

WAR GAMES: THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT VIDEO GAMES THAT PLAY AT WAR

Many video games are based on the theme of war, a theme that has been a part of the video game industry from the beginning—and a part of traditional games for much longer. However, in a post-9/11 world and in a time when the United States is still engaged in the ‘War on Terrorism,’ it is important to think critically about the messages sent by these games and to ask questions about their cultural meanings and significance. In this activity, students will:

- » think critically about the imagery and narratives of video games based on war;
- » consider that video games can be used as a propaganda tool;
- » become familiar with the debate about violent video games; and
- » become aware of the connections between militarism and video games.

PREPARATORY HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

1. Visit the following websites for the video game *Conflict: Desert Storm*

- » www.sci.co.uk/games/basic.asp?version_id=32
- » www.gothamgames.com/conflict/

a. On the first website, read the description of the game.

- » Based on this description, what perspective of war does it seem that this game puts forth?

b. On the second website, click on “Visual Confirmation.” Look through the screen shots of the game.

- » Describe these images. What perspective of war do these images put forth?

c. Explore the second website, the Gotham Games site, and click on the links to find out about the features of the game, etc..

- » What aspects of the game do you find interesting, exciting, or intriguing? If you don’t personally find the game appealing, what aspects of the game do you think others would be attracted to?

- » What audience (*age, gender, etc.*) do you think this game would appeal to?

2. Visit the website for America’s Army www.americasarmy.com and look around. The U.S. Military spent \$6 million to develop the game. Most video games cost \$1-1.5 million to develop. This game is given away for free as a recruiting tool. Answer the following questions:

- » Why would the U.S. Military spend this much money to develop a video game?
- » Why might a video game be an effective recruiting tool?
- » How does a video game that simulates military training and combat differ from the experience of actually going through it?

(continued on next page)

WAR GAMES:

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT VIDEO GAMES THAT PLAY AT WAR

» In the gallery, there is desktop wallpaper, designed by gamers, that is free for download. Examine these images:

- » What point of view of military and war is propagated with these images?
- » What information and aspects of war do these images ignore or gloss over?
- » Why might it be appealing for someone, particularly a teenage boy (*the primary audience the U.S. Military targets with their recruiting efforts*), to download these images?
- » Why do you think the U.S. Military sponsored the contest for designing desktop wallpaper?

IN-CLASS READING & DISCUSSION

Handout *Militarism & Video Games: An Interview with Nina Huntemann* (available in PDF format for easy download at www.mediaed.org/news/articles/militarism—you will need Acrobat Reader to download this document). After reading the interview, students should answer the following questions (either in writing or in a discussion).

1. Prof. Huntemann notes that ‘playing war’ has historically been a part of games, such as Chess, Go, and Battleship. She notes however that playing war in video games is different. What are the differences she cites? Discuss your thoughts about these differences.

2. Video games are used as training tools in the U.S. Military. Discuss the ethics of selling a video, with slight alterations, to the general public that has been used to train soldiers to kill. (*To further inform this discussion, read Lieutenant Col. Grossman’s article “Teaching Kids to Kill” available at www.killology.com/article_teachkid.htm. To add further complexity to the discussion, do some research and find articles that critique Lieutenant Col. Grossman’s analysis, and evaluate the critique for objectivity, fairness, and soundness.*) Discuss.

3. Respond to Huntemann’s statement:

“Clearly, post-9/11, we’re living in a much more fearful world. We carry more fear with us than we did 2 years ago, and one of the things these games allow people to do is, even if just for 45 minutes, sit and play a game – it gives you a sense of getting back the control of that fear. It’s fantastical, it’s temporary, but if you can play a game where you are neutralizing a terrorist threat – for 45 minutes you can pretend you have some sense of agency, some control, or at the very least, some part in trying to make the world a safer place. There is something to be said for that kind of cathartic and escapist moment that it gives you. Of course, the downside of that is if the only place where you address the fear is in your fantasy world, is in your entertainment, is in a game for 45 minutes, then that leaves the rest of you really wanting for another way of addressing that. Talking to other people, becoming part of a community effort to make your neighborhoods safer, learning more about your fears, and so forth, are things to think about. If you get your relief from that fear via a temporary and fantastical scenario, it could take away from addressing it in a realistic, long-term, and healthy way.”

4. In her interview, Huntemann states:

“The concern is that with such attention to the technology of war, again what room does that leave for thinking about a lot of the other aspects of war? Yes, the casualties of war — the immediate casualties both on our side and the enemy side, and of course the innocent civilian side. What are the implications after the war? What will happen to this country that we may be invading — or that you may be battling in the video game — after the action is over? What about the geopolitical outcome or fallout, what’s going to happen to international relations between the United States and Europe, post-conflict? So, hyper-focusing on the technology of war takes attention away from other extremely important aspects of war and war coverage.”

(continued on next page)

WAR GAMES:

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT VIDEO GAMES THAT PLAY AT WAR

Think of the screen grabs from *Conflict: Desert Storm* (which you looked at in **1b** of your homework assignment) in the context of this quotation. Discuss. Based on these images, what aspects of war does it appear that this game does not show?

5. Huntemann explains that she believes that video games are “reinforcing the idea of acting quickly and perhaps doing so without considering the context your actions are going to affect.” Explain what she means by this. Why might it be dangerous to act quickly and without thought?

6. Media violence experts often explain that what we (*especially children and young teenagers*) do in our leisure time—and what and how we play—affects how we see ourselves, each other, and the world. Discuss this concept.

7. Discuss the following statement: Video games and other forms of entertainment media that play at war glorify and glamorize the notion of combat; they condition us to accept war. If we have engaged in this kind of media on a regular basis, we will be less likely to ask questions and expect our country to seek out alternative response options when a real war comes along.

8. Do you believe that video games that play at war are socially responsible? Why or why not? Do video game designers have an obligation to be socially responsible? What does that mean? What does (*or would*) a socially responsible video game look like?

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

Justice Talking, a radio show that airs on NPR stations around the nation, aired a debate about Violent Video Games on June 24, 2003. Go to the following link and listen to the debate on-line:

» www.justicetalking.org/viewprogram.asp?progID=414.

Complete the following writing assignment:

- 1.** Summarize the perspectives each of the guests (*Daphne White and Gerard Jones*) have on violent video games.
- 2.** List the main points that each of the guests made about violent video games during the debate.
- 3.** Reflect on the debate. What points were the strongest and made the most sense to you? Why? Taking into consideration both Daphne White’s and Gerard Joneses’ perspectives, what sense do you make of the issue? What is your opinion about violent video games? What is your opinion about video games that specifically play at war?

VIDEOS & DISCUSSION

- » Show the video *Game Over: Gender, Race, & Violence* (available at www.mediaed.org) in class. Discuss.
- » Show the video *Beyond Good & Evil: Children, Media & Violent Times* (available at www.mediaed.org) in class. Discuss.
- » Show the video *Sex, Murder, & Video Games* (available at www.mediafamily.org.store) in class. Discuss.