

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION

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Joystick Warriors
Video Games, Violence and Militarism

[TRANSCRIPT]

CLIVE THOMPSON: We have a long history of being absolutely fascinated by violence and we grapple with it by making art about it.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: ...through vicious violent videogames.

CNN NEWS ANCHOR: ...trained for a shooting spree by playing videogames.

MSNBC NEWS ANCHOR: An avid gamer

ELIZABETH LOSH: The relationship between videogames and violence might be weaker than the relationship between videogames and militarism.

ANDREW BACEVICH: If you want to be a soldier march down to the local recruiting office, we'll sign you up. We'll send you off to boot camp.

SUT JHALLY: One of the functions of popular culture is to bridge the divide between the public and the military; to provide a kind of fantasy that connects the two.

NINA HUNTEMANN: If the enemy is everywhere and can be anyone then you have to protect every front and assume that everyone is a potential combatant.

MSNBC NEWS ANCHOR: The sixty billion dollar gaming industry is also under intense scrutiny from critics who say that the graphic violence in videogames contributes to real world gun violence.

SUT JHALLY: The discussion we hear all the time in the media about videogames: some people claiming they are responsible for violence.

FOX NEWS PUNDIT: We have raised a generation of children cocked and primed to kill.

SUT JHALLY: Others, mostly the makers of games, insisting they have no effect.

MSNBC NEWS ANCHOR: Videogames are not posing dangers for children or adults.

SUT JHALLY: ...mirrors the debate about media violence that has been going on now for almost fifty years. And that way of framing things has gotten us no nearer to understanding what is really happening when a culture is flooded with images of graphic violence. We really have to start asking a different set of questions: not just whether they making people more violent, but whether they may affect us in other ways as well.

FOX NEWS ANCHOR: Black Ops set a first day sales record, 5.6 million copies of the game sold in the United States and the UK during the first 24 hours. The record didn't just shatter previous videogame sales but also surpassed movie sales.

NINA HUNTEMANN: In 2012 the industry made, in the United States alone, over thirteen billion dollars. On many different platforms, consoles, handhelds, tablets, the P.C. computer.

CBS NEWS ANCHOR: Movies take in ten point six billion at the box office and videogames sales total twenty-three billion dollars--more than movies and music combined.

NINA HUNTEMAN: The videogame industry is diverse in the genres it offers, in the games you can play, in the types of experiences you can have. And they're such beautiful, clever, magnificent worlds that you can temporarily occupy.

ELIZABETH: "See they are not stars, they are doors!"

BOOKER: "doors to...?"

ELIZABETH: "To everywhere! All that is left is the choosing!"

NINA HUNTEMANN: But even though games have come a long way in thirty, forty years, and genres are expanding, and themes, and the visual capabilities of games are going places we could not have imaged twenty years ago. They are still overwhelmingly dominated by themes of war and violence.

SUT JHALLY: It is no mystery that violence is such a big part of television, movies, or videogames. On the one hand it is relatively simple and cheap to script and produce. It doesn't require a great deal of creativity or imagination to figure out how to blow someone up or shoot someone. On the other hand, violence travels really well across borders; there's no language barriers, no possibilities of cultural misunderstandings. When the economics of cultural industries depend upon global audiences, anything that works equally well in the U.S., Europe, or Asia is invaluable.

JAPANESE T.V. ADVERTISEMENT: "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare Two"

EVAN NARCISSE: Ninety percent of videogames that enter the mass consciousness, have something to do with you know, shooting one faction or another, saving the planet, the universe, your girlfriend, by virtue of some kind of violent action.

LEIGH ALEXANDER: Call of Duty is really the one that created this trend, it sold probably more than any other videogame other than Grand Theft Auto. Two of the best selling videogames— one is about war one is about high crime. So, you see, publishers desiring to double down on those themes. The traditional commercial blockbuster game industry has had the challenge of rising budgets alongside advancing technology for some time. Fans are very demanding, they want to see the technology maximized to its fullest potential. That costs a lot of money. Games are now made by multiple studios: two-hundred people at one, one-hundred people at another. These budgets get into the hundred millions.

AMERICAN T.V. ADVERTISEMENT: This is someone you care about, this is a squad member. He does everything from sniffing out explosives to protecting the team. So in this next Call of Duty, being in a whole new world on a whole new story...

EVAN NARCISSE: You see a lot of sequels, twos, threes, and fours, in videogame franchises because they slowly iterate on things that have worked before. They were lucky enough to get something in a first title that found an audience and was profitable. If they are going to do another one, they will add some changes to it, but they are going to be very careful about the changes.

CLIVE THOMPSON: Doing something that is artistically daring, or breaking from the conventions that you have seen before of how men and women are presented, or the way that war is presented, is hard to do for the same reasons that it is hard to make a genuinely artistically daring movie. You have got to stick with the genres that have proven to make tons of money. There are these big financial pressures to deliver these same ideas about war, and these same ideas about men and women.

EVAN NARCISSE: You want to be given a goal that is easy to execute, easy to understand. And then most videogames, because they are driven by mechanics, (how you play it) it's more about learning how to use those mechanics and those tools that they give you, and it's easier to do that with a simple goal.

SUT JHALLY: So, the concentration of violence makes first-person shooter videogames stand out in terms of what is different from other media. Even in movies that we think of as violent, the violence only occupies a small part of the time— not in videogames— it is ever-present. The other thing that is really distinctive is the interactive aspect of games.

MATTHEW PAYNE: One of the key touchstones for game scholars is this notion of interactivity or procedurally. We do things in games that we cannot do with other art forms. We make choices.

PREACHER WITTING : "Are you ready to be born again?"

BOOKER: "I Am."

PREACHER WITTING: "Do you hate your sins? "

BOOKER:"I do."

SUT JHALLY: The mind is involved in an active way because you are making decisions about whether to shoot and who to shoot. So it's not a passive activity. And then your body has to do something; it has to operate the controller. Now, all the very best art tries to move you to this emotional plain, in videogames, that level of involvement is almost intrinsic to the technology, so it is even more powerful. You have this industry that is really big with lots of people engaged in this interactive way, playing for hours and hours in an environment that's just steeped in violence. We have to ask: "What effect is this having, both on the users, and society more generally?"

FOX NEWS ANCHOR: Police say there's reason to believe the Newtown killer loved violent videogames. Could that be part of our problem?

SUT JHALLY: There is a large body of research out there on videogame violence that is pretty much in line with what the research on media violence in general says: that there is very little evidence that persons committing real life violence do so solely because of heavy media viewing. And very little evidence that videogame players engage in more violence than those that do not play. Now, that shouldn't be surprising. Any behavior is the end result of a number of interacting factors. At the most you can say that playing violent videogames is just one in a list of potential factors for committing violence.

CRAIG ANDERSON: One of the newest studies explicitly link violent behavior in the real world to excessive violent videogame play. We're not saying that if there are no other risk factors, that playing violent videogames is going to create a juvenile delinquent or a mass shooter or anything like that, that is not the case. But, what this research does show is that one of those risk factors that can contribute, at least to some extent, does look to be high exposure to media violence, and in this particular study, videogame violence.

NINA HUNTEMANN: We know that any mediated response to violence is incredibly complex. The risk factors for someone acting violently are going to be multiple. But, even the suggestion that mediated violence might influence us at all is often responded to, sometimes by the industry, and so often by players, is that it's cathartic—they're just blowing off steam. They play games to get out those bad feelings, that aggression, that fear, that anxiety.

CRAIG ANDERSON: Basically the catharsis idea is if we can somehow express our emotions in a safe environment that, that will somehow reduce our tendency to act on those emotions in the real environment. And although the idea is really interesting and easy to understand, it also is wrong; it is one of the most well debunked ideas in psychology.

CLIVE THOMPSON: When you play a first person shooter, you start off seeing the gun and the explosions, but eventually it just becomes the physics. You become attentive to and fascinated by the game mechanics. So what a lot of people do not understand when they see people playing a violent game is that on some level after like, you know, the fourth hour, they sort of stop seeing some of the stuff that looks egregious. They are really thinking about the game mechanics in a deep way. So in one sense, this is good news, because it means that what you are actually playing is the game system, you are not really playing a war game. On the other hand, it is terrifying news because this is exactly the desensitization people worry about. That we start looking at something that ought to be terrifying and ugly and just see it as vectors of force.

LEIGH ALEXANDER: I absolutely am frightened of the potential of games to desensitize people. We know they can because the military uses games and simulations to desensitize people. I am often concerned at the way that we cheer for increasingly gory headshots rather than say, "Oh wait a minute, I don't like this! It is not pleasant for me to see. I don't want to pretend I am committing a gruesome act."

CRAIG ANDERSON: What most researchers mean by desensitization is the normal negative emotional reaction that people have when they are faced with violent images. That, that normal negative reaction tends to decrease with exposure. It's that negative emotional reaction that helps prevent people from acting really violently. Even relatively brief exposure can desensitize us. And there are some studies that show that this kind of desensitization does lead to increased aggressive behavior.

ONLINE VIDEO GAME PLAYER COMMENTARY: "Hahahahaha! I can't believe I hit that! Holy crap!"

NINA HUNTEMANN: One of the results of that desensitization can actually be a loss of empathy. And that is a really interesting result. The idea that the more you play the less empathetic you can be to a victim or to your enemy. I think that's really disconcerting because that ties directly into the narratives of war and violence in these games. That desensitization and lack of empathy is almost required in order to play for hours and hours. So, this connection between desensitization and lack of empathy, I think that is the place we need to go when we are looking at the effect of violent videogames on us. On the likelihood of whether or not we will become aggressive or not, isn't as interesting, as the idea of losing our empathy towards others.

ELIZABETH LOSH: When we turn an experience into a spectacle, when we disassociate our own embodied actions from an activity, we also have sent ourselves from certain kinds of moral investment. What is tricky is how do we get beyond kind of broad generalizations about how technology impacts us to thinking about how we make moral choices, and how we teach making moral choices.

HENRY GIROUX: There's a hardening of the culture, there's a distancing from the social, from questions of compassion and social justice and being responsive to the needs of others. It creates what I call "a formative culture of cruelty". In many ways, videogames represent one element of that culture of cruelty. They make it appear as one of the few spaces left where pleasure can be felt, where gratification can be grasped, where desires can be filled in, where identities can become mobile, where social relationships and problems can be addressed, ultimately through the mediation of violence.

VOICEOVER, CHIVALRY: MEDIEVAL WARFARE: "Your days are over. You will die!"

NINA HUNTEMANN: We play stories of violence as a way of safely engaging with what otherwise is deadly. And in that safe space, you can explore: "How do I feel about this? "How do I feel when someone blows up in front of me?" "How do I feel when I see bombs exploding when I am supposedly the one controlling the bombs dropping?" But then, of course that leads us down a problematic road, because what we're seeing is so constructed, and so simplistic, and so reductive. And so, games allow us to be close, but also distant.

CLIVE THOMPSON: We have a long history of being absolutely fascinated by violence and what it means because there's something terrifying about it. And we grapple with it by making art about it. When you see at the end of the Iliad Patroclus dies, you know, he's killed by the Gods, basically. And it's an absolute blood bath, the delight that the Homeric authors had in describing stuff like the sound of the sword going into the metal helmet and piercing the brains and how the brains were jellified. But, am I equating the Iliad with Call of Duty? Not really, because there is a big difference between a poem written to make spiritual sense of the universe and a piece of glossy entertainment produced by a corporation that doesn't particularly care about the moral messages it is giving off.

SUT JHALLY: When we think of depictions of violence in videogames, one way of approaching it is to ask, as the great media scholar George Gerbner once did, "Who can do what to whom and get away with it?" That is, media violence is never just an act, it's a story about the role of violence in life, about who are victims and who are perpetrators. And the major theme in that story is that violence should be the first response to any kind of conflict. Not negotiation, not discussion, not arriving at consensus, but the solution that comes from the barrel of a gun.

GRANDTHEFT AUTO CLIP: "You piece of shit!"

HENRY GIROUX: There's a structural violence that mediates the culture, that appears on a whole range of sites. We can look at popular sports and extreme sports. We can look at cage fighting, and the message increasingly becomes clear that violence is not just a commodity it is an identity. It's a way of life. It's something we inhabit in order to exhibit what has become one of the few choices we have left to be alive, to feel something. When violence becomes the only motif, we essentially see kids acting out and mimicking that behavior. Not all kids, but it certainly becomes one of the more valued responses. You have to ask yourself, "What kind of culture produces the conditions in which violence no longer is simply a matter of entertainment, but actually becomes the utmost form of pleasure. You have to be alarmed at the fact that on television we have a run or shows that are about serial killers, a series based on Hannibal Lector, or Dexter.

FEMALE CHARACTER: "Are you a serial killer?"

DEXTER: "Yes"

HENRY GIROUX: Not only does it humanize violence, but it seems to suggest that the spectacle of violence is the only source of pleasure that we have left.

SUT JHALLY: It's interesting that one of the major ways that boys and men relate to each other in our culture is through violence. So when boys and men are playing shooter games when they are in the same room, or when they are in one of these multiplayer online games, their form of connection is through the violence of the game rather than connecting in some other way.

ONLINE PLAYER ONE: "This is the best part"

ONLINE PLAYER TWO: "You get to slamming shit."

ONLINE PLAYER ONE: "One where I burn his face, come over here!"

ONLINE PLAYER TWO: "Looks like Bono or something oh brutal man! Slam him to the ground and punch him in the face."

SUT JHALLY: So the places where boys and men are social with each other are really narrow and one dimensional. And increasingly are defined by violence, guns and weapons.

ONLINE PLAYER ONE: "We'll just stand here!"

ONLINE PLAYER TWO: "Hey guys what is up, Pizza is here--want to shoot him!"

ONLINE PLAYER ONE: "Should I kill this guy, I guess so!"

ONLINE PLAYER TWO: "Yeah, shoot him!"

SECTION: GUNS AND GAMES

NINA HUNTEMANN: One of the ways in which videogames will sell themselves is to talk about the accuracy of the weapons included. And often times they will reference the experts they brought on for the game development. Most often those are representatives from gun manufacturers.

GREG GOODRICH: We are here at the 2012 international photo-shoot for Metal of Honor War Fighter. I'm here with Drake Clark from Magpole. A great partner. They have brought CTR, PMAGS, EMAGS, What else did you bring today for us?

DRAKE CLARK: You know what, we've got a variety of different stocks and grips. We have the PMAGs of course some MBUS sights on there, our new sling system the MS3 and the two attachment points on there the RSA and ASAP.

NINA HUNTEMANN: This is an incredibly attractive relationship for the gun manufacturers. Because they get a form of free advertising, and such care to their product. And their product being placed in an exciting and fun environment. They couldn't ask for better advertising.

LEIGH ALEXANDER: The technology exists now to have a weapon rendered in absolute life like detail in the game, and for the gamers to interact with that object and become excited about the degree to which it is rendered. Gun manufacturers, they are hoping that the young man who picks up the game will develop an affinity for a certain brand or style of weapon and be drawn to it.

ELISABETH LOSH: Product placement is one of the most insidious forms of intrusion in an entertainment experience. Sometimes there's product placement for verisimilitude, sometimes there's product placement for advertising purposes.

GAME PLAYER ONE: "A weapon stash."

GAME PLAYER TWO: "Oh yeah, I just want more ammo."

NINA HUNTEMANN: Even if a gun manufacturer has not created an economic relationship with the publisher, to have a specific model of a gun appear in the game, the manufacturer still wins. I mean, it's still advertising for the gun, it's still product placement, just not in a formal sense. The product is placed in the game, it's seen being used, most often used in a very glamorous way.

CALL OF DUTY CPL DUNN: "Alright, try switching to your raffle, good now switch to your sidearm again. Do you see how fast that was? Remember switching to your pistol is always faster than reloading."

JUSTIN MCFARLIN: One thing you have seen now, because of videogames, that you haven't seen historically, is the familiarity that even younger children, pre-teens, teenagers have, with advanced weapons. They know the difference between a nine-millimeter, a forty-five, and a fifty-caliber bullet. And the damage that each one can give.

SUT JHALLY: The gun industry wants to make guns normal, so they're just an accepted part of the world in which people actually live. And then, what individual gun manufacturers want to do is to have their brand and model be recognizable within the setting.

U.S. CRICKETT RIFLE ADVERTISEMENT: My first rifle, a moment you'll never forget. Girls and even Mom will love the way they can pick one to their own taste.

SUT JHALLY: The ultimate aim of course, of this marketing effort, is to boost gun sales in real life, and it seems to be working pretty well.

NEWS ANCHOR: Kentucky officials are now considering charges in the case of a five year old who shot and killed his two year old sister with his own gun. A my first rifle, twenty-two caliber. Police say the child pulled the gun from the backpack and then shot himself in the chest. "This is every parents worst nightmare." That gun was not just left out, but was again left out in the child's Spiderman backpack.

LOCAL NEWS ANCHOR: A fourteen year old was shot in the head last night by accident, by another girl.

WAYNE LAPIERRE: There exists in this country, sadly, a callous corrupt, and corrupting, shadow industry that sells and stows violence against its own people. Through vicious, violent videogames.

NINA HUNTEMANN: I felt that the NRA's shift to look at gun violence through the spectrum of videogames was very smart, because for most people, that is in fact their relationship with guns. And if you shift the conversation back to entertainment, then that becomes your context for talking about them.

FEMALE CHARACTER IN GRAND THEFT AUTO: "Are you freakin' serious?"

SUT JHALLY: Now, once you know that the relationship between the videogame industry and the gun industry is so intimate, then the attempt by NRA Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre in the aftermath of the Newtown shootings to blame videogames for real world violence becomes even more bizarre and strange than everyone first thought. It is a joke because the very people he's blaming – video game manufacturers – are the people who gun manufacturers have partnered with to make sure that their weapons are highly visible in videogames. If we accept that videogames are to blame for violence as LaPierre says then the gun industry of which he is a representative bears equal responsibility. You know, in fact, it bears

more responsibility because it is their products that do the actual killing, not the virtual killing. It's one of the most bizarre and confusing statements I've ever heard.

SECTION: MILITARY ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

DWIGHT EISENHOWER: We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence whether sought or unsought by the military industrial complex.

SUT JHALLY: If Dwight Eisenhower were talking today, and he wanted to warn people of the unwarranted influence about the military on society, the label he would use would be the "Military Industrial Entertainment Complex". Because popular culture and entertainment is now shaped to support spending tax dollars on the military economy.

MATTHEW PAYNE: Military Industrial Entertainment Complex is a lab of cultural producers, and private, and government defense interest, who work together to create entertainment commodities that range from music videos to films, to television shows, to comic books, and of course videogames. What they do is they produce these cultural goods, which in fact support the U.S. military's own interest.

CALL OF DUTY GAME PLAYER: "SEC 264, Fire on the left barracks."

CALL OF DUTY PLAYER TWO: "You got it"

CLIVE THOMPSON: A lot of war games are made, the elite ones are made with the cooperation of ex-military and sometimes existing military. Some of the sounds that they have recorded have come from military hardware. When you look at the liner notes there's these extensive thanks to former high up brass and so there is a certain coziness that, you know, is never going to result in a game that displays anything particularly critical about the way war actually goes.

ELIZABETH LOSH: Under the Bush administration there was an explosion in the serious games movement. That's the movement to use games for education, to create more military training games. This was interesting to see in that you would go to videogame conventions and you would see military brass who were trying to meet game developers in order to develop more effective training games. And they wanted to try to use off the shelf existing technologies as much as possible a) because it was cheaper and b) because those off the shelf technologies are the ones that soldiers already know.

MILITARY OFFICER: "Come around the right! Barnett - cover that building while we move! I'm right behind you"

NINA HUNTEMANN: There is a dual purpose that the games serve for the military organizations. They are used for simulation, which is employed in training, and they are also used for recruitment. And this is best seen, or manifest, in "America's

Army". America's Army was created by the U.S. army, specifically as a marketing slash recruitment tool. Seventeen is the legal age at which the military can actively recruit young people to serve. But if you go in through a kind of back door of videogames, then you can reach them at the age of thirteen, which is roughly the age that America's Army was looking for. It's rated T for teen specifically to reach a younger than seventeen audience. One of the things that America's Army does, is that it valorizes the U.S. army, it supports military engagement, it supports military organizations. And so, it makes us feel good about the military.

AMERICA'S ARMY ADD VOICEOVER: You guys want a real challenge? Call 1(888) 395-ARMY now for a free copy of America's army game and this new interactive DVD. Hear what it's like to be a soldier from real soldiers.

SECTION: WAR AS FANTASY

CLIVE THOMPSON: The war games do a really good job of making war seem incredibly cool and acceptable, an acceptable part of every-day life. So that when you see this happening, all the time around you, it doesn't seem aberrant, it doesn't seem like something that shouldn't be happening. That is a moral impact that I think is in some respects even worse than simplistically causing violence. In some respects, the argument over, "do games make kids more violent?" has been a great disservice to our discussion of videogames because it has taken so many eyes off the real impact that some of the violent games can have, which is to normalize the idea of a permanent state of war.

ELIZABETH LOSH: The United States is a militaristic society in that we have had troops actively involved in conflicts through most of the last hundred years. That means that young people who are growing up, have a reasonable expectation that their peers will be involved in armed combat.

SUT JHALLY: When roughly half of all discretionary spending goes to the military sector, it would be a miracle if the culture of that society did not celebrate all the things that have to do with war. In fact, to make the military, and troops especially as the human face of the military, almost like a fetish object of adoration and celebration. This reverence has been there for a long time, but its intensity was really ramped up after the attacks of 9/11.

ANDREW BACEVICH: I think 9/11 reinforced a penchant that was already in existence. That we had already fallen in love with our armed forces. We had already decided that America's strong suite was military power. That using military power was the principle way that we demonstrated this thing called global leadership.

SUT JHALLY: One of the strange characteristics of American society is how few people especially white and middle class actually have a direct connection to it. You know they don't serve in it, they don't have family in it, they don't even have friends in it.

ANDREW BACEVICH: The creation of the so-called "all-volunteer force" at the end of Vietnam began a process of dividing the military from American society. A gap developed between the two.

SUT JHALLY: One of the functions of popular culture is to bridge the divide between the public and the military. To provide a kind of fantasy that connects the two. And there's no better example of that than video gamers, most of whom would never in a million years volunteer to join the armed forces because it is just too dangerous. But who believe that they are connected to it through their gaming experience. Now, the military of course has been aware of this problem for many years, and has explicitly identified videogames as a way of closing that gap.

CPT JARED AUCHEY: Whatever society is doing, that is what the army is going to be doing.

SUT JHALLY: That was the idea behind something called the "Army Experience Center".

MAJOR LARRY F. DILLARD, JR.: Ninety percent of males ages sixteen to twenty-two are playing military themed videogames almost every week.

SERGEANT MI'RISSA CUTT: Nobody knows anything about the army unless you work next to a base or you know a soldier. So if they're just curious they can come in and say, "I just wanted to check it out".

TEEN AT ARMY EXPERIENCE CENTER: It really shows you what war is about what war is like. Like hell, your life is on the line. It is fun because you can really feel like you are in the army when you are playing the games.

ANDREW BACEVICH: To market a war game by suggesting that if you buy this and play this you will be a soldier, I think is part and parcel to this strange relationship between the military and society that we have come to have. I mean if you want to be a soldier, march down to the local recruiting office, and assuming you meet the basic fitness criteria we'll sign you up, we'll send you off to boot camp. In fact, most Americans don't want to do that. So they have this odd admiration of soldiers, this putting soldiers on some kind of pedestal. And games allows people to indulge this identity with soldiers in a way that has no obligations, no downside, it is fraudulent.

JUSTIN MCFARLIN: Having gone to Iraq, having a lot of friends who have served in combat roles, having lost a number of close friends in conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, war and combat is not a glamorous thing for me.

JONATHAN GENSLER: Call of Duty or Iron Warfare is not like being a real soldier; it takes a thirty-second snap shot from maybe a month. Even my friends who were in special operation: there's a lot of down time, there's a lot of boredom and there's a lot of frustration, there's a lot of time spent walking to get where you're going.

SUT JHALLY: Not only are most Americans separated from the military, they're also separated from the actual experience of war, except for a few very isolated incidents like Pearl Harbor or September Eleventh, the United States has not had the real experience of war. Americans think of war in the abstract, not in its painful reality, but in its kind of celebratory mode with victorious troops coming home. Their version of war is a one sided fantasy. And when they're citizens of the most powerful military society that has ever existed, that is a disaster for the rest of the world.

ANDREW BACEVICH: The reality of war is not simply shooting, but it is killing, and killing that exacts a penalty of the killer. And it's also being susceptible to being killed or maimed. People for whom war is defined by popular media don't get that and therefore their understanding of war is fundamentally false and distorted.

SECTION: GAMES OF EMPIRE

ANDREW BACEVICH: There are powerful forces committed to the proposition that we need to continue to be the world's greatest military power – I'm talking about the Military Industrial Complex, the National Security bureaucracy. And there are people who make money, Tom Clancy would be a good example, also contributing to this line of thought.

SUT JHALLY: In this post 9/11 context anything goes. So it's important to recognize that gamers are not just engaged in a fantasy about war in general but a very particular conservative version of it.

CALL OF DUTY GENERAL SHEPHERD: "Gentleman good work on taking the town! Private Allen you will be taking orders from me from now on. I will brief you on the chopper let's go."

METAL GEAR SOLID THREE, VIDEOGAME CLIP: "Now answer me!"

NINA HUNTEMANN: Videogames about war also diverge from real war particularly around the idea of war crimes, rules of engagement, the Geneva Convention. And videogames have for a very long time sort of glorified the "special ops team" the rogue soldier who purposefully breaks from ranks to go off on a mission, and what that kind of sets up is this idea that once you are beyond the rules of engagement, once you are beyond the expectations of the Geneva Convention, then anything goes.

CALL OF DUTY, PLAYER ONE: "Flank You. "

CALL OF DUTY, PLAYER TWO: "No need general, I have nothing to gain by talking to you."

NINA HUNTEMANN: There is a greater acceptance for enhanced interrogation, for extraordinary rendition.

METAL GEAR SOLID THREE, VIDEOGAME CLIP: “So you survived the colonel’s torture, eh?”

NINA HUNTEMANN: That has certainly been a theme of videogames for a while now. And we’re seeing it in our foreign policy as well. There’s no outrage. There doesn’t seem to be much of a civilian response to war crimes in our name.

SUT JHALLY: It used to be that pop culture was a place where there was some skepticism about, and distance from, the repressive institution of the government. For example, a film like *Three Days of the Condor* from the nineteen-seventies was about the C.I.A. murdering its own employees who knew too much. Nowadays instead we’re supposed to be the C.I.A., we’re supposed to be the Marines, we’re supposed to be the Army Rangers. Even as they go about spreading mayhem across the world. Instead of being distanced from the institutions of the state, we’re now fully identified with them. That’s the real effect of videogames.

LEIGH ALEXANDER: If you have young people raised on entertainment that celebrates certain political standpoints or stances to weapons ownership it raises the question: do these people then grow up to support the military or to propagate propaganda related to war?

ELIZABETH LOSH: The question really has to do more with: how do the people that do not serve understand their participation in military culture? And, I think one of the questions is: as we develop these technologies that allow for more and more remote delivery of violence, so things like drones, where a lot of the technologies to train drone pilots also come from videogame technologies as they look at how people understand the action of a controller and how do you get feedback about a successful target.

CNN NEWS ANCHOR: Adversaries possibly killed by a U.S. drone.

ELIZABETH LOSH: As we become more remote from the scenes of violence, how do we understand our participation in that violence?

SUT JHALLY: In 2010 one of the first things released by Wikileaks was a secret video recording that actually looked like a videogame, showing two American Apache helicopters opening fire on a dozen people in Iraq during the U.S. occupation in 2007. What was shocking was not only the footage which showed American troops committing what many people would label a war crime, but the fact that it elicited almost no response from American citizens. There was no outrage, it was kind of just a shrug of the shoulders and then people carried on with their business. And I thought: this is what it means to live in a society where images of violence

have become normalized, this is what desensitization and lack of empathy look like. You know, it's not what people do, it's what they don't do.

SETION: CULTIVATING FEAR

MATTHEW PAYNE: Many of these games give us these invasion narratives. So they either have invading what is considered to be a "rogue nation" or sometimes it is a fictional terrorist group that has gotten control over an American city or some type of technology. But fear is often times the principle spring board by which the games justify the martial response so you have to justify why it is you would send men and women into battle or why it is you would extract the most horrific form of human violence on another person. And often times it is to protect the nation state and it begins with fear.

CALL OF DUTY, PLAYER ONE: "Madam president we are taking you to the prom night shelter under the Bonavenger Hotel downtown."

CALL OF DUTY, FICTIONAL FIRST LADY: "Johnson, I want troops in the streets and these drones dealt with."

SUT JHALLY: A military society needs two fundamental things: first it needs a fearful population that will demand a strong government to protect it. Second, it needs a relatively clear vision of who the enemy is, of whom to be fearful of. And it needs that enemy to be clearly different from us, the so-called proverbial other. After 9/11 it is not surprising that the enemy is identified as Arabs. And the setting for many of the military videogames is the Middle East. But the pressure to create new products that are in some way different from competing videogame makers means that there is a constant search for new enemies. They can't just be Arab anymore.

CALL OF DUTY, SPANISH ENEMY CAPTIVE [yelling in Spanish]

CALL OF DUTY, PLAYER: "You son of a bitch!"

EVAN NARCISSE: When it comes to bad guys, there is an othering that happens. You need to separate them in terms of how they look, how they sound, so that they feel distant from the hero. And as a result comes this easy jingo-ism: you're finding somebody that doesn't necessarily look like you-if your a white guy- doesn't sound like you, presumably has different beliefs than you politically, religiously. If you are afraid of the other then taking him out will be easier than taking somebody out who might look just like you.

CLIVE THOMPSON: There was this funny trend that happened right after Iraq where there was a sense that we can't just make Arabs the bad guys. They started lunging for things that are kind of funny: like, you started seeing Russians appearing again.

VIDEO CLIP: "It is in the VIP Area! Where he contains the fat cats and keeps an eye on the girls! That is it I swear!"

CLIVE THOMPSON: They're in this funny transition right now where they know they can not be openly racist but they need to have someone to fight.

NINA HUNTEMANN: We've seen this interesting shift towards othering everyone and I think this operates in a very interesting way if we think about it in terms of contemporary warfare. We are in a state of perpetual war. At least that is what our politicians and world leaders tell us. But not only perpetual war, but that our war fronts are everywhere. They are over there, they are next door, and they are in your backyard. The enemy could be anyone and could be anywhere. And that is fear and anxiety producing. If the enemy is everywhere and could be anyone, then you have to protect every front. Assume that everyone is a potential combatant, a potential antagonist.

SECTION: NO GIRLS ALLOWED

HENRY GIROUX: I think that it's difficult to talk about masculinity, particularly in the United States, without talking about the culture of violence. We see the move from a society that simply was militarized, to one that is now suffering from what I call, the 'poverty of militarization,' which means society is increasingly organized for the production of violence. A new kind of subject is needed. That subject is a hyper-masculine subject, a subject that wears guns, becomes a first-shooter. It's a subject that believes violence is one of the few choices left that people have to define what it means to embody a masculine body and be in the world.

GEARS OF WAR THREE, MARCUS: "I'm not the conversational type."

CLIVE THOMPSON: These ideals of masculinity as this chiseled guy to an almost ridiculous extent. If you take a look at someone like Marcus, the lead character in Gears of War it is almost at the level of self-parody how huge and muscled he is.

SUT JHALLY: When the culture in general defines masculinity in this tough physical way, and the vast majority of boys and men don't have those physical attributes, videogames provide the kind of fantasy world whereby they can inhabit a kind of socially sanctioned masculinity defined through intimidation, toughness, violence, and above all control, without actually having to behave like that.

LEIGH ALEXANDER: I think the audience that is most attracted to videogames tend to be people who want to feel a sense of empowerment, maybe you want to escape circumstances of disempowerment in their real lives. They are drawn to videogames because they want to visit a world that they can have an impact on and control.

CLIVE THOMPSON: The truth is these games are part of an absolute love bombing of gender that happens every time you open your eyes in Western culture. These games are part-and-parcel of a constant messaging that guys have to be this tough thing and women have to be hot and that is really all there is to it.

SUT JHALLY: There is no doubt that women, when they do appear, are being represented in pretty narrow stereotypical ways in many videogames. Although, in the shooter games, they are largely invisible, or very marginal to the action. There aren't very many female characters. But, and this is often overlooked when we talk about videogames, the social space of gaming, is also profoundly male. Women players are kept out in a variety of quite disturbing ways.

SEXIST ONLINE GAMER: "Nah b-tch, I don't play like this, you m-therfu-king live on this game. Shut up b-tch."

LEIGH ALEXANDER: A lot of these shooter games have incredibly strong online multi-player components. You have to go online, play with others, and use your voice. And if you have a sexist gamer culture they are going to enforce the message that women are a rarity. Women may feel alienated from shooters, not because of some innate distaste for them, but because of a cultural problem that enforces to them that they should stay away.

NINA HUNTEMANN: As a woman, those spaces are dangerous at worst, and just uncomfortable in their most benign.

SEXIST ONLINE GAMER: "I'm gonna kick your -ss. F_cking N-gger."

NINA HUNTEMANN: I love to play videogames, I often will play online, but I tend to avoid online game play specifically for military shooters. The smack talk between players is incredibly homophobic, racist, and incredibly misogynistic.

RACIST ONLINE GAMER: "Come on man, you are so Black."

NINA HUNTEMANN: Women who have even attempted to critique that space have been beseeched by misogynistic abuse and really personally threatening abuse as well.

SUT JHALLY: The most infamous case involves a cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian who when she announced a pretty innocuous Kickstarter campaign to look at how women were represented in videogames, became the victim of a massive backlash.

ANITA SARKEESIAN: I found myself the target of a massive online hate campaign. All of my social media sites were flooded with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, death. The Wikipedia about me was vandalized with sexism, racism, and pornographic images. There was a campaign to report all of my social media accounts including my Kickstarter, my Youtube, my Twitter and they would report

them as fraud, as spam, even as terrorism, in an effort to get them suspended. There were images made, pornographic images made, in my likeness being raped by videogame characters and sent to me again and again. There was even a game made where players were invited to "beat the bitch out" in which upon clicking on the screen, an image of me would become increasingly battered and bruised.

SUT JHALLY: If you look at this in its totality: the hyper-masculinity based on violence and control, the invisibility of female characters, the incredibly misogynistic attacks on any woman that dares to enter the space or to critique it, you don't exactly need to be a very skilled cultural analyst to see that a very particular and narrow notion of gender is what dominated these games. You know, it's often said that one of the characteristics of videogames is that they allow you to be anything you want to be, to explore alternative identities. The shooter games are the exact opposite, reinforcing the most regressive notions of masculinity and femininity.

SECTION: NO REALITY ALLOWED

KILLZONE TWO, VOICEOVER: "Once stolen, we will Shatter their dreams and haunt them!"

NINA HUNTEMANN: One of the consequences of the militarization of our culture and particularly popular culture, is we shift the focus to the individual soldier. What is so problematic there is that we are not taking a look at the power structures, those who wage war, who make decisions on when we are going to go to war and how we are going to wage war. Not those who fill the boots on the ground and follow the orders of those who make those decisions. Games don't talk about those geopolitical decisions. Games don't talk about the consequences to nations, to civilizations. War is a violent political response to conflict, and games don't engage that.

SUT JHALLY: The videogame version of war is a really distorted picture. You know, first of all, there are no consequences to war. You might fail and die, but you are back in the next game. You never experience fear for your safety and life the way that real soldiers do. And the violence in videogames is what George Gerbner called "happy violence". It's death delivered with a punch line or joke. With none of the consequences of real war, none of the physical pain of dismemberment, the grieving of a family and friends of the people you blew away without a second thought. Unlike real war, everything is geared towards escalation. The more people you kill and blow up the better, and never towards resolution. There's no collateral damage because there are no pesky civilians to get in the way.

ELIZABETH LOSH: It is interesting to see how a culture around playing military videogames is something that is perhaps different from the culture of people who actually go and fight these wars. How do people imagine right and wrong in

situations where there are only virtual consequences, no one is actually hurt, and yet it does reshape the way that they see the world.

SUT JHALLY: Our discussion about shooter-based videogames has been deflected into dead ends. It is not about whether they create people who become violent. What they do is much more profound: they desensitize us to violence, they diminish our capacity for empathy, they present death as a joke, they normalize the presence of weapons in our lives and present violence as the first and only response to any form of conflict. They glorify masculinity based on toughness and intimidation, and they attack anything that diverts from that, they cultivate fear of anyone or anything different, and they present war not in its excruciating tragedy, but as fun and exciting. Videogames don't create violent people, what they do is glorify a violent culture, and shut down our capacity as a society to imagine anything different. They short-circuit our ability to think in more productive ways about the real violence in our lives--that is their real tragedy.