (at the grocery store, or at work, for example) would likely get you two years in prison.

Going to work in a corporation is like stepping onto the ice. The game is now defined by the rules of th corporation, by its institutional imperatives. The decisions made and actions taken follow from that. So no it becomes morally possible for individuals to do things that *as* individuals (off the ice) they would not d might even abhor—such as developing and marketing products that are harmful to children, or undu suppressing or discrediting information that raises concerns about such harms.

Traditionally governments restrained corporations, understanding that their purely self-intereste institutional characters denied them the ability to restrain themselves. Legal limits were imposed in the for of regulations, and agencies were created to enforce those regulations. Such measures were believed necessa to protect children's health and well-being, among other important public interests. That was a key beli behind century-of-the-child reforms. Over the last thirty years, however, governments, under the spell neoliberalism, steadily retreated from that belief and from the regulatory practices it inspired. Children we left unprotected as a result and are now openly exposed to corporate predation and harm.

Parents, by corollary, have become less able to protect children, their parenting choices limited an frustrated by corporations' profit-seeking maneuvers. Parents may choose, for example, to feed the children healthy food, but they have no choice about the powerful and pervasive marketing that fu children's desires for and consumption of unhealthy food; they may choose to buy nontoxic products fo their children, but they have no choice about the many other sources through which children are exposed industrial chemicals; they may choose to limit their children's viewing of media violence, but they have n choice about the increasing ubiquity and brutality of such violence in children's lives.

We make choices today as parents, in other words, but not in conditions of our own choosing. And mo and more the conditions in which we choose, and hence the choices we make and the effects they have, a determined, or at least heavily influenced, by the decisions and actions of corporations—by the choices *th* make.

In 1859, John Stuart Mill in his classic work *On Liberty* wrote that human nature

> is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the inward forces which make it a living thing. . . . A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature . . . is said to have a character. . . . It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation.[15]

Children should be enabled by society to develop unique characters, flourish as individuals, and becon the "noble and beautiful object[s] of contemplation" of which Mill spoke. That is what childhood should b about. It is what it was thought to be about during the century of the child. But childhood, thus understoo is now under attack as industry and corporations freely exploit children's vulnerabilities and neglect the interests. This must, and can, be stopped. But first, it must be understood.

Chapter Two

Whack Your Soul Mate and Boneless Girl

Whack Your Soul Mate, a popular "casual game" (as simple, animated online games are described), availab at numerous child-oriented sites on the web, allows players to determine "how . . . your soul mate meet his or her untimely end." The game is easy to play. With a click of the mouse, a player chooses from amon a variety of brutal murder scenarios between two animated "soul mates." In one scenario, the woma punches the man in the face, elbows the back of his head, and then defecates on him after he crumples to t floor dead and bloodied; in another, the man hands the woman a heart-shaped box of chocolates an watches as she opens the box and a spring-loaded cleaver pops out and cuts her head off, blood gushin everywhere; in yet another, the woman stands over the man, who lies prone on the ground, defecating o him as she beats him to death with her fists.[1]

Boneless Girl, another popular game widely available to children on the web, encourages players to sma an apparently unconscious woman wearing black thong underwear and a bra against various-sized spheric objects, and to squeeze her through impossibly narrow gaps, causing her limp body to be crushed an contorted. "Poke and pull this scantily clad babe all over bubble-land," the site exclaims. "You'll be amaze by the small spaces she can fit through, and throwing her across the screen never gets old."[2]

Brutality, violence, cruelty and murder, and finding humor and fun in it all, are common in casu games. *Stair Fall* is another example ("Pushing someone down the stairs has never been so awesome. Th more damage they take, the more points you get. How bloody can you make this paper creation?"). Oth ones are *Bloody Day* ("Back alley butchering has never been so much fun. It's like having your own barr with moderately slow-moving fish. How many kills can you rack up?"); *Kitty Cannon* ("Make Fluffy blood The best thing you can hope for with these kitties is that they hit a pile of explosives. And even if they hit th spikes, it's still good"); and *Kill a Kitty 2* ("This kitty needs to die. All it takes is one click of your choice, an then watch as hilarity ensues. Will it be the killer bee or the killer heel?").[3]

Addictinggames.com is one of the web's premier casual games site. With 10 million players each mont the majority of whom are children and teenagers, the site hosts all the games described above (except f *Whack Your Soul Mate*, which it recently pulled in response to complaints). Kids love the site, and man agree with one ten-year-old's assessment that it is the "Best f_ing site ever!!!"[4] The fact kids flock t Addictinggames.com (and similar sites) is not surprising. For tweens and teens especially, the edgy an offensive content is a tantalizing lure. With their developing psyches "invaded by a newly mobilized an vastly augmented id as though from a hostile innerworld," as psychoanalyst Erik Erikson has describ adolescence, they are fascinated by violence, horror, cruelty, and sex, especially when parents disapprove. [5] love this website but my mom thinks it's inappropriate (true, it is)," reports one twelve-year-old abou Addictinggames.com.[6]

That most parents abhor games like *Whack Your Soul Mate* and *Boneless Girl* is equally unsurprisin Because "we try to instill in our children a sense of what's right and wrong; a sense of what's important, o what's worth striving for," as one father, President Obama, described it (while a senator), the nastiness an nihilism of these games is not something we want our kids to consider fun.[7] Despite tha Addictinggames.com has become a flagship site for its corporate operator, award-winning children's networ Nickelodeon, and edgy and brutal games are key to its success. Such games draw kids to the site and kee them playing there, so they can be bombarded with banner ads, video ads, and advergames to he Nickelodeon and its corporate parent Viacom get a piece of the $15 billion spent annually on children

advertising.[8]

~~When I first learned about Addictinggames.com from my then twelve-year-old son and visited the~~ site find *Whack Your Soul Mate* and *Boneless Girl*, I was predictably surprised and appalled. But I was al perplexed. What kind of society have we become, I wondered, in which a leading purveyor of childre entertainment, Nickelodeon, could offer this kind of fare? Why do we tolerate it? What makes it seem right to the people who work at Addictinggames.com (and Nickelodeon and Viacom), many of who presumably, are parents themselves, to produce this kind of material for kids?[9]

But Addictinggames.com is just one small part of a much larger and expanding industry, "k marketing," as it is usually called—the constellation of corporations and industries that specifically targ children and teens with products, media, services, and marketing. That industry barely existed just half century ago. Now it fuels the entire consumer economy as children's direct buying power, combined wit their influence over parents' spending, tops $1 trillion a year (up from $50 billion twenty years ago, and billion twenty years before that). The industry's spectacular success has been due in part to marketer increasing technological capacity to reach and dazzle children—comic books and magazines gave way television and radio in the 1960s; cable eclipsed broadcast television in the 1980s; and today television being supplanted by computers, mobile devices, and social media.

Of at least equal significance to evolving technology, however, is the continuous refining of tw fundamental and related kid marketing strategies, both inspired by the groundbreaking work of k marketing's first guru, James McNeal (who I discuss in the next chapter), and both manifest in *Whack Yo Soul Mate* and *Boneless Girl*. First, campaigns, products, and media content are aimed at the uniqu forming, and tumultuous emotions of childhood and adolescence (the subject of this chapter); and, secon children are targeted separately from parents, with campaigns, products, and media content unique enticing to them, and often at odds with parents' values and concerns (the subject of the next chapter).

Growing up in Denmark in the 1980s, Martin Lindstrom, one of today's top kid marketers, was "slight different," he says, than other boys his age. While they played with LEGO, he was obsessed with it. At th age of eight he began building a "Lego Mini Land" in his backyard. Three years later he opened it to th public, charging each visitor the Danish equivalent of a dollar for admission. Only two people showed up his mother and father. Undaunted, he drafted an advertisement and ran it in the local newspaper. The ne day, more than a hundred people showed up. "That's when," he says, "I realized that marketing an branding are magical."[10]

The next year Lindstrom, then twelve years old, started his own advertising firm. He sold the firm to top international ad agency six years later, and after working at that agency (as an internet marketi specialist) and then at LEGO (as a brand developer and chief designer) he began his current career as consultant. Advising the likes of Disney, Microsoft, Kellogg's, Pepsi, and Mars in that capacity, he has no become, in the words of the BBC, "the number-one brand builder" in the world.[11]

For Lindstrom, marketing to kids is all about discovering and then engaging the unique emotions youth. Emotions drive everything for children, he says, and marketers, to be successful, must engage t most fundamental emotions at the deepest levels. *Love*, which connotes nurturing, affection, and romance, one of these fundamental emotions, he says. *Fear*—as in violence, terror, horror, cruelty, and war— another. Then there is *mastery*, kids' aspiration to gain independence from adults, and also their desire master new skills (in gaming, for example). Important as well are *fantasy* ("provide [tweens] the tools th will enable them to create the world of their escapist dreams," Lindstrom advises, "and voilà, you've got made in the proverbial shade"); *humor* ("pushing the limits, making fun of adults and doing crazy things");

and *collection value* (the impulse to collect things such as cards, coins, stamps, and avatar accessories). Finall there is the *mirror effect*, the desire of kids to imitate the grown-up world. “Products that allow tweens to a as players in an adult world are bound to succeed,” says Lindstrom. “The younger you are, the older yo want to be; nine-year-olds want to be fourteen so they can be categorized as *real* teenagers, but fourtee year-olds think teenagers *suck*; they are waiting to become *real* adults.”[13]

Successful marketing to children and teenagers requires more than just tapping these emotions, howeve It is equally important, Lindstrom advises, to use the right kinds of media to do so. Today, he says, whe “interactivity means everything,” marketers must take full advantage of the deep and sustained engageme allowed by interactive media, such as games, virtual worlds, and social networks, if they want to rea children effectively.

Addictinggames.com is exemplary. Many of the site’s games deliver emotional content interactively– players can act out and control virtual acts of brutality and murder rather than just passively watching acto or animated figures do so, as they would on TV. They can actually *feel* the emotions associated with the actions. That is what makes the games (and gaming more generally) appealing for kids, and hence profitab for Nickelodeon and Viacom.

The games illustrate another point as well, however, and the main point of this chapter. Havin discovered that manipulating children’s deep emotions is a formula for success, kid marketers push th formula as far as they can, doing whatever it takes, without apparent constraint or concern, to work t emotions of youth into profit. It is this dynamic, as I explain below, that drives them to ramp up med violence, cultivate addiction, cynically exploit social network friendships, sexualize girls, and promo hyperconsumerism.

In the spring of 2008 the video game *Grand Theft Auto IV* was released, selling in its first week six millio units for a half billion dollars and thus smashing every entertainment industry record. It was now clear th brutal and sometimes sexual violence was a top entertainment choice for kids. Tween and teenage boys love the video game (nearly half of all thirteen-year-old boys reported it as their favorite), which like many oth popular video games allows players to choose among and create different, and usually violent, scenarios for protagonist avatar.

In one possible *GTA IV* scenario, inspired by a promotional trailer for the game and posted on YouTub protagonist Nick Bellic, a grizzled Balkan Wars vet, has sex with a female prostitute in his car and the murders her. The murder is brutal. Bellic beats her with a baseball bat and then as she runs away, he throws bomb at her. The bomb explodes, she catches fire, and falls to the ground, engulfed in flames, her bod quivering. Bellic then sprays her with bullets from a machine gun. Once she stops moving, Bellic reach into her pants pocket to retrieve the money he paid her for sex. He then saunters back to his car.[14]

Despite its “mature” rating (the industry’s designation that a game is inappropriate for kids under the ag of eighteen), *GTA IV*, like other mature-rated games, is often sold to underage kids who happily buy an play it. Nearly one half of all twelve- to sixteen-year-olds and a quarter of eight- to eleven-year-olds ow mature-rated games.[15] Much larger numbers of kids find ways to play the ever-growing repertoire increasingly violent games even if they do not actually own them. When, for example, *Call of Duty: Mode Warfare 2*, a game both lauded and criticized for its cinematic experience of violence and mayhem, w released in the fall of 2009, selling nearly 5 million units for $300 million, our then twelve-year-old so who was not allowed to own the game, phoned around furiously to find a friend who had bought it an went over to his house to play it.

Then there is *Halo*, a space epic with immersive violence, poised to become the “No. 1 gaming title of a

time," according to its maker, Microsoft, and recently released in its fourth edition (*Halo Reach*). Again, t ~~game is hugely popular among tween and teen boys ("It's just fun blowing people up," explains one twelv~~ year-old) despite its "mature" rating. Even churches have begun offering *Halo* to recruit young members- that's how popular the game has become. "[It's] the most effective thing we've done," says David Drexler o the Country Bible Church in Ashby, Minnesota, who seems to have no problem turning his church into den of virtual violence to lure youth. "We have to find something that these kids are interested in doing th doesn't involve drugs or alcohol or premarital sex."[16]

Numerous other popular video games are notable for their brutality and violence. Casual games too, su as the ones at Addictingames.com, are ramping up violence, and pairing it with sexual images and themes, efforts to attract young players. The reason is simple: kids, especially tweens and teens, want to play gam that engage emotions associated with *fear*, as Lindstrom observes. That is what draws them to violenc brutality, blood, and gore.[17]

But fear is not the only emotion game designers play upon.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum, in virtual worlds of pets and penguins, cuddly avata frolic through landscapes of *love*. Yet the same formula responsible for video game violence—mining kid deepest emotions with powerfully interactive media—is at work. "We thought virtual pets was a good id because people would get attached [to their pets] and keep coming back," is how Adam Powell, creator the world's first virtual pet website, Neopets, describes his achievement. The site, launched in 1999 and no boasting more than 40 million members worldwide, was bought by Nickelodeon for $160 million in 200 "We couldn't help notice that there was this site that had an enormous number of kids," explained Je Dunn, Nickelodeon's president at the time. Dunn made the right decision, as Neopets quickly became corporate goldmine.[18]

Numerous other virtual pet websites, Club Penguin and Webkinz notable among them, have also do extremely well using the two-step formula pioneered by Neopets—forge emotional bonds between kids a their virtual pets to create "stickiness" (a term used to describe the degree to which users keep playing at a coming back to a site); and then monetize that stickiness with sales of advertising, subscriptions, and virtu goods. Kids feel strong emotions for pets which, site operators have found, easily extend to those compos of pixels on a screen. Children name their virtual pets, feed and play with them, care for and build hom and habitats for them, and navigate with them through exciting virtual landscapes and adventures. The form deep attachments to their pets, and obsessively monitor the meters displayed at most sites indicati pets' emotional and physical states (with their own emotional states often determined by how their pets a doing and feeling.)[19]

Pet sites succeed by manipulating, using casino-style tactics, the intense feelings kids have for their virtu pets. Club Penguin, for example, initially allows kids to play for free in "basic mode," giving them time bond to their penguin avatars, and then aggressively pitches more fun and excitement, and better and mo things for their penguins if they buy costly subscriptions. The site, for example, will display in a "bas mode" pop-up box a special accessory for an avatar and then inform the player who clicks on it that he she must subscribe in order to get it.[20]

Giving away "free" virtual things and cash is another tactic used by pet sites. At Neopets, for exampl players are given 150 NC (short for Neocash, a virtual currency) when they register. With that, they can b virtual goods for their pet avatars. But because premium goods cost a lot, as much as 800 NC for one ite the free Neocash (much like the rolls of quarters handed out on casino buses) quickly disappears. Players c win more by playing games, but the large amounts of Neocash needed to dress pets in the latest fashio feed them good food, and buy them cool things, compel many to buy Neocash with real cash, at exchange rate of $1 for 100 NC, either online or at retailers that sell Neocash cards.[21]

A final tactic used by pet sites, which would likely make even a casino owner blush, is to threaten childre with ill fates for their beloved pets if they stop visiting the site or do not visit it enough. Webkinz, f example, takes away kids' pets and everything they have purchased for them if a subscription lapses, an threatens kids with sickness and unhappiness for their pets if they do not visit the site regularly to feed an play with them. "I am 6 1/2 years old and i am afraid that my webkinz will die; i feel like crying cuz i can go on webkinz," complains one child at an online forum.[22]

These and similar tactics are craftily deployed by pet sites to draw kids in, entice them to stay, and kee them coming back (and thus to get them to engage with ads and hand over money for subscriptions an virtual goods). Virtual pet sites are "like gambling at the end of the day," says Martin Lindstrom. They ar designed to make kids feel *compelled* to visit, play, and subscribe; to be, as *Wired* magazine once describ Neopets, "so addictive that people would gladly suffer through ads to experience [them]."[23] It may see diabolical—manipulating kids' emotions so as to "addict" and therefore monetize them—but that accepted strategy at pet sites, and indeed throughout the gaming and virtual world industries.

There is, after all, nothing stickier than addiction. And that is why these industries have developed mo and more addicting content over the years, from simple skill-based games in the 1980s, such as *Tetris* an *Pac Man*—"these games were designed so you would try fifty times, and when you finally got to the goal fe a great sense of achievement and joy," according to gaming titan Kristian Segerstrale—to the likes of *GT* and *Halo*, Webkinz and Club Penguin, and scores of other video games and virtual worlds that, Segerstrale describes it, "really grip you as a player, really take you on a journey."[24]

"Addiction" has indeed become the gold standard in gaming, the true mark of a game worth playing. "I like injecting heroin," reports one online reviewer of *GTA IV*.[25] *BusinessWeek* describes new iPhone games "immersive, addictive fun,"[26] while a recent review of *Civilization V* says the game should have a warnin label—"The contents of this package may be highly addictive and lead to lack of sleep, lost productivity an marital strife."[27] One game designer proudly proclaims that "parents have to drag their kids away cryin from a game he designed for preschool-aged kids;[28] another observes that "the perfect game is [one] th sucks you in and never lets go."[29] And then, of course, there is the aptly named Addictinggames.com wher in the words of corporate owner Viacom, "junkies gorge themselves" on "addictive . . . impulsive" gam that "fuel their addiction."[30]

It is no secret, says gaming expert and psychologist Douglas Gentile, that designing games to be addicti is the main "indicator of success" in the industry. *World of WarCraft* , he notes, has 10 million membe paying $15 a month. "Do you think they want it to be addictive?" he asks. "I don't know if they think terms of addictive, but they certainly want repeat play, they want continued play, and they want you to lik it so much that you get your friends to get on. That's much better for their bottom line."[31]

To achieve such repeat and continued play, successful game designers exploit not only deep huma emotions, as Lindstrom and Segerstrale advise, but also the basic patterns and principles of human an animal behavior, as discovered by behavioral psychologists. A powerful way to "make players play forever according to game design guru John Hopson, in his highly influential article *Behavioral Game Design*, is t "avoidance schedule." Put a rat in a cage with a small lever. Shock the rat at short intervals through th cage's metal floor. Hold off on the shock for thirty seconds if the rat presses the lever. And lo and behol the rat quickly learns to press the lever at a rate that ensures the shocks stop. Human game players, Hopso says, will keep playing a game, just as the rat keeps pushing the lever, if emotionally painful consequences a inflicted upon them if they stop.[32] The "avoidance schedule" is the operative principle at children's sites suc as Webkinz and Club Penguin, where bad things happen to kids' cherished pets if they stop playing, fail t play enough, or do not subscribe. It is a desirable strategy from the perspective of game designers, sa Hopson, because it is "relatively cheap since they don't have to keep providing the player with toys o

rewards."[33]

The "avoidance schedule," according to Hopson, is one of several "fundamental patterns that underl how players respond to what we ask of them," all of which are "species-independent and can be found anything from birds to fish to humans." The trick to successful game design, he says, is to manipulate thes universal evolutionary tendencies in order to elicit compulsive and addictive player behavior.[34] So, the fa we know a chimpanzee will happily do some task in exchange for a piece of lettuce, but after having be fed a tastier item, such as a grape, will throw an offering of lettuce back at the experimenter, is a warning game designers never to reduce levels of reinforcement. This "is a very punishing thing for your players ar can act as an impetus for them to quit the game," says Hopson.[35] Instructive as well is an experiment which a pigeon denied a food reward after receiving it every thirty seconds for an hour will beat up another pigeon in the cage, despite the latter's innocence (it was tethered to the cage and thus unable interfere with the first pigeon's food supply). The "frustration is irrational, but real nonetheless," a lesson t game designers, according to Hopson, that stopping rewards will generate anger toward the game and cau players to stop playing.[36]

In the end, says Hopson, the thousands of behavioral studies done over the years on rats, pigeons, chimp and a Noah's Ark full of other animals, including humans, contain an important overall message for gam designers. To make players play hard and keep playing they must reward them on a variable, thoug frequent, schedule (creating a "constant probability of reward, [so] the player always has a reason to do th next thing"), and/or punish them if they stop playing or stop playing hard (i.e., the avoidance schedule).[37]

For a game to be successful, then, it must, following Hopson, be structured to allocate rewards an punishments in accordance with our most fundamental behavioral tendencies, and, following Lindstrom an Segerstrale, deliver content that taps our deepest emotions. Understood in this way, it is hard to imagine more cynical art than game design, especially when we consider that children are the main targets of scientifically informed manipulation of behavior and emotion.[38]

A new development in gaming—its merger with social networking—is now taking that cynical art ev deeper into children's psyches, and eliciting more compulsive and "addictive" play.

Kristian Segerstrale, who fondly recalls a childhood roaming around the forests of his native Finland (think all kids should have that," he says), nonetheless knows that making money off kids is easier when th are roaming around virtual worlds—like the one he and his company, Playfish, created in *Pet Society*, "th most obsessive game we have," he says. Part of the game's success is its typical (of pet sites) "avoidanc schedule" setup—"kids don't like to abandon pets so they keep logging in to keep their pet happy." [39] B what makes the game stickier than even its stickiest pet-site competitors—it had 20 million registered playe and 2 billion monthly player minutes just three months after coming online in 2008, and it now boasts 1 million monthly active users—is the fact it is *social*. Players play with their Facebook friends. "The real me of the game in *Pet Society* is that all your real-world friends live in the same village as your pets, so the p sort of becomes a virtual representation of you," says Segerstrale. "The game becomes what's happenin between you and your real-world friends."[40]

And it is that "real world status," Segerstrale says—the fact the game has consequences in players' re lives—that makes *Pet Society* and other social games so compelling. Taking care of a friend's pet, buying gifts (with virtual cash bought or earned at the site), having your pet hug or kiss or flirt with that pet mea something in your outside-the-game relationship with that friend. "You can get people to come back to th kind of game play at a completely different level" than in a nonsocial game, says Segerstrale. "Things lik love, friendship, competition, and envy among friends are far more powerful than the emotions betwe

you and just a game."[41]

By tapping into people's real emotions and relationships, social gaming adds a new, and intense compelling, dimension to gaming. The widely popular *Mafia Wars*, offered on Facebook by Playfis competitor Zynga games, is another example. While *Pet Society* occupies the *love* end of Lindstrom emotional spectrum, *Mafia Wars* is firmly embedded at the *fear* end. Players "start a Mafia family wi [their] friends, run a criminal empire and fight to be the most powerful family" in a game of back all beatings, drive-by shootings, robberies, brutal muggings, and heists.[42] Warnings of "sex, drug use, violen and other subject matter that some parents may consider inappropriate for audiences under 18 years of ag likely only help entice tweens and teens, who are among the game's most avid players.[43]

Again, it is the fact players play with their actual Facebook friends—creating mob "families" with then competing against other "families," planning heists together, and so on—that makes the game so compellin There is a seamless interplay between players' real friendships, cliques, grudges, and alliances and what go on within the game. As Zynga proudly boasts on its website, its games allow players to "express themselv and form deep social connections with their friends."[44]

Both *Pet Society* and *Mafia Wars* make money by selling virtual goods to players, and also by lurin players with virtual cash to the sites of third-party advertisers (who, in turn, pay Playfish and Zynga for ea player visit). It is a highly profitable monetization model. "There's no cost to produce one hundred machin guns and there's no inventory costs," boasts *Mafia Wars*' Scott Koenigsberg of the easy money made b selling virtual goods. "The only limit is our brains and what people think is cool."[45] As one industry insid describes it, social games are about "get[ting] users in the door to play for free and then monetiz[ing] the h out of them once they're hooked."[46] Given that many of those users are children, even a real Mafioso mig find it all a bit distasteful.

Segerstrale, who recently sold Playfish to gaming giant Electronic Arts for $300 million, says he plans develop new social games that are even more engaging, addictive, and sticky than those currently availab and that penetrate even deeper into kids' social and emotional lives. "The most exciting area of innovation he says, is "when players can use a friend's data as part of the game play even though that friend is n playing. They can pull that friend's name and photos as part of the game play."[47] Lika Games's *Friends f Sale* is an example of this new kind of game, says Segerstrale. The game has players bid against each oth using virtual cash, which they purchase from the site with real cash, to buy and own mutual Faceboo friends. "Buy people and make them your pets!" the site proclaims. "You can make your pets poke, sen gifts, or just show off for you. Make money as a shrewd pet investor or as a hot commodity!"[48] The mutu friend has no idea he or she is being bought and sold, unless so informed by one of the players, but for t players involved, says Segerstrale, the buying and selling of the mutual friend "is worth something, it mea something in the real world."[49]

"We've only scratched the surface of what's possible in this type of game play," Segerstrale says. What lie beneath that surface may be exciting for Segerstrale and his gaming industry friends, but it should b worrying for parents.

* * *

Our thirteen-year-old daughter was unusually upset one day. We asked her what was wrong and she told u after a bit of prodding, that one of her Facebook friends had been making nasty comments about he anonymously, for months, on an application called Honesty Box.[50] Launched in 2007, and current catering to millions, Honesty Box allows users to send, receive, and reply to anonymous messages fro Facebook friends. "Flirt with your crushes," the application promises. "Discover what people really think

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