Professor Jenkins Goes to Washington
By Henry Jenkins

This is the story of how a mild mannered MIT Professor ended up being called before Congress to testify about "selling violence to our children" and what it is like to testify.

Where to start? For the past several months, ever since my book, from Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games appeared, I've been getting calls to talk about video game violence. It isn't a central focus of the book, really. We were trying to start a conversation about gender, about the opening up of the girls game market, about the place of games in "boy culture," and so forth. But all the media wants to talk about is video game violence. Here is one of the most economically significant sectors of the entertainment industry and here is the real beach head in our efforts to build new forms of interactive storytelling as part of popular, rather than avant-garde, culture, but the media only wants to talk about violence. These stories always follow the same pattern. I talk with an intelligent reporter who gives every sign of getting what the issues are all about. Then, the story comes out and there's a long section discussing one or another of a seemingly endless string of anti-popular culture critics and then a few short comments by me rebutting what they said. A few times, I got more attention but not most. But these calls came at one or two a week all fall and most of spring term. Then, with the Littleton shootings, they increased dramatically.

Suddenly, we are finding ourselves in a national witch hunt to determine which form of popular culture is to blame for the mass murders and video games seemed like a better candidate than most. So, I am getting calls back to back from the LA TIMES, The New York Times, The Christian Science Monitor, The Village Voice, Time, etc., etc., etc. I am finding myself denounced in The Wall Street Journal op-ed page for a fuzzy headed liberal who blames the violence on "social problems" rather than media images. And, then, the call came from the U.S. Senate to see if I would be willing to fly to Washington with just a few days notice to testify before the Senate Commerce Committee hearings. I asked a few basic questions, each of which feared me with greater dread. Turned out that the people testifying were all anti-popular culture types, ranging from Joseph Lieberman to William Bennett, or industry spokesmen. I would be the only media scholar who did not come from the "media effects" tradition and the only one who was not representing popular culture as a "social problem." My first thought was that this was a total setup, that I had no chance of being heard, that nobody would be sympathetic to what I had to say, and gradually all of this came to my mind as reasons to do it and not reasons to avoid speaking. It felt important to speak out on these issues.

A flashback: When I was in high school, I wore a trenchcoat (beige, not black), hell, in elementary school I wore a black vampire cape and a medallion around my neck to school. I was picked on mercilessly by the rednecks who went to my school and I spent a lot of time nursing wounds, both emotional and some physical, from an essentially homophonic environment. I was also a sucker for Frank Capra movies -- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington most of all -- and films like 1776 which dealt with people who took risks for what they believed. I had an amazing high school teacher, Betty Leslein, who taught
us about our government by bringing in government leaders for us to question (among them Max Cleveland, who was then a state legislature and now a member of the Commerce Committee) and sent us out to government meetings to observe. I was the editor of the school paper and got into fights over press censorship. And I promised myself that when I was an adult, I would do what I could to speak up about the problems of free speech in our schools. Suddenly, this was a chance.

I also had been reading Jon Katz' amazing coverage on the web of the crackdown in schools across America on free speech and expression in the wake of the shootings. Goth kids harassed for wearing subcultural symbols and pushed into therapy. Kids suspended for writing the wrong ideas in essays or raising them in class discussions. Kids pushed off line by their parents. And I wanted to do something to help get the word out that this was going on.

So, it didn't take me long to say yes.

I was running a major conference the next day and then I would have one day to pull together my written testimony for the Senate. I didn't have much in my own writings I could draw on. I pulled together what I had. I scanned the web. I sent out a call for some goth friends to tell me what they felt I should say to Congress about their community and a number of them stayed up late into the night sending me information. And I pulled an all-nighter to write the damn thing that was really long because I didn't have time to write short. And then, I worked with my colleague, Shari Goldin, to get it proofed, edited, revised, and sent off to Congress. And to make arrangements for a last minute trip.

When I got there, the situation was even worse than I had imagined. The Senate chamber was decorated with massive posters of video game ads for some of the most violent games on the market. Many of the ad slogans are hyperbolic -- and self-parodying -- but that nuance was lost on the Senators who read them all dead seriously and with absolute literalness. Most of the others testifying were professional witnesses who had done this kind of thing many times before. They had their staff. They had their props. They had professionally edited videos. They had each other for moral support. I had my wife and son in the back of the room. They are passing out press releases, setting up interviews, being tracked down by the major media and no one is talking to me. I try to introduce myself to the other witnesses. Grossman, the military psychologist who thinks video games are training our kids to be killers, won't shake my hand when I wave it in front of him. I am trying to keep my distance from the media industry types because I don't want to be perceived as an apologist for the industry -- even though, given the way this was set up, they were my closest allies in the room. This is set up so you can either be anti-popular culture or pro-industry and the thought that as citizens we might have legitimate investments in the culture we consume was beyond anyone's comprehension.

The hearings start and one by one the senators speak. There was almost no difference between Republicans and Democrats on this one. They all feel they have to distance themselves from popular culture. They all feel they have to make "reasonable" proposals...
that edge up towards censorship but never quite cross the constitutional lines. It is political suicide to come out against the dominant position in the room.

One by one, they speak. Hatch, Lieberman, Bennett, the Archbishop from Littleton.... Bennett starts to show video clips which removed from context seem especially horrific. The fantasy sequence from The Basketball Diaries reduced to 20 seconds of Leonardo DiCaprio blasting away kids. The opening sequence from Scream reduced to its most visceral elements. Women in the audience are gasping in horror. The senators cover their faces with mock dread. Bennett starts going on and on about "surely we can agree upon some meaningful distinctions here, between Casino and Saving Private Ryan, between The Basketball Diaries and Clear and Present Danger..." I am just astonished by the sheer absurdity of this claim which breaks down to a pure ideological distinction that has neither aesthetic credibility nor any relationship to the media effects debate. Basketball Diaries is an important film; Clear and Present Danger is a right wing potboiler! Scorsese is bad but Spielberg is good?

Meanwhile, the senators are making homophobic jokes about whether Marilyn Manson is "a he or a she" that I thought went out in the 1960s. These strike me as precisely the kind of intolerant and taunting comments that these kids must have gotten in school because they dressed differently or acted oddly in comparison with their more conformist classmates.

By this point, we reach the hour when the reporters have to call in their stories if they are going to make the afternoon addition and so they are heading for the door. It's down to the C-Span camerawoman and a few reporters from the game industry trade press.

And then I am called to the witness stand. Now, the chair is something nobody talks about. It is a really, really low chair and it is really puffy so you sit on it and your butt just keeps sinking and suddenly the tabletop is up to your chest. It's like the chairs they make parents sit in when they go to talk to elementary school teachers. The Senators on the other hand sit on risers peering down at you from above. And the whole power dynamics is terrifying.

Grossman starts to attack me personally, claiming that a "journalism" professor and a "film critic" have no knowledge of social problems. It takes me a while for the attacks to sink in because they are so far off the mark. I am not a journalism professor and I am not a film critic. I am a media scholar who has spent more than 15 years studying and writing about popular culture and I do think I have some expertise at this point on how culture works, how media is consumed, how media panics are started, how symbols relate to real world events, how violence operates in stories, etc., etc. And that's what I was speaking about.

I am doing OK with all of this. I am surprisingly calm while the other people speak, and then Senator Brownback calls my name, and utter terror rushes through my body. I have never felt such fear. I try to speak and can hardly get the words out. My throat is dry. I reach for a glass of water and my hands are trembling so hard that I spill water all over
the nice table. I am trying to read and the words are fuzzing out on the page. Most of them are handwritten anyway by this point because I kept revising and editing until the last minute. And I suddenly can't read my writing. Cold sweat is pouring over me. I have visions of the cowardly lion running down the halls in OZ escaping the great blazing head of the wizard. But there's no turning back and so I speak and gradually my words gain force and I find my voice and I debating the congress about what they are trying to do to our culture. I take on Bennett about his distorted use of The Basketball Diaries clip; explaining that he didn't mention this was a film about a poet, someone who struggles between dark urges and creativity, and that the scene was a fantasy intended to express the rage felt by many students in our schools and not something the character does, let alone something the film advocates. I talked about the ways these hearings grew out of the fear adults have of their own children and especially their fear of digital media and technological change. I talked about the fact that youth culture was becoming more visible but its core themes and values had remained pretty constant. I talked about how reductive the media effects paradigm is as a way of understanding consumer's relations to popular culture. I attacked some of the extreme rhetoric being leveled against the goths, especially a line in TIME from a GOP hack that we needed "goth control" not "gun control." I talked about the stuff that Jon Katz had been reporting about the crackdown on youth culture in schools across the country and I ended with an ad-libbed line, "listen to your children, don't fear them." Then, waited.

The Senator decided to take me on about the goths, having had some staff person find him a surprisingly banal line from an ad for a goth nightclub which urged people to "explore the dark side." And I explained what I knew about goths, their roots in romanticism and in the aesthetic movement, their nonviolence, their commitment to acceptance, their strong sense of community, their expression of alienation. I talked about how symbols could be used to express many things and that we needed to understand what these symbols meant to these kids. I spoke about Gilbert and Sullivan's Patience as a work that spoke to the current debate, because it spoofed the original goths, the Aesthetics, for their black garb, their mournful posturing, and said that they were actually healthy and well adjusted folks underneath but they were enjoying playing dark and soulful. The Senator tried repeating his question as if he couldn't believe I wasn't shocked by the very concept of giving yourself over to the "dark side." And then he gave up and shuffled me off the stand.

The press warmed around the anti-violence speakers but didn't seem to want to talk to me. I just wanted to get out of there. I felt no one had heard what I had to say and that I had been a poor messenger because I had stumbled over my words. But several people stopped me in the hallway to thank me. And dozens more have sent me e-mail since having seen it on C-Span or heard it on the radio or seen the transcript on the web or heard about it from friends. And suddenly I feel better and better about what had happened. I had spoken out about something that mattered to me in the halls of national power and people out there had heard my message, not all of them certainly, but enough.

I know the fight isn't over -- at least I hope it isn't. There will be more chances to speak, but I felt like I had scored some victory just by being there and speaking. Someone wrote
me that it was all the more powerful to have one rational voice amid a totally lopsided panel of extremists. People would see this was a witch hunt of sorts. I'd like to believe that.

The key thing was that I got a statement into the record that was able to say more than I could in five minutes. What follows is the text of my oral remarks that are rather different from the written statement because I was still doing research and writing on the airplane.

I am Henry Jenkins, Director of The MIT Comparative Media Studies Program. I have published six books and more than fifty essays on various aspects of popular culture. My most recent books, The Children's Culture Reader and From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games deal centrally with the questions before this committee. I am also the father of a high school senior and the house master of a MIT dormitory housing 150 students. I spent my life talking with kids about their culture and I have come here today to share with you some of what I have learned.

The massacre at Littleton, Colorado has provoked national soul searching. We all want answers. But we are only going to find valid answers if we ask the right questions. The key issue isn't what the media are doing to our children but rather what our children are doing with the media. The vocabulary of "media effects," which has long dominated such hearings, has been challenged by numerous American and international scholars as an inadequate and simplistic representation of media consumption and popular culture. Media effects research most often empties media images of their meanings, strips them of their contexts, and denies their consumers any agency over their use.

William Bennett just asked us if we can make meaningful distinctions between different kinds of violent entertainment. Well, I think meaningful distinctions require us to look at images in context, not looking at 20 second clips in isolation. From what Bennett just showed you, you would have no idea that The Basketball Diaries was a film about a poet, that it was an autobiographical work about a man who had struggled between dark urges and creative desires, that the book on which it was based was taught in high school literature classes, and that the scene we saw was a fantasy which expressed his frustrations about the school, not something he acts upon and not something the film endorses.

Far from being victims of video games, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had a complex relationship to many forms of popular culture. They consumed music, films, comics, videogames, television programs. All of us move nomadically across the media landscape, cobbling together a personal mythology of symbols and stories taken from many different places. We invest those appropriated materials with various personal and subcultural meanings. Harris and Klebold were drawn toward dark and brutal images that they invested with their personal demons, their antisocial impulses, their maladjustment, their desires to hurt those who had hurt them.

Shortly after I learned about the shootings, I received e-mail for a 16 year old girl who shared with me her web site. She had produced an enormous array of poems and short
stories drawing on characters from popular culture and had gotten many other kids nationwide to contribute. Though they were written for no class, these stories would have brightened the spirit of writing teachers. She had reached into contemporary youth culture, including many of the same media products that have been cited in the Littleton case, and found there images that emphasized the power of friendship, the importance of community, the wonder of first romance. The mass media didn't make Harris and Klebold violent and destructive and it didn't make this girl creative and sociable but it provided them both with the raw materials necessary to construct their fantasies.

Of course, we should be concerned about the content of our culture and we all learn things from The mass media. But popular culture is only one influence on our children's imaginations. Real life trumps media images every time. We can shut down a video game if it is ugly, hurtful, or displeasing. But many teens are required to return day after day to schools where they are ridiculed and taunted and sometimes physically abused by their classmates. School administrators are slow to respond to their distress and typically can offer few strategies for making the abuse stop. As one Littleton teen explained, "Everytime someone slammed them against a locker or threw a bottle at them, they would go back to Eric and Dylan's house and plot a little more."

We need to engage in a rational conversation about the nature of the culture children consume but not in the current climate of moral panic. I believe this moral panic is pumped up by three factors.

1) Our fears of adolescents. Popular culture has become one of the central battlegrounds through which teens stake out a claim on their own autonomy from their parents. Adolescent symbols from zoot suits to goth amulets define the boundaries between generations. The intentionally cryptic nature of these symbols often means adults invest them with all of our worst fears, including our fear that our children are breaking away from us. But that doesn't mean that these symbols carry all of these same meanings for our children. However spooky looking they may seem to some adults, goths aren't monsters. They are a peaceful subculture committed to tolerance of diversity and providing a sheltering community for others who have been hurt. It is, however, monstrously inappropriate when GOP strategist Mike Murphy advocates "goth control" not "gun control."

2) Adult fears of new technologies. The Washington Post reported that 82 percent of Americans cite the Internet as a potential cause for the shootings. The Internet is no more to blame for the Columbine shootings than the telephone is to blame for the Lindbergh kidnappings. Such statistics suggest adult anxiety about the current rate of technological change. Many adults see computers as necessary tools for educational and professional development. But many also perceive their children's on-line time as socially isolating. However, for many "outcasts," the on-line world offers an alternative support network, helping them find someone out there somewhere who doesn't think they are a geek.

3) The increased visibility of youth culture. Children fourteen and under now constitute roughly 30 percent of The American population, a demographic group larger than the
baby boom itself. Adults are feeling more and more estranged from the dominant forms of popular culture, which now reflect their children's values rather than their own. Despite our unfamiliarity with this new technology, the fantasies shaping contemporary video games are not profoundly different from those that shaped backyard play a generation ago. Boys have always enjoyed blood and thunder entertainment, always enjoyed risk-taking and rough housing, but these activities often took place in vacant lots or backyards, out of adult view. In a world where children have diminished access to play space, American mothers are now confronting directly the messy business of turning boys into men in our culture and they are alarmed at what they are seeing. But the fact that they are seeing it at all means that we can talk about it and shape it in a way that was impossible when it was hidden from view.

We are afraid of our children. We are afraid of their reactions to digital media. And we suddenly can't avoid either. These factors may shape the policies that emerge from this committee but if they do, they will lead us down the wrong path. Banning black trenchcoats or abolishing violent video games doesn't get us anywhere. These are the symbols of youth alienation and rage -- not the causes.

Journalist Jon Katz has described a backlash against popular culture in our high schools. Schools are shutting down student net access. Parents are cutting their children off from on-line friends. Students are being suspended for displaying cultural symbols or expressing controversial views.

Katz chillingly documents the consequences of adult ignorance and fear of our children's culture. Rather than teaching children to be more tolerant, high school teachers and administrators are teaching students that difference is dangerous, that individuality should be punished, and that self expression should be constrained. In this polarized climate, it becomes IMPOSSIBLE for young people to explain to us what their popular culture means to them. We're pushing this culture further and further underground and thus further and further from our understanding.

I urge this committee to listen to youth voices about this controversy and have submitted a selection of responses from young people as part of my extended testimony.

Listen to our children. Don't fear them.

http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/profjenkins.html

accessed 28 July 2007