

Globe and Mail, Facts and Arguments, Jan. 8, 1999

The warrior and his mother

Why this ugly, violent, expensive game?

Is it part of the combat involved in being a man?

Every so often, I need to stand back and contemplate the very young man I live with - my son.

He's 14 now, handsome, skinny and tall with a scrub of platinum hair, bleached by his sister a few weeks ago. By day, he enjoys passing the time in Grade 9 of the local high school, where he's doing fairly well. That's a major improvement over past years; my boy can't sit still, let alone make his brain follow a straight, logical line. Detail, concentration, fine motor skills are not his strength.

But gross motor skills are. When it comes to movement and reflex - basketball, baseball, skateboarding, snow-boarding - he's a finely tuned action machine, a blur on the horizon. He can throw and catch, he can swish, he can ollie and grind and kick-flip. Through all these energetic pastimes, I, his admiring mother, have stood on the sidelines and admired. But now, with this latest craze, I have to let him go it on his own.

He has bought his own gun and has taken to shooting people - not with bullets, but with paintballs, which splatter oil and colour instead of blood. From one day to the next, he dropped boyhood toys and games and adopted a different kind of plaything, a different kind of play. After his first session of paintball at a friend's birthday party, he came home ecstatic, his body pocked with little round bruises. I was horrified. When he wanted to play again and again, and then when he wanted to buy his own gun, I wouldn't hear of it. That's when he asked me to sit down for a talk.

"Mum," he said, with intensity, "you may not like it, but the fact is that I'm really good at this game, because I'm agile and fast. An old guy at the place couldn't believe that I'd only played a few times. It feels great to be so good at something, and I'm going to go on playing it."

Which is how I ended up, last Saturday, driving him and his friend Marcel to the paintball palace on the edge of town. For months, with an uncustomary single-mindedness, my boy saved his chore money; he sold his Nintendo, raided his bank account, and accumulated \$300. I agreed to buy the safety equipment, another \$80. Even there in the bleak, chilly concrete bunker, amidst the racks of guns and the T-shirts adorned with distended musclemen and naked women, I tried to drag him back. "This is so expensive, so ugly and violent," I exclaimed. "You don't really want to do this, do you?"

He didn't hear me. He and his friend were poring over the gun.

I watched him and Marcel and the others - excited boys of all ages, a lone middle-aged man singing "Camelot" to himself, a few fathers and one brave mother - pull on the grey coveralls, the helmet, the protective shield like an x-ray tunic, and load their guns. While they listened to the kid with the earrings lecture them about safety, I peered through the splattered windows at the warscape on the other side: burned-out shacks, walls made of tires, free-standing corners and trees to hide behind, everything covered in the yellow slime of the paint. Why would anyone want to enter that dirty, dark, cold place on this sunny afternoon? My son, looking like an astronaut headed for the Crusades, came over and kissed me goodbye, the plastic mouthpiece of his mask touching my cheek. And then he was gone, into the war zone.

In some countries, I thought, a boy his age would be carrying a real gun into a real war; not here in this placid country, thank God. He seems to be preparing himself for combat anyway; for the struggle, perhaps, of becoming a man.

Five hours later he returned, glowing with victory. He had never been hit except by mistake, by his own team member; using wiles and dodges, he had Captured the Flag, shooting all the others, all the adults. They had awarded him one hundred additional balls, the grand prize. Safely home, the warrior lay down his weapon and allowed himself to be served nourishment: a mountain of spaghetti, a bucket of milk, a box of Smarties.

Where does this skill lead, I wonder? To the army or a life of crime? Will he be a spy, a real life James Bond? He adores James Bond. So do I - but only as fantasy, not the reality of danger, murderous criminals, evil women. Has anyone ever given a thought to 007's mother, how she must worry about her boy? I hope James Bond goes home and visits her, once in a while.
