

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

RETURNING FIRE
Interventions in Video Game Culture

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, discussion questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing provide a series of questions designed to help you review and clarify material for your students; to encourage students to reflect critically on this material during class discussions; and to prompt and guide their written reactions to the video before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Video games like *Call of Duty*, *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 Joseph Delappe, Anne-Marie Schleiner, and Wafaa Bilal moved dissent from the streets to our screens, infiltrating 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 military combat and killing become forms of consumer play.

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

- In the past decade, as America has entered both the war in Iraq and the war on terror, war video games have risen in popularity.
- The most popular war video games are those that quickly reproduce current events. These games include *America's Army*, which is produced by the U.S. military, and commercial franchises like *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor*, and *Battlefield*.
- Video game profits in the U.S. totaled \$19.6 billion in 2010.
- *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* made \$310 million on its first day of release, which is the biggest one-day launch in any entertainment genre.
- As the technological tools used by today's military have worked their way into commercial video games, war has increasingly become a form of mass entertainment.
- The activists in this film want us to question the machine-like nature of modern warfare and consider the role of activism in a digital world.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

- 1) Do you play video games? If you do, what kind of video games do you play and why? If you don't, why not? Be specific.
- 2) Why do you think war video games have become so popular over the past decade? Why do you think people play video games like these?
- 3) How is the game play of war video games similar to the warfare of the U.S. military? How is it different?
- 4) What is the role of citizen activism in a democracy? How can the Internet be used as a tool for citizen activism? Do you see any limitations in what the Internet can accomplish as an activist tool?

Assignments

- 1) Play a war video game. If you can't get your hands on a controller, watch a friend play or look up videos on the Internet. What is the game like? Does its story reproduce current events? Be prepared to share your experience with the class.
- 2) Research the video game industry. How does it compare and contrast to other popular media industries? In addition to overall sales figures, production costs, and net profits, be specific about how video game companies are structured, and operate, as businesses.
- 3) Research the correlation between toy weapons and actual weapons throughout American history. How is playing with a toy gun in the 1950s similar to the high-tech play of today? How is it different? What other forms of play are similar to forms of war?

DEAD IN IRAQ

Key Points

- The U.S. Military Academy at West Point developed the online game *America's Army* as a recruiting tool.
- Joseph DeLappe created a virtual war memorial within its game space by typing the name, rank, and date of death of fallen Americans into the game's text messaging system.
- Most players were resistant to DeLappe's project, responding to his messages with their own arguing "this is just a game."
- The developers claim the game is "high realism at its best," but DeLappe argues: "You're not put in the hospital. You're not disabled for life.... You come back the next round to do it again. That's not real. That's pretend."
- DeLappe's project sparked media attention, especially after he received an email from Lee Hutchinson, the brother of a soldier killed in Iraq. Hutchinson disagreed with the project, and thought his brother would too, because he believed it trivialized soldiers' deaths. DeLappe's response was that he believes the game itself trivializes death, and distorts how soldiers really experience war.
- Some people have complained to DeLappe, saying he should take his antiwar activism somewhere else. "This is not the place to protest," one player wrote to him. "Go do this on the federal building steps." Yet DeLappe believes he is creating meaning by taking his concerns directly to the source, similar to how blacks did at lunch counters in the 1960s.
- DeLappe considers his protest to be rather small compared to the overwhelming military influence on American culture, but he thinks he has been effective in using media to critique media.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

- 1) How do you feel about the U.S. military's recruiting tactics? Are video games an innovative way to get people interested in joining the military? Why or why not?
- 2) Are war video games "just a game"? Is virtual killing merely a form of mindless entertainment? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you support Joseph DeLappe's project? Does *America's Army* trivialize the deaths of American soldiers? Should DeLappe have taken his protest to "the federal building steps" instead? Why or why not?

Assignments

- 1) Throughout American history, the government has found new ways to recruit its citizens to join the military. Research current military recruitment tactics, and compare and contrast them with recruitment tactics employed in the past, going all the way back to the Revolutionary War.
- 2) Research lunch counter protests during the civil rights era, and compare and contrast this form of political action with DeLappe's approach. What do these two forms of protest have in common on the tactical level? How are they different? And beyond the tactical methods used, what similarities and/or differences do you see in what they were trying to accomplish?

VELVET-STRIKE

Key Points

- Anne-Marie Schleiner thinks war video games blur the boundaries of military space, fictional space, and civilian space.
- Against the backdrop of the war in Afghanistan, Schleiner and a friend decided to infiltrate the popular shooter game *Counter-Strike*. Using virtual spray paint, they covered the game space with anti-war graffiti. They also created a series of “intervention recipes” to allow other players to interfere with the flow of the game themselves. For example, one recipe enabled players to stand together in the shape of a heart and let other players shoot at them.
- Schleiner received hate mail, and even death threats, for intervening in *Counter-Strike*. One piece of mail was from a man who watched the World Trade Center burn in New York City. He told Schleiner that *Counter-Strike* was an outlet for him to seek revenge on the perpetrators of 9/11.
- Schleiner thinks it’s good when activism becomes more playful: “It becomes a game in itself,” she says, “to try and think of fun ways to divert the flow.”

Questions for Discussion & Writing

- 1) Can you think of any examples where the boundaries of military space, fictional space, and civilian space have gotten mixed up? What are they?
- 2) Do you think intense immersion in the video game universe can serve as an outlet for real-life anger? Why or why not? And if you do, how does this square with the argument that playing these games can reinforce the very behaviors and emotions that some players say they’re trying to work off?
- 3) Do you support Anne-Marie Schleiner’s project? Do you think anti-war activism in a virtual space like *Counter-Strike* is an effective form of protest? Why or why not?

Assignments

- 1) Visit the Velvet-Strike website (<http://www.Opensorcery.net/velvet-strike>) and check out both the “sprays” and “intervention recipes.” Using any design software, create your own spray. Or if you’d prefer, come up with instructions for your own intervention recipe.
- 2) There are many different approaches to activism. For example, during the civil rights movement, the leaders Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. endorsed violent and nonviolent movements, respectively. Research these different approaches, including the newer “playful” approach. Which approach do you think is best today? Why?
- 3) In 1930s Germany, Nazi youth were raised on war games. Research these games, and compare them to the war games currently played by American youth. According to historians, what sort of effect did war games have on young Germans? Do you see any parallels with the influence of war games on kids today?

DOMESTIC TENSION

Key Points

- Wafaa Bilal grew up in Iraq during the dictatorship of Sadaam Hussein. He was arrested and tortured for his political artwork, which criticized Saddam, and when Iraq invaded Kuwait in the early 1990s, he refused to fight. Bilal was blacklisted, and he fled to the U.S. in 1992.
- The deaths of his brother and father in Iraq inspired Bilal to explore the relationship between technology and war.
- Bilal put himself into an installation in Chicago, rigged an actual paintball gun to shift left, right, and shoot, and allowed people online to shoot at him.
- Bilal designed the online interface to be very similar to a video game, and he deliberately degraded the quality of the image to make it look more like war images on television.
- Within the first 24 hours, Bilal was shot at over 1,000 times. In 30 days, he was shot at 65,000 times.
- Controversial radio host Matthew “Mancow” Muller shot Bilal during an interview on the Free Speech Radio Network.
- On Memorial Day, a group of 39 people started a group called Virtual Human Shield. They shifted the gun left and prevented other people from shooting at Bilal.
- To fully engage people and make true change, Bilal believes that you have to filter your message through the local language of the people you’re trying to reach.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

- 1) When would you personally speak out against your government? Would you ever go as far as Wafaa Bilal and refuse to fight for your country? Why or why not? Would you be prepared to flee the country to avoid persecution?
- 2) How does Bilal’s project explore the relationship between technology and war? Explain.
- 3) Do you support Bilal’s project? Do you think art can become a successful form of protest? Why or why not? If you were an activist-artist, what could you do to make sure your message got across to people who might not understand you?

Assignments

- 1) Write a research paper on the history of Sadaam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, focusing specifically on how he handled dissent and protest.
- 2) Research the controversial radio host “Mancow.” Visit <http://www.mancow.com>, browse the site’s content, do additional Internet research, and be prepared to report to class on everything you know about Mancow, his methods, and why you think he handled Bilal the way he did.
- 3) Create your own intervention in video war game culture, a strategy for getting us to think more critically about our role in the authorization of state violence.