

The *Hunger Games* contradiction

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In Suzanne Collins's trilogy, and the recent movie adaptation of the first book, the Hunger Games are a nationally-televised spectacle in which 24 randomly chosen teenagers are forced to fight to the death in a man-made arena. The annual Hunger Games are an instrument of oppression by the Capitol--the center of totalitarian power that survived a rebellion--to remind the 12 districts under its power just how powerless they are.

The citizens of the Capitol love the Hunger Games. To them it is pure entertainment. To the citizens of the 12 subservient districts, it is a form of torture. Their children and neighbors become murderers or victims, and they are forced to watch (literally--viewing is mandatory).

There is a paradox at the heart of *The Hunger Games'* appeal. The book's message is fundamentally anti-violence and antiestablishment, but the action of the Games is its main draw. The first half of the book introduces the Games as the unjust, inescapable instrument of exploitation they are. But going on to read about the Games in the second half is just really fun.

Collins treads this contradiction carefully. Her main tool is Katniss Everdeen, the book's hero and narrator. At every step of the process--from volunteering for the Games (to take her sister's place) to

training, public appearances, strategy sessions and finally the Games themselves--we get Katniss's dread and anger at the position she's been forced into. She watches with horror as the contestants kill each other in cold blood, sometimes gleefully.

And yet, Katniss is also really awesome. She's a skilled archer, and years of hunting for her supper has made her adept at surviving in the woods. No matter how horrific the idea of the Games is, part of you shouts, "Kill them all, Katniss!" as you race through the pages.

Collins, in another very deft sleight of hand, makes this easy for you to do. Although Katniss does well in the Games, she only actually kills two other contestants. Both are "careers," kids who have been put through combat and survival training by the citizens of their district, and they are *jerks*. They're cocky and they love killing. Katniss picks each of them off in self-defense after they've already killed several other kids.

For the most part, Katniss just sits back while the other kids kill each other. When she does face a kill-or-be-killed situation, of course, she's got her bow and arrow, surely the most graceful and detached of all deadly weapons. For a contestant in an underage death match, her innocence remains fairly untarnished.

When the story is translated from book to screen, the scale of violence versus contemplation of same tips very heavily toward violence. On screen you don't get nearly as much of Katniss's tortured inner monologue, her reluctance to participate or her horrified witness of murder. What you do get are exciting fights! Laughing blond alpha males getting offed! Katniss's quick, deadly draw.

A friend of mine said he had to actively resist the movie's lure while he watched. The filmmakers so obviously wants you to cheer when any kid besides Katniss gets killed. Another friend said people in the theater where he saw it actually *did* cheer. "I think," he said, "they were missing the point."

They were. The other kids were chosen at random, by their totalitarian government, just like Katniss. As much as Collins manages to

demonize some of them so you don't mourn when they die, they certainly don't deserve death.

The citizens of the Capitol--which boasts, say, 99 percent of the nation's wealth--don't have to send contestants to the Games. They only have to watch, and they think of the contestants as people to root for or against. Before the Games, the contestants are paraded through the Capitol, where they are cheered like celebrities rather than children randomly chosen to murder each other.

Witnessing this reception, Katniss is horrified at how obviously the people embrace the Games as great entertainment. Whatever, kill them all, Katniss!