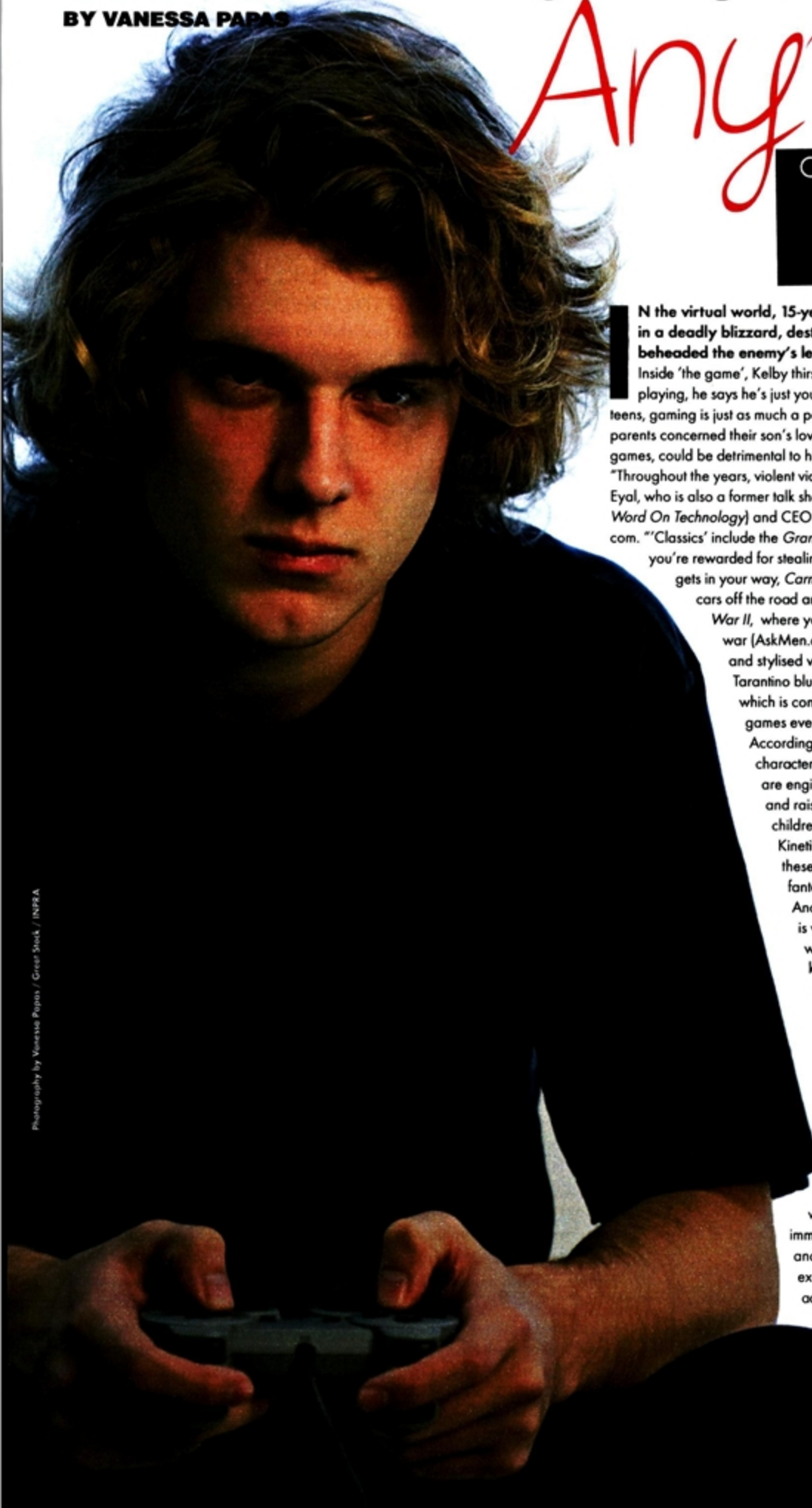


WHEN IT'S NOT A GAME

BY VANESSA PAPAS

Any more

Can the 'virtual world' be to blame for bullying, aggression and a marked decrease in pro-social behaviour in tweens and teens?



In the virtual world, 15-year-old James Kelby is untouchable. He landed a helicopter in a deadly blizzard, destroyed an entire enemy fleet single-handedly, captured and beheaded the enemy's leader, and still made it home in time for family dinner.

Inside 'the game', Kelby thirsts for chaos, anarchy, violence and destruction, but when he's not playing, he says he's just your average teenager. For Kelby, and millions of other tweens and teens, gaming is just as much a part of life as school, homework and sports. Why then, are Kelby's parents concerned their son's love for the virtual world, in particular his love for playing violent games, could be detrimental to his wellbeing?

"Throughout the years, violent video games have captivated the youth," says tech expert Eran Eyal, who is also a former talk show host (Cape Talk/702's *A Word On Technology*) and CEO and founder of Springleap.com.

"Classics' include the *Grand Theft Auto* series, where you're rewarded for stealing cars and killing anyone who gets in your way, *Carmageddon*, where you smash cars off the road and run people over, *God Of War II*, where you become the Greek god of war (AskMen.com claimed the game's gory and stylised violence would make Quentin Tarantino blush), and of course, *MadWorld*, which is considered one of the most gory games ever and surprisingly came from the family-friendly Nintendo Wii."

According to Eyal, violent games specifically appeal to the youth because characters are powerful, popular, celebrated and strong. "These games are engineered to immerse players in the experience, pump endorphins and raise adrenaline. With advances in technology, the veil that separates children from the 'virtual world' thins every day. Think Xbox with their Kinetik, Playstation Move, or the Wii. The way kids are interacting with these systems is becoming more seamless. Ultimately, the world of fantasy is becoming believable."

And this, says Johan van Lill, educational project manager at HIP2B², is where the danger lies. "The virtual world illuminates how the mind works," explains van Lill. "'Good' game designers manage to get kids learning and to enjoy learning as they have to master long, complex and difficult games. 'Good' designers create virtual worlds where children can have meaningful new experiences that are not possible in everyday life, or that their physical world would ever allow them to have. These experiences have the potential to make children smarter and more thoughtful. In a virtual world, kids can make things happen and take on different personas."

When it comes to playing violent games, research shows that even short-term exposure to violent video games produces immediate increases in aggression, and that repeated, long-term exposure increases aggression across a lifespan. Violent video games can have



Eran Eyal



Johan van Lill

a stronger effect on children than violent movies because the identification with the aggressor is more direct. The player identifies more strongly with the aggressor as they are controlling them and this can lead to increased learning of the violent behaviour."

Joburg-based clinical psychologist agrees. "Some argue that violent

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