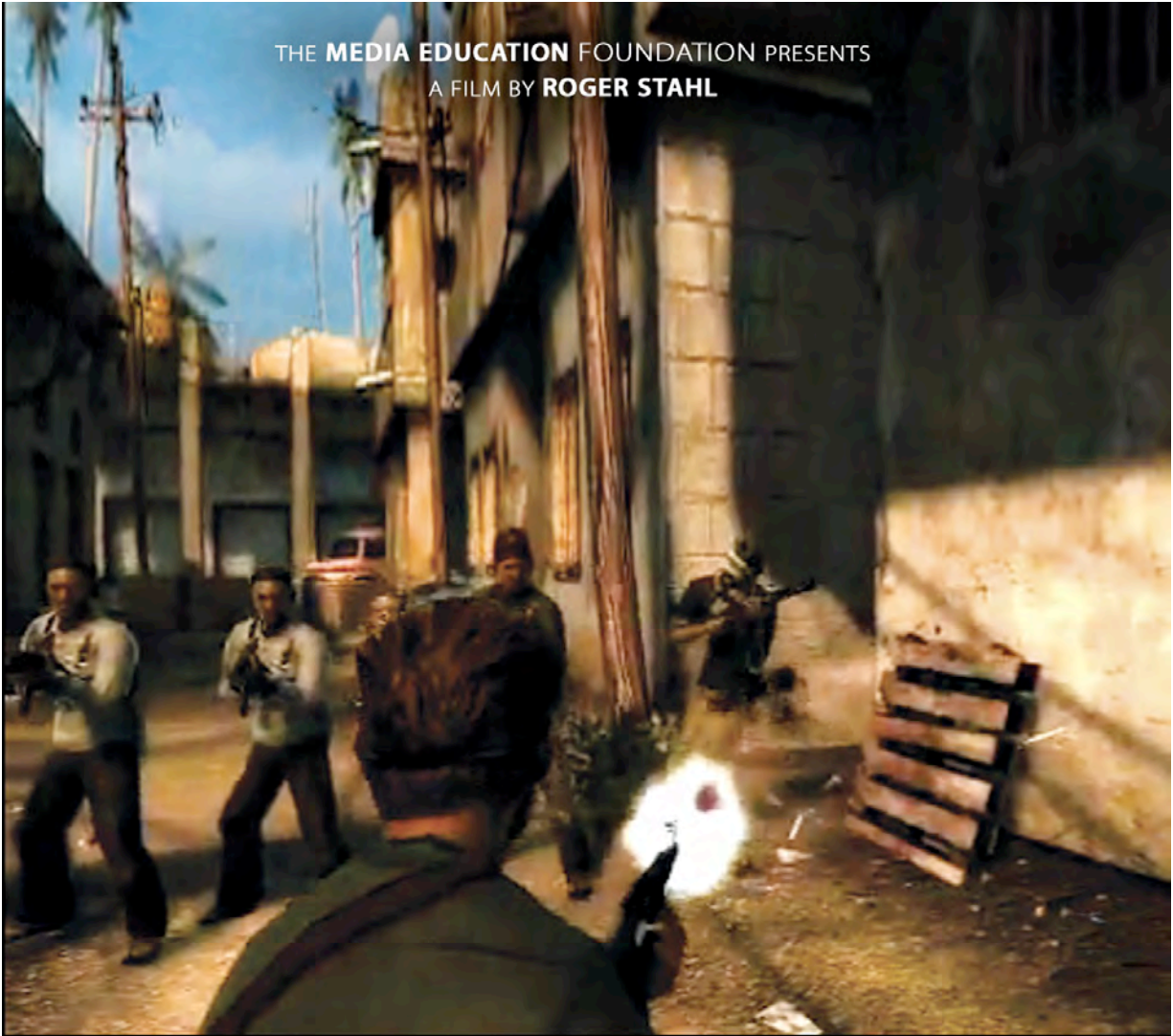


THE **MEDIA EDUCATION** FOUNDATION PRESENTS
A FILM BY **ROGER STAHL**



RETURNING FIRE

Interventions in Video Game Culture

FILM SYNOPSIS

Video games like *Modern Warfare*, *America's Army*, *Medal of Honor*, and *Battlefield* are part of an exploding market of war games whose revenues now far outpace even the biggest Hollywood blockbusters. The sophistication of these games is undeniable, offering users a stunningly realistic experience of ground combat and a glimpse into the increasingly virtual world of long-distance, push-button warfare. Far less clear, though, is what these games are doing to users, our political culture, and our capacity to empathize with people directly affected by the actual trauma of war. For the culture-jamming activists featured in this film, these uncertainties were a call to action. In three separate vignettes, we see how Anne-Marie Schleiner, Wafaa Bilal, and Joseph Delappe moved dissent from the streets to our screens, as they infiltrate war games in an attempt to break the hypnotic spell of "militainment." Their work forces all of us -- gamers and non-gamers alike -- to think critically about what it means when the clinical tools of real-world killing become forms of consumer play.

CREDITS

Written, Directed & Edited by Roger Stahl
Additional Editing & Motion Graphics | Andrew Killoy
Supervising Producer | Jeremy Earp
Audio Engineering | Pinehurst Pictures & Sound
Original Music by Roger Stahl & Andrew Killoy

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UNITED STATES • 2011 • 44 minutes • Color • Shot on Mini-DV • Aspect Ratio 4:3 • Stereo •
English/English subtitles • Available on BETA/DVD/DVCAM • NTSC

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

ROGER STAHL | Director, Writer & Editor

Roger Stahl is an associate professor of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia with interests in rhetoric, media, and culture. He has taught courses in the political history of the camera, media theory, the rhetoric of war, public speaking, argumentation in the courtroom, critical theories of popular culture, and contemporary rhetorical theory. Stahl's research has focused mainly on the rhetoric of war, specifically the intersection of military realities and popular culture. He received his Ph.D. in Communication Arts & Sciences from Pennsylvania State University. His work has appeared in publications such as *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, *Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. His latest book, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture*, was released by Routledge Press in November 2009.

INTERVIEWEE BIOGRAPHIES

JOSEPH DELAPPE | Professor at the University of Nevada

Joseph DeLappe is a professor in the Department of Art at the University of Nevada where he directs the Digital Media program. Working with electronic and new media since 1983, his work in online gaming performance and electromechanical installation have been shown throughout the United States and abroad – including exhibitions and performances in Australia, the United Kingdom, China, Germany, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada. In 2006, he began an online performance, memorial, and protest project, [dead-in-iraq](#), which intervenes in *America's Army*, the military's first-person shooter online recruiting game and propaganda tool. He refuses to play the game and opts instead to access the system's chat interface, methodically typing in the names of U.S. service personnel who have lost their lives in Iraq. He also directs the [iraqimemorial.org](#) project, an ongoing web based exhibition and open call for proposed memorials to the many thousand of civilian casualties from the war in Iraq. He has lectured throughout the world regarding his work, including most recently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His works have been featured in the *New York Times*, *The Australian Morning Herald*, *Artweek*, *Art in American*, and in the 2010 book from Routledge entitled *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Game*.

ANNE-MARIE SCHLEINER | Instructor at the National University of Singapore

Anne-Marie Schleiner is engaged in gaming and net culture in a variety of roles as a writer, critic, curator, and gaming artist/designer. Her work investigates avatar gender construction, computer gaming culture, hacker art and game design. She holds an M.F.A. degree in Computers in Fine Art from San Jose State University in California. She has curated online exhibits of game mods and add-ons including the exhibits "Cracking the Maze: Game Patches and Plug-ins as Hacker Art" and "Mutation.fem." She has designed the games *Anime Noir* and *Heaven711*. She runs a site focused on game hacks and open source digital art forms called [opensorcery.net](#) and has been actively involved in the anti-war game performance art initiatives Velvet-Strike and OUT. Her writing has been published in various art and game anthologies and journals. She has taught at universities and artist workshops and participated in art residencies in Germany, Belgium, Spain and Mexico. Her work has been exhibited online and in the New Museum, the Whitney, Centro de la Imagen Museum, Mexico City, and international galleries, museums and festivals.

WAFAA BILAL | Assistant Arts Professor at the New York University's Tisch School of the Arts

Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal is known internationally for his on-line performative and interactive works that provoke dialogue about international politics and internal dynamics. For his current project, *The 3rdi*, Bilal had a camera surgically implanted on the back of his head to spontaneously transmit images to the web 24 hours a day – a statement on surveillance, the mundane and the things we leave behind. Bilal's 2010 work *...And Counting* similarly used his own body as a medium. His back was tattooed with a map of Iraq and dots representing Iraqi and US casualties – the Iraqis in invisible ink seen only under a black light. Bilal's 2007 installation, *Domestic Tension*, also addressed the Iraq war: Bilal spent a month in a Chicago gallery with a paintball gun that people could shoot at him over the Internet. *The Chicago Tribune* called it "one of the sharpest works of political art to be seen in a long time" and named him 2008 Artist of the Year. Bilal's work is constantly informed by the experience of fleeing his homeland and existing simultaneously in two worlds – his home in the "comfort zone" of the U.S. and his consciousness of the "conflict zone" in Iraq. Bilal suffered repression under Saddam Hussein's regime and fled Iraq in 1991 during the first Gulf War. After two years in refugee camps in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, he came to the U.S. where he graduated from the University of New Mexico and then obtained an MFA at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

NOTABLE QUOTES FROM *RETURNING FIRE*

JOSEPH DELAPPE: “Realism. God, you’re not put in the hospital, you’re not disabled for life, you’re not dealing with the V.A. for the rest of your life. You’re not, you know...you come back the next round to do it again. That’s not real. That’s pretend. I look at what I’m doing in there as a way of kind of closing the loop.”

JOSEPH DELAPPE: “There’s a reason why in the ‘60s blacks went to lunch counters. They created meaning by actually going into that context. It’s the same thing I’m doing here. I mean I could go to the federal building and stand there and read a list of these names, but who’s going to pay attention to that? This got your attention. The military industrial and entertainment complex—whatever you want to call it – you know, to actually engage it on its own terms, I think, is sometimes extremely important.”

JOSEPH DELAPPE: “I’m like a little speck against this gigantic juggernaut of kind of military influence on our culture, but I think those kind of things can perhaps be effective. It shows the possibility of using the media in kind of the same way that the army exploits that media.”

ANNE-MARIE SCHLEINER: “I think there’s this kind of disturbing kind of blurring of boundaries going on. And it’s not so much about computer game violence per say, but it’s more about mixing up military space, fictional space, and civilian space.”

ANNE-MARIE SCHLEINER: “My point with *Velvet Strike* was that we’re already mixing in contemporary Middle Eastern politics with a game anyway, and people who play *Counter Strike* were always saying one of the appeals was that it was so realistic. So why not make a bit more real, and bring activists in there and protesting the war?”

ANNE-MARIE SCHLEINER: “But I think there’s been a change in the approach to activism. It’s become more open to a more playful approach and it becomes a game in itself to try and think of fun ways to divert the flow.”

WAFAA BILAL: “I think by disconnecting them I am, in a bigger picture, drawing their attention to how the video game is designed to disengage from reality.”

ROGER STAHL: “What does it mean when the technological sophistication and of modern militarism go mainstream? When the tools of real-world killing become forms of mass entertainment?”

ROGER STAHL: “These three interventions, *Dead in Iraq*, *Velvet Strike*, and *Domestic Tension* only begin to scratch the surface of the contradictions involved in our new war game culture. They do, however, suggest where the future battle lines are being drawn between realism and reality, between game space and public space, between the comfort zone and the conflict zone, between politics and entertainment. They also suggest strategies for getting us to think more critically about our role in the authorization of state violence. In doing so, they begin to map out paths to a more just and humane world.”

CONTACT INFORMATION

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION | Educational Distributor & Sales Rep

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