Gun Play

•

Jay Mechling

Biology and the particular gun culture of the United States come together to explain the persistent and powerful attraction of American boys to both real guns and toy guns. The 1990s saw adults begin to conflate "the gun problem" with "the boy problem," sparking attempts (largely failed) to banish toy guns from homes and schools. Following the approach of play scholar Gregory Bateson, this article offers an understanding of play with guns, maintains this moral panic about boys and gun play is unfounded, and suggests some developmental and other benefits from boys' play with guns.

IT WAS A BEAUTY. It was a simple machine—a single-shot, bolt-action, .22-caliber rifle—and it was lying on the table among the other Bingo prizes I was playing for that summer we visited family friends stationed at the Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. I wanted to win that rifle, to bring it home and recreate the exhilarating experience from the previous summer of 1957, when at Boy Scout camp, I fired my first rifle—.22-caliber short ammunition, also—at paper targets. I never won any of the Bingo games that would send me to that particular table of prizes, nor is it likely that my parents would have permitted me to bring a rifle home to Miami Beach, Florida. But I craved owning that real rifle.

I had a hard enough time persuading my parents to let me have a Daisy BB gun. They finally relented, and I loved that gun. I set up targets safely in the backyard, loaded those BBs into the pump-action rifle's chamber, and fired away—never at an animal, never at a human, as I promised. I oiled the gun diligently, and although a BB gun is a real enough gun (it can "put out an eye," as every parent warned), I also knew that it was not the "real thing." As a suburban kid reared far from the country and far from a gun culture of hunters, real guns seemed to me powerful talismans, something always just outside my reach.

My baby-boom youth was not unique. Judging from the number of advertisements for Daisy BB guns in comic books and in magazines aimed at boys,

there was a real market for this particular "toy" gun, a gun that lay somewhere in the liminal zone between the toy gun and the real thing. For the baby boom boys born between 1946 and 1964, having a Daisy BB gun was the least of the socialization into the gun culture of the United States. Standard television fare in the 1950s consisted of World War II films and American Westerns, and the films and serials in the theaters offered more of the same. There was lots of gun play in the Lone Ranger, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, and even Sky King weekly episodes, and, for the slightly older boy and his parents, CBS broadcast the "adult" Western, *Gunsmoke*.

The toy soldiers of earlier wars had been made of metal, usually lead or tin, and were often hobby or collector items as much as play pieces. Thanks to the advances in plastics in the 1930s and 1940s, the toy soldiers made for reenacting World War II on a boy's bedroom floor or in the backyard in the 1950s came in a vast and cheap abundance that helped keep imaginary violence in play. My own arsenal of guns in the 1950s included that treasured BB gun, several cap guns, a spring-loaded plastic six-shooter that shot plastic bullets, an air pump gun that shot Ping-Pong balls, a few ray guns (Flash Gordon serials on television), and even a wooden six-shooter that had been a Cub Scout woodworking project. My parents also let me play with a chrome cigarette lighter from the 1930s or 1940s that looked exactly like a derringer.

Baby boomers played with these guns in the house and outside, and usually they (we) played cowboys and Indians or we reenacted the World War II films we saw on television. Some Vietnam veterans—Tobias Wolff (1995) and Ron Kovic (1976), for example—recount in their memoirs playing "war" in the woods and fields near their suburban homes, memories of a childhood that gave them a romantic notion of war that turned out not to be quite so accurate. And Stephen King, another boomer, includes in his semi-autobiographical short story, "The Body" (1982), and in the film *Stand By Me* (1986) made from the story, the character of Teddy, one of the four boys who go on the adventure to see a real dead body. Teddy was the one obsessed with playing soldier as a way of celebrating and becoming his Marine father.

When I visited the Strong National Museum of Play in the spring of 2007, while this essay was still coming together in my mind, I noted the absence of toy guns as I meandered through the museum's cases of old toys. It also seemed strange to me that the National Toy Hall of Fame at the museum did not include the Daisy BB gun. I asked museum CEO G. Rollie Adams about this absence, and while he shared with me his own recollections of a beloved Daisy and other

toy guns from his youth, he said that the Daisy had been nominated several times but was considered too controversial to be chosen. In the museum's experience, every time they try to display toy guns they get protests from parents and teachers. He and I were having this conversation shortly after a Virginia Tech University student went on a shooting rampage that now stands as the largest mass-murder by an individual in American history. The public conversation about this tragedy was in many ways a continuation of the one begun early in the 1990s, a conversation punctuated too often by school shootings and other acts of violence using guns.

So here is the question: What is it with boys and guns? And do adults have reason to worry about play with guns? There is a long history of toy guns in the United States, a history related to the mythological history of real guns in American history. Although girls and women have been known to handle guns—as target shooters, as hunters, and now as members of the U.S. military—my focus here is on boys and their gun play, for it is clear that guns hold a special attraction for boys. At the same time, it is also clear that we are living in a period of moral panic about the safety of children and, more to my point, about boys and violence.

The question—"what is it with boys and guns?"—brings together two socially constructed "social problems," namely, the "problem" of masculine aggression and violence and the "problem" of easy access to guns in the United States. The "war on boys," in fact, probably outpaces the ineffectual "war on guns" because the interests that see boys as dangerous, even "toxic," are able to put institutional forces behind their rhetorical construction of that problem, whereas the people working against the easy access to guns exercise little real power in the society and government, especially against the large gun lobby of manufacturers and of users.

To understand boys and guns in this atmosphere, we need recourse to a complex mix of biology and culture. I begin this inquiry with the biological question because it is the biological, developmental base that makes it so difficult to separate boys and guns in American culture. But the biological question will quickly become a socio-biological question and a developmental-biological question. Biological behaviorists argue that the old choice between "nature" and "nurture" is a false dichotomy. They assert that biology and behavior perform a coevolutionary dance, a system of feedback and change with few or no simple, linear causations.

Even though I use the biology question as an entry into the system where

biology and culture interact, the socio-historical, cultural questions regarding boys and gun play will help us see, first, what is under our control and, second, how we should think about boys' gun play. At that point, I turn from the biological issues to the social and historical ones. I shall then dwell briefly on the history of toy guns and their marketing. But far more important is coming to an understanding of the meanings of gun play for boys. Gregory Bateson's "Theory of Play and Fantasy" (1972/1955), with its notion of a "play frame," clarifies the difference between the real use of guns and fantasy play with guns.

For against the intuition of vast numbers of parents and other adults, play with guns is not only *not* bad for boys but actually has some benefits. Let us begin with . . .

Where Biology Meets Culture

We did not need science to see that in human history men are more violent than women. Eventually, evolutionary theory and folk theories concluded that boys and men are violent because life is a "struggle for existence" and because competition (warfare and its surrogates) favors the strong, aggressive men who survive to reproduce.

Historians have noted that the amount of violence in a society is driven largely by the proportion of men who are in the 18–27 age cohort (Courtwright 1996). That is why frontiers are so violent, argue historians—frontiers are populated largely by young, unattached men. Scientific research with animals and humans has yielded, in the last few decades, very strong evidence that the androgen hormone, testosterone, is a key element in male aggression and violence (Sapolsky 1997). People have been gelding animals and other people for many centuries in recognition of the role of the testes in making a mammal aggressive or docile, but we now know that it is the testosterone produced by the testes that produces the effect.

But, as behavioral biologist Robert Sapolsky points out, the truth is more complicated than the simple claim that "testosterone causes aggression." The dichotomy between biological and environmental influences "is a sham," warns Sapolsky. "No biology. No environment. Just the interaction between the two" (1997, 156). He continues: "Boys will be boys and certain things in nature are inevitable. Violence is more complex than a single hormone. This is endocrinology for the bleeding heart liberal—our behavioral biology is usually meaningless

outside the context of the social factors and environment in which it occurs" (159).

So while biology has something to do with boys' playing with weapons— from fists to clubs to knives to guns—we are going to have to look at culture, at the socialization of boys, for a better understanding of the ways the biology and the environment interact to create boys' gun play.

The scholarly study of masculinity works along this hot border between male biology and the cultural arrangements meant to socialize the boy into a certain sort of man. Masculinity studies rely heavily upon feminist and other reinterpretations of psychoanalytic theory. Object relations theory, especially, informs the work of Nancy Chodorow (1978, 1994) and others (Frosch 1994) who give us the clearest understanding of the developmental forces behind certain performances of masculinity. The theory posits that the central developmental problem for a boy is the separation from his mother and the identification with her opposite gender, the masculine. The developmental sequence for girls goes somewhat smoother. A girl, too, needs to separate from her mother, but her mother is the "proper" identification from society's point of view, so for a girl the identification with the female proves positive. A boy, on the other hand, must detach from his mother but also from the feminine gender, including the repression of the feminine aspect of the self, which leads some theorists to note that masculinity is based on a negative, on "not female," and thus is always fragile and tentative (Frosch 1994).

This fundamental psychology runs counter to our everyday experiences of the performance of self-assured, confident, aggressive masculinity, but that is precisely the point. The developmental drama makes necessary the exaggerated, stylized performance of masculinity. Manhood must be proven on an ongoing basis; the necessity for the performance never ends—which explains the role of "tests" in the performance of masculinity. Men and boys are tested by other men and boys and they test themselves, for "proof" of manhood (no matter how tentative) emerges only with the successful response to a test (Raphael 1988; Beneke 1997). The fundamental paradox of masculinity, therefore, is that its strong, sometimes swaggering, sometimes aggressive performance stems from its fragility.

Weapons become crucial props in the performance of a hard masculinity. Weapons bring power to the performance. In thinking about the relationships between "violence and manhood in post-Vietnam America" (as his subtitle puts it), James William Gibson notes that the "new" war stories of the late 1970s and

1980s featured two elements we see in mythologies about masculinity—the test, and the exercise of self-control by the male seeker (1994, 78). Moreover, as in older mythologies, these heroes carry "magic weapons," including Dirty Harry's gun and Rambo's knife (80–85). There is a ritual-like violence in these stories (See Ehrenreich 1997), too, and we might add that the sort of violence acceptable to Americans is a redemptive violence that rights a wrong (Jewett and Lawrence 1977; Lawrence and Jewett 2002). The notion of redemptive violence has religious origins, and we should note that for some premillennialist Christians in the United States it is a duty of parents to teach their boys to exercise dominion (even violent dominion) over the earth in anticipation of the Second Coming of Christ (Wilson 2001; Boyer 1992).

Gibson (1994) recounts quite clearly the role of guns in the "new war stories" read, watched, and enacted by young men growing up in a post-Vietnam America. He throws himself into cultural scenes where he encounters men with guns—paintball players, gatherings of soldiers of fortune, and a ranch teaching combat pistol shooting—and what he reports bolsters his argument that these men in the 1980s are using guns to fashion a new, tough masculinity through initiations, tests of manhood, and male bonding in the group.

For Gibson and others, the biological, developmental imperatives of masculinity meet a particular culture with particular stories about what constitutes true manhood. The universal presence of male initiation rituals (Bettelheim 1954; Raphael 1988) and the role of the test and the magic weapon in so many initiation ritual mythologies provide the context for the emergence of guns as props in the performance of masculinity. Guns represent power in the male initiation, which itself is based on biological and developmental imperatives.

There is one other point to make. The behavioral biology perspective I have summarized here can lead us down a psychoanalytic path that some would take and others would not, but I think there is value in contemplating every possibility for explaining the fascination guns hold for boys. It may seem too facile and trite to note the symbolic equivalence of a gun and a penis, but there are some good reasons to entertain this notion. So let me explore this idea briefly before turning to the socio-historical, cultural dimensions of the gun play of boys.

The penis plays an important role in the stylized performances that compensate for the fragility of masculinity. As Susan Bordo (1999) notes, "the phallus is not the penis." In patriarchal society, being male gives men access to the power of the symbolic phallus. But penises are real and vulnerable.

The symbolic equivalence of the penis and the gun does not rely upon pop

Freudian analysis; it is not just daft Freudians who believe in this equivalence. Psychoanalytic folklorist Alan Dundes demonstrates that the folk themselves make symbolic equivalences between phallic objects in their stories, jokes, pranks, and other folk genres. His careful analysis of variants of a particular folktale across time and space shows how the folk understand the symbolic equivalence of the nose and the penis, as the two items become interchangeable in variants of the tale (Dundes 1987). Using this notion of "symbolic equivalence," we need not look far for evidence that the folk see the penis and the gun as symbolically equivalent.

We should note that in some folk speech and imagery, the penis is a knife or sword and a condom is a "sheath." When Darth Vadar cuts off Luke Skywalker's sword hand in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), he is performing a symbolic demasculinization of his son in the Oedipal struggle at the heart of George Lucas's *Star Wars* series. In *Braveheart* (1995), director Mel Gibson puts a large sword in William Wallace's hand—despite the fact that the historical Wallace used a broadax as his weapon—because of the phallic meanings of the sword to a 1990s film audience sensitive to the current crisis in white, heterosexual masculinity (Mechling and Mechling 1999). The folk saying "stick it to him" bears the double meaning of metaphorically attacking a man with a symbolic knife or sword but also of representing the act of one male dominating another male through anal rape, putting the raped male in the "inferior," submissive, female position. So, the stick, the knife, the sword—the penis.

Many examples of folk speech support the symbolic equivalence of the penis and the gun. The classic boot camp marching cadence—"This is my rifle, this is my gun, this is for shooting, this is for fun," with appropriate patting of the rifle and the crotch (a cadence aimed at teaching the soldiers not to call their rifles "guns")—makes the point, but consider other examples. Folk speech for ejaculation is "shooting," and a man who is infertile is said to "shoot blanks." Jokes about the size of guns (bigger is better) and other jokes (e.g., the Mae West quip "Is that a pistol in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?") provide ample evidence of the symbolic equivalence of guns and penises. And in her book *Missile Envy* (1986) criticizing the nuclear arms race of the Cold War, physician and peace activist Helen Caldicott sees in the language of nuclear weapons the same symbolic equivalence of penis and gun we find in the folk speech.

Gibson also remarks on the sexualized meanings of guns and shooting (1994, 95–99), drawing on his interviews and examination of gun magazine

advertisements to show how men associate guns with sex. And violence. He quotes a famous passage from Mickey Spillane's 1947 "Mike Hammer" novel, *I, the Jury*, which ends in a distinctly orgasmic scene in which Mike Hammer shoots a near-naked woman (his fiancée, but also the killer in the novel). The language of the bullets piercing her naked body is as close to a pornographic description as a popular novel could get in 1947 (105). Indeed, some testimonies in oral histories with Vietnam vets admit a sexual excitement that comes with shooting a gun. More than one film critic and historian has remarked on the sexualized meanings of the closing, violent scene in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), where the bodies of the two characters seem to writhe in sexual ecstasy as countless bullets enter their bodies.

In short, American folk speech and popular culture narratives (including images) provide lots of evidence that guns offer boys and men distinctive symbols of masculine power, mixing sexual pleasure and violence in ways that help explain the attraction of guns. But this biological and psychological basis of gun play would not necessarily result in the pervasive gun play we see in American society if it were not for the particularities of American history and culture. Presumably young men in Canada and England, for example, experience some of the same biological and developmental imperatives as do American boys, and yet guns have a very different place in those two societies (See Michael Moore's award-winning documentary film *Bowling for Columbine*, 2002). So we must turn to the particular elements of American culture that make gun play so pervasive in its socialization of boys into men.

Real Guns and Mythological Power

The origin stories white Americans tell about the United States are bloody. The Indian wars were preludes to the American Revolution, and the image of the "Minuteman" holding his rifle, ready to do battle against the British army, remains one of the central icons of the Revolution, as the National Rifle Association recognizes in its use of the Minuteman as its logo. In this mythology, the rifle in the hands of skilled Americans won the Revolution and then won the West, pushing the frontier from the original colonies to the Pacific. The Civil War was an especially violent moment in the mythological narrative, but the story continues. The real western frontier history gave birth to a mythologized West in fiction and in the form of the Wild West show (Kasson 2000; Warren

2005). Always the gun was at the center of this mythology, either in the form of the six-shooter (and "gun play" on the streets of frontier towns) or in the form of the famous rifles, such as the Winchester, that "won the West." The story of Sergeant Alvin York, hero of the First World War, as told in contemporary articles and songs and, eventually, in a film starring Gary Cooper (*Sergeant York*, 1941), showed how a country boy who learned to shoot game could become one of the army's best marksmen.

Bellesiles's (2000) book doubting this gun-toting mythology created a ruckus among lay people and historians. Bellesiles musters evidence to show that American colonists did not own rifles in large numbers, and those who did were not skilled shooters. Some historians questioned Bellesiles's methods, but in any case the reality is not likely to diminish the power of the mythology (Dizard, Muth, and Andrews 1999). The National Rifle Association itself was founded in 1871 by two Union army officers who were alarmed at the poor marksmanship of soldiers during the Civil War, and a concerted effort to teach men and boys how to shoot rifles emerged by the 1890s in the form of clubs and youth shooting programs. The Boy Scouts of America (BSA), founded in 1910 amid mixed feelings about militarism, adopted the NRA's program for teaching young Scouts how to shoot targets with rifles, and throughout the twentieth century the NRA, the BSA, and the gun and ammunition manufacturers have drawn upon the stories and imagery of the romanticized West to justify teaching young boys how to shoot rifles.

In the early twenty-first century, the gun culture of the United States remains strong. Gun shows flourish (Burbick 2006), war reenactment is a growing hobby (Thompson 2004), and the National Rifle Association is one of the most powerful lobbies in Congress. The Virginia Tech shootings proved once again how easy it is for Americans to buy guns, and the presence of violent "gun play" on television and in films affirms for the world that ours is a violent culture where masculine power is defined by guns.

Toy Guns and the Culture Wars

There are social movements and individuals who resist the influence of the culture of guns in American society, and, as the discourse emerged in the 1990s, the "problem" of boys melded with the "problem" of guns to become a social problem of boys with guns. A series of highly publicized and disturbing school

shootings in the 1990s put white, middle-class parents, teachers, and community officials into a moral panic (Bronner 2002). Many commentators noted that the general public was less alarmed when the daily reports of teenagers shooting other teenagers was urban black-on-black crime; boys and guns became a significant social problem when it was white kids killing white kids. Articles by adolescent psychologists in newspapers and magazines advised parents on how to spot a troubled boy, and schools instituted "zero tolerance" for guns, knives, other weapons, and violence in the schools. A number of books (see, for example, Miedzian 1991; Lang 1994; Garbarino 1999) and newspaper and magazine articles through the 1990s warned of violence by boys, even calling boys "toxic," and socially conservative commentators (Sommers 2000) saw the "war on boys" as part of the pernicious feminist effort to erase gender differences.

This gathering concern about boys, violent aggression, and guns was fed by the emergence of "first-person shooting games" for computers and video game systems, another worry parents could add to the violence on television, in films, and in some musical genres (e.g., "gansta rap"). In response to the outcry from parents and others about the violence depicted in video and computer games, the industry adopted a set of codes (e.g., "E" for suitable for everyone, "T" for teens, "M" for mature) providing guidance on what age group should play a particular game. In some first-person shooter games the player is shooting fantastic aliens, which mitigates just a little bit the meanings of the violence for the parents; in other games the player is shooting humans, even more troubling to adults.

So in the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, parents, teachers, and public officials fought the "culture wars" over gun play amid contradictory forces. On the one hand, the American mythology of "redemptive violence" was alive and well, having been invoked to justify and report the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. On the other hand, real gun violence in school shootings and fantasy gun violence in boys' play unnerved adults, who were forced to distinguish in their own minds justifiable violence from "mindless violence."

Toy guns seem to have been around almost as long as real guns. Although I do not intend to write a history of toy guns here, we can note that toy guns followed the general history of toys, moving from handmade folk objects to commercially produced toy rifles and pistols as manufacturing processes and the development of cheap materials made each generation of toy guns possible (Cross 1997). We have many studio photographs from the late nineteenth century of children posed

with real guns and what appear to be toy guns, so we know that some parents embraced even then the notion that boys and guns go together.

In fact, vernacular photographs (snapshots) of boys with real guns and toy guns are plentiful. Children and adolescents show up in hunting photographs (Mechling 2004), a useful record of the participation of rural youth in that sport. But guns show up in other snapshots, sometimes recording toy guns as gifts on Christmas morning, sometimes showing kids in cowboy or Indian costumes carrying cap pistols and toy rifles. Sometimes the snapshots are the sort that disturb parents, with boys pointing toy guns at the camera and at themselves. The easy, smiling faces on the boys playing with these guns show how normal this play appeared to the adults taking the photographs.

The moral panic about boys, aggression, and guns extended to toy guns. Whereas some day care programs, preschools, kindergartens, and even early elementary schools used to permit (even encourage) kids to bring favorite toys from home, toy guns and toy soldiers were not allowed. Both scholars and parents noted in frustration that the ban on guns was a hopeless battle, as boys would make guns out of Lego blocks, sticks, plastic "7s" and "Ls," and their bare hands. Boys would chew sandwiches into the shape of guns. Forbid one invented form of guns, and another one would pop up. Clearly parents and teachers were dealing with a deep drive or need, partly developmental and partly cultural, that guns of any form, real or imaginary, satisfy.

Parents sought advice from experts or from each other. For example, the Berkeley Parents Network, a website where parents could exchange ideas about child rearing, carried a running exchange in October 2001 prompted by a mother's (Karen's) plea for help in handling her two-and-a-half-year-old son's "newfound enthusiasm for turning toys or found objects into guns or swords and the result-ing play." She admits that he doesn't actually hit anyone (though he claims he'll kill family members with his popgun). Her husband tells her it's a normal stage she should ignore, but clearly she is concerned. The online advice varied, but most parents (including other mothers) assured Karen that this was normal, that their boys went through the same stage, and that simple rules (like "no pointing a pretend gun at real people") were a reasonable compromise. Along the way, mothers shared their own stories of the endless inventiveness of small boys in turning objects like lettuce leaves, cucumbers, and toast into guns.

A similar discussion arose in December 2002 and then again in July 2003 in response to a mother's worry that to her three-year-old twin boys "everything is a gun." One response from the website is worth quoting in full:

My parents were also, as one respondent put it, "fierce pacifists" (I love that!) and strongly opposed to toy guns and war play in general. But then my little brother got to be about three, and pretty soon, sandwiches got chewed into gun shapes, etcetera. Eventually, my parents relented and allowed him to have some war toys, and my brother went through a really horrifying stage of war enthusiasm, co-mingled with the whole "I'm a ninja" thing. But here's the point: as a teenager, my brother became a conscientious objector to the draft, and now he is in his thirties, the gentlest, kindest, most nonviolent man you'll ever meet. He has no desire to own guns, has never hit another person in anger, and in fact seldom raises his voice. So I have to conclude that gun-fantasy-play is just an unfortunate but normal part of male childhood in our culture. And maybe it's a necessary catharsis of some very heavy business? [Signed] Pacifist's big sister

Experts on child rearing were giving mothers the same advice. William Pollack, author of the best-selling *Real Boys* (1998), was interviewed by "Beliefnet" on this matter, and he assured the readers that "Pretend play is healthy, not harmful, and playing with toy guns is no predictor of future violent behavior."

Gerard Jones (2002) elaborates this argument, mainly in defense of violent video games, by pointing out that several child psychologists he interviewed thought that trying to shield children from exposure to violent media narratives and forbidding toy guns actually harms children. Children need to understand the difference between real and fantasy violence, and they can see this experience only if they have experiences with fantasy violence. This argument seems counter-intuitive to many parents, teachers, and other adults, whose "folk theory" of media effects is what critics have called the "inoculation" theory, the idea that repeated exposure to violence desensitizes the child and makes the child more likely to commit aggressive and violent acts. But the Batesonian approach to play and fantasy clarifies the actual benefits of fantasy play, so it is time we turn to Gregory Bateson's notion of the play frame.

The Shooting that Is Not a Shooting

Most adults watching preadolescent and adolescent boys play with guns—and we could extend the age into adulthood to include paintball games and war

reenactments—see the play in terms of real guns and real violence. This perspective misses the fact that the boys are shooting at each other in a play frame. Questioning how the monkeys he observed at the San Francisco Zoo could engage in play fighting, Bateson realized that the animals must have exchanged a message signaling the players to view the ensuing behavior as play and not, say, real aggression. In Bateson's language, the mammals exchanged a metamessage (a message about messages) that he called "this is play," and the metamessage governed the participants' interpretation of all messages within the frame. The play frame is fragile and needs careful maintenance, but in some ways the most important cognitive experience in the play frame is experience with the paradox of play—that is, the paradox that messages in the play frame do not mean what they would mean in another frame (such as everyday life, work, ritual, a real fight, and so on).

When boys play with guns or their surrogates, they create a play frame in which "a shooting is not a shooting." The essay in which Bateson introduces the notion of the play frame is entitled "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," indicating that even solitary fantasy play with guns is an exercise in recognizing and enjoying the paradox of play.

Girls play, too, of course, and some even play with guns. But this gun play by boys has an additional dimension that the girls don't require for their development. Because boys have a biological push toward aggression (shaped by culture, as we have seen), boys' friendship groups develop cultures marked by "stylized" aggression, a playful performance of aggressive masculinity that takes the place of real aggression and violence, making the negotiations of power in the male friendship group safer. Verbal dueling, "roughhousing" (play fighting, rough and tumble play), and mock taunts or threats are among the common genres of this stylized aggression, something girls could learn but generally don't need to (the exception is women's athletics) because the exercise of power in the girls' group plays out so differently. Boys' gun play is simply another form of stylized aggression and, as some of the mothers and sisters in the Berkeley Parents Network conversation observed, is a natural stage in the development of boys into young men. We might even say that a boy who does not have access to fantasy play with guns and other symbols of power is working under a deficit, missing out on one common way in which the boy learns how to "perform" male "stylized aggression" and a common way in which the boy learns the difference between real aggression and stylized aggression, between real violence and fantasy violence.

The Batesonian approach to boys' gun play, therefore, suggests cognitive and developmental benefits of such play; I would say that these observations suggest that we should actively seek to get boys to play with guns and other symbols of power, but they do this pretty much on their own. The lesson is to leave them alone.

There is, however, one last and I think highly interesting aspect of boys' gun play, which is the opportunity it offers to pretend to die. Before concluding this essay, let me explore this unexpected psychological benefit from boys' gun play.

Pretending to Die

One of the interesting puzzles in framed gun play concerns the pleasure that the boys take in pretending to die. I have not found any systematic study of this phenomenon among those who study preadolescent and adolescent play. Gibson (1994) does not discuss this when he recounts the paintball play, and Thompson (2004, 188–91) has a brief discussion of the variations in war reenactors when it comes to "taking a hit," that is, being wounded or killed in the play frame. Some simply won't take a hit; others will, sometimes enjoying a dramatic "Hollywood death," sometimes welcoming the rest that comes from getting to lie down in a hot, dusty reenactment.

Pretending to die seems a minor part of a game; it may even seem a way of exiting the game. But that view undervalues the psychological and social functions of this particular pretense. Death is a serious, fearful business, and pretending to die draws much of its meaning and power from the knowledge that death is so.

My personal testimony does not count for much in generalizing about the meanings and functions of pretending to die, but in the absence of any research on this topic my own experience is a place to start. I recall taking some pleasure as a kid in pretending to die in the midst of playing World War II in the 1950s. In preadolescence we also played Civil War, and I died less frequently then (though when I did I took pleasure in the dramatic death). Of course, this peculiar pleasure was not something we talked about in our play, so I could have been unique in feeling these pleasures. But I suspect that the experience is more broadly shared.

Age and a great many other factors are at work here; pretend dying during

gun play doubtless differs between individuals and has developmental patterns. Some kids won't pretend to die, others will. Some Civil War reenactors are happy to be chosen as someone who dies, others won't abide it. Admittedly I am speculating about these meanings, but I think it tells us something about how gun play might serve important social and psychological functions, especially for boys.

For younger boys, pretend dying probably serves the same functions Bettelheim (1976) sees in the unexpurgated fairy tales; that is, children have real fears about death, about abandonment by parents, about being lost, and so on. The fairy tales offer narratives that work through these fears and anxieties with positive outcomes. The value of the stories, from the folklorist's point of view, is that they take individual troubles and put them into the larger contexts of cultural formulae, in a sense making the personal impersonal. The play frame of a fairy tale makes manageable and even pleasurable the fears raised and then resolved by the tale.

Similarly, gun play provides models of power (action at a distance) and provides formulaic scenes in which boys can play both the dominant and submissive role. Pretending to die and then coming alive again for the end of play or for the next "chapter" of the play scenario looks a lot like the framed experience of loss and death in the fairy tales. Playing at dying tames real fears about dying.

We might note that imagining our own deaths may be as important for adults as it is for children. Susan Sontag (1982) sees something like this in the fascination many of us have for disaster films and other narratives where we imagine our own deaths. Sontag warns that the constant rehearsal of these imagined deaths, especially in the nuclear apocalyptic films, may have the unfortunate political consequence of short-circuiting political action to prevent nuclear war (or other disasters). Nevertheless, she sees in them a basic human need to tame anxieties about death through fantasies imagining death.

Now, adults will differ on whether taming real fears about dying through pretend dying is a good idea or a bad idea. Some adults worry that pretend dying and then springing back to life (as in cartoon deaths, too) gives children a false sense of the permanency of dying and may even lead to playing with real guns as if a playmate who gets shot will come back to life. This argument perfectly illustrates what happens when adults look at play through their own eyes rather than through the eyes of the children. Understanding the difference between fantasy and reality is a developmental matter, as Jones (2002) reminds

us, and the actual number of cases of real shooting stemming from confusing the two is very small. Besides, teaching children that people go to heaven when they die undoes the notion of the permanency of death as much or more than pretend dying in the play frame, yet most adults do not think it is dangerous to teach children about the afterlife.

Pretend dying may also display what I will call the "Tom Sawyer effect." Such pretending allows us to take note of the pain and grieving at our death, much as Tom and Huck got the chance to witness the crowd's reaction at their own funeral when the adults thought the boys had drowned.

I have a hunch that late preadolescent and early adolescent boys take pleasure from pretend dying because of the sacrifice for others the death represents. Actually, adolescent psychology provides some support for this hunch. As far back as G. Stanley Hall's monumental work *Adolescence* (1904), child psychologists have believed that boys in early adolescence are especially prone to feelings and acts of selflessness. Pretend dying in a play frame where the boy's sacrificial death saves others taps this developmental dynamic.

We should note that boys can offer their own sacrificial deaths in first-person shooter games in video game systems and computers. For long portions of these games (e.g., in *Halo*), death is not permanent; your player comes back alive after an interval set by the game's rules.

The adolescent developmental piece of the puzzle here may even suggest a psychosexual pleasure in pretend dying. A youth's sacrificing himself for his brothers has a masochistic element worth exploring, but not here. Clearly, the phenomenon of pretend dying calls for some good research to help see how this seemingly minor pretense actually serves many social and psychological processes as boys use play with guns to experiment with power, fantasy, and sacrifice.

Conclusion

While the male attraction to aggression and to instruments of aggression in play and fantasy has a biological, developmental base that is universal, societies socialize these drives in different ways. The unique features of the gun culture of the United States—a culture created in part by historical mythologies and images—have made gun play a common element in the socialization of American boys. Despite cycles of antimilitarism and pacifism in American history, adults gen-

erally have accepted boys' play with toy guns as normal. Several historical and social forces in the 1980s and 1990s gathered to define boys' aggression as a social problem and the easy access to guns as a social problem. These two worries, fed in large part by school shootings, came together in the 1990s to create a concerted effort by parents, teachers, and other adults to ban boys' play with guns. The play continues, of course, and this essay has offered a Batesonian way to think about boys' play with guns, a way that should allay concern and that should get the lobby against toy guns to see actual social and psychological benefits in gun play. More than that, we might even say that we damage boys to the extent that we try to shield them from all fantasies of aggression and violence, including play with guns. As is true in so many things regarding children's play, the best thing adults can do is leave the kids alone.

References

Bateson, Gregory. 1972, first published 1955. A theory of play and fantasy. In *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistomology*, 177–93.

Beliefnet. Boys and guns: What's the attraction? http://www.beliefnet.com/story/51/story_5139.html.

Bellesiles, Michael A. 2000. *Arming America: The origins of a national gun culture.*

Beneke, Timothy. 1997. *Proving manhood: Reflections on men and sexism.*

Berkeley Parents Network. Little boys and guns (and swords and . . .). http://parents.berkeley.edu/advice/playing/weapons.html.

Bettelheim, Bruno. 1954. *Symbolic wounds: Puberty rites and the envious male.*

———. 1976. *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales.*

Bordo, Susan. 1999. *The male body: A new look at men in public and in private.*

Boyer, Paul S. 1992. *When time shall be no more: Prophecy belief in modern American culture.*

Bronner, Simon J. 2002. Introduction: Folklore responds to Columbine and adolescence. *Children's Folklore Review* 24:7–20.

Burbick, Joan. 2006. *Gun show nation: Gun culture and American democracy.*

Caldicott, Helen. 1986. *Missile envy: The arms race and nuclear war.*

Chodorow, Nancy. 1978. *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender.*

———. 1994. *Femininities, masculinities, sexualities: Freud and beyond.*

Courtwright, David T. 1996. *Violent land: Single men and social disorder from the frontier to the inner city.*

Cross, Gary S. 1997. *Kids' stuff: Toys and the changing world of American childhood.*

Dizard, Jan E., Robert M. Muth, and Stephen P. Andrews Jr., eds. 1999. *Guns in America: A reader*.

Dundes, Alan. 1987. The symbolic equivalence of allomotifs in the rabbit-herd (AT 570). In *Parsing through customs: Essays by a Freudian folklorist*, 167–77.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. 1997. *Blood rites: Origins and history of the passions of war*.

Frosh, Stephen. 1994. *Sexual difference: Masculinity and psychoanalysis*.

Garbarino, James. 1999. *Lost boys: Why our sons turn violent and how we can save them*.

Gibson, James William. 1994. *Warrior dreams: Paramilitary culture in post-Vietnam America*.

Hall, G. Stanley. 1904. *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education*.

Jewett, Robert, and John Shelton Lawrence. 1977. *The American monomyth*.

Jones, Gerard. 2002. *Killing monsters: Why children need fantasy, super heroes, and make-believe violence*.

Kasson, Joy S. 2000. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, memory, and popular history*.

King, Stephen. 1982. The body. In *Different seasons*, 299–452.

Kovic, Ron. 1976. *Born on the Fourth of July*.

Lang, Susan S. 1994, first published 1991. *Teen violence*.

Lawrence, John Shelton, and Robert Jewett. 2002. *The myth of the American superhero*.

Legman, Gershon. 1968–1975. *No laughing matter: An analysis of sexual humor*.

Mechling, Elizabeth, and Jay Mechling. 1999. American cultural criticism in the pragmatic attitude. In *At the intersection: Cultural studies and rhetorical studies*, ed. Thomas Rosteck, 137–67.

Mechling, Jay. 2004. Picturing hunting. *Western Folklore* 63:51–78.

Miedzian, Myriam. 1991. *Boys will be boys: Breaking the link between masculinity and violence*.

National Rifle Association. http://www.nrahq.org/history.asp.

Pollack, William S. 1998. *Real boys: Rescuing our sons from the myths of boyhood*.

Raphael, Ray. 1988. *The men from the boys: Rites of passage in male America*.

Sapolsky, Robert M. 1997. *The trouble with testosterone: And other essays on the biology of the human predicament*.

Sommers, Christina Hoff. 2000. *The war against boys: How misguided feminism is harming our young men*.

Sontag, Susan. 1982, first published 1966. The imagination of disaster. In *Against interpretation, and other essays*, 209–25.

Thompson, Jenny. 2004. *War games: Inside the world of 20th-century war reenactors*.

Warren, Louis S. 2005. *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West show*.

Wilson, Douglas. 2001. *Future men*.

Wolff, Tobias. 1995, first published 1994. *In Pharaoh's army: Memoirs of the lost war*.