

MILITARISM & VIDEO GAMES: AN INTERVIEW WITH NINA HUNTEMANN

*Recently, MEF intern Michelle Barron interviewed **Nina Huntemann**, producer of *Game Over: Gender, Race & Violence in Video Games*. The transcript of the interview follows.*

MB: *What are the links between militarism and video games?*

NH: Video games and militarism have an old history. Games of all sorts — video games, board games, and games kids play in the backyard — have historically been about conflict and warfare. Whether you're playing *Chess*, which is a simulated battlefield, or a game like *Go*, an ancient Chinese game that is also a simulated battlefield, or you're playing a board game like *Risk* or *Axis and Allies*, you're essentially at war and you're playing out military conflict. The history continues with electronic games.

What is perhaps different about video games that deal with military conflict is they're more realistic. Instead of imagining the battlefield in your mind or having such an abstract battlefield like the *Chess* war, is that in video games the battlefield is drawn out for you in almost photographic, picture-perfect volume. Then you have all the other aspects of video gaming: the simulated violence and gore, and the sounds of the battlefield (instead of having to imagine the sound as you are moving *Chess* pieces around the board as you pretend to be fighting off an enemy). The video game provides it for you and those sounds are designed to be very realistic. So, the link between video games and militarism is that video games continue to make play out of warfare in an extremely realistic manner, more realistic than any previous entertainment game that is technologically-oriented.

MB: *Video war games were around before September 11, 2001, but what are the cultural meanings and implications of these games in a post 9/11 environment?*

NH: Two things have occurred since 9/11. One is that there has been an interesting trend in the kinds of games released, and the second thing is that 9/11 is so culturally significant that the games take on a new meaning. A game that came out prior to September 2001 that was about fighting terrorism means something very different in our culture now, just because of the very recent history of the world. So, one thing that is going on is that there is an increase in games about militarism (in a very specific way) and another thing is that games that already existed about warfare and military conflict take on a new meaning in a post 9/11 world because of the history.

I've looked at video games for about five years now. A trend that I've noticed in just the past two years is an increase in games of 'covert-ops.' The scenario is some kind of military operation that must be played out, but that military action isn't sanctioned by any international governmental structure, like the UN; rather, the government that is supporting it — the U.S. — is doing so secretly. The operations will not be publicly discussed. For example, you'll start off in a game like Tom Clancy's *Splinter Cell* — there is some kind of a terrorist threat and what you have to do individually or sometimes with a group of four or five other characters, is go in and neutralize that terrorist threat, but in doing so you will use secret and really illegal actions. The ads for *Splinter Cell* read something like this: *I alone have the fifth freedom — the right to spy, steal, destroy, and assassinate to insure that American freedoms are protected. If captured my government will disavow any knowledge of my existence.* That just gives you a sense of what's being set up here. The lead character that you'd play is commanded to go out and commit what under the UN Human Rights Charter or even International Rules of Engagement, would be illegal. Assassinating a political leader is illegal under International Law; it's a war crime, and you can be brought to trial for it. What this

game is setting up is that you are going to commit these illegal acts for a government; and, in this case, the United States is the auspice.

The theme was certainly there prior to 9/11, but I have seen a surge in the popularity of those games, not only in the production of those games that are on the shelves, but they're also being purchased. They're out there and becoming very popular. *Splinter Cell* was the third most popular game being sold for the PC in the second week of March. Another game, *Raven Shield*, which was out a year ago, was similarly as popular. So, there is an increase in how many games are being made with this theme, and they're popular among audiences.

MB: *Since 9/11, there has been no action taken on part of the video game designers to alter the games insofar as modifying the content of terrorist genres. Would you say that both the design and increase in playing this type of game is about avenging the enemy?*

NH: I do want to say one thing about these games — they're fun. In that, your adrenaline during all of this is really pumped up, and you have to be sneaky and think through things, and strategy is involved, so there are a lot of visceral connections to these games. I enjoy playing *Conflict* and *Splinter Cell*; it's quite a thrill. They're popular because they're fun to play, but also the themes draw us in, since they are themes that are in the headlines. We're drawn in a way to something that is realistic. It is really important in video games that the storyline is realistic — and how much more realistic can you get then a terrorist threat that needs to be neutralized, when we've just come out of a terrorist attack? You take all of the technological aspects of realism, combine those with the narrative realism — as in this stuff could actually be happening in the world — and you have an incredibly compelling game.

It's not just about fantasy and escape, but another part of what we enjoy about entertainment and popular culture is how it reflects the world we live in. When we hear the word 'terrorism' for example — when the president uses the expression 'terrorist threat', we immediately respond with an immediate, *Yes, we must neutralize it. Yes, they must be destroyed*, etc. There is no moral or ethical questioning of the specifics of the historical context of the terrorist threat — why might there be this terrorist threat? or How might we be implicated in the fact that there is a proliferation of terrorist cells? And so forth — all of the questions that might come in between hearing about a threat and then deciding to act have been flattened or eliminated. In video games, as soon as the narrative establishes that you are going to eliminate a terrorist threat, just like in the real world, there is no discussion of all of those other questions of why — what are the moral implications? What might be the outcome be? Why did this terrorist threat occur in the first place?

What I find really frightening is that in our playtime — in our leisure time, we're engaging in fictional conflicts that are based on a terrorist threat and never asking any questions. I get really worried about what we're doing: what are we not thinking about? and Are we being rash and quick to jump to lots of assumptions? It almost gets the designers of the games off the hook in having to explain in more depth why this is a threat...It's almost as if all the game needs to say is, *There's a terrorist threat, now go!* If you take that and connect it to our culture, that is disconcerting to me because obviously there are hundreds of questions that need to be asked and pondered and thought about before action.

MB: *What are video games reinforcing for the players?*

NH: I think what it does is it reinforces — whether video games are causing this or not, but I don't think so — it reinforces the idea of acting quickly and perhaps doing so without considering the context your actions are going to affect. Like swallowing the whole story.

MB: *Based on what you've looked at before, what has your analysis been in the past couple of months? What has the coverage of the war in Iraq meant in relation to video game violence?*

NH: This is something that I think is not necessarily new post 9/11. This has always been there with the video game industry, but it has incredible revenue. What I have found in video games based on warfare

is an intense amount of time for the designers, an intense amount of time in the marketing, and an intense amount of time by the players is focused on the technology of the warfare. For example, in a game like *Battlefield 1942*, which is about WWII, there is an intense amount of attention paid to what kinds of weapons you as a player have access to — What kinds of artillery, tanks, airplanes, hand grenades, handheld guns, larger weaponry? A lot of attention to detail and mimicking, or replicating, what was actually used during WWII. And, in fact, it's this focus on technology and the realistic portrayal of the technology that can make or break the popularity of the video game. So for example, in video games about historical wars, like *Battlefield 1942*, there is attention paid to what technology was available during that war, and the game is going to provide that technology simulated.

In *G.I. Combat* (another game about WWII) — an ad for the game reads, *A game that gives the player the chance to rewrite history in this groundbreaking redefinition of WWII tactical combat. Realistic 3-D environment; maps are drawn from the actual terrain on Normandy. Historically designed campaigns set in Normandy, June 1944, accurate physics models for weapons for armory penetration...* and on and on. So what the marketers are doing, and the designers have, is first of all, a lot of homework to find out what kind of weaponry was available during these conflicts, and then replicating that both in the way it looks on the screen, and how it acts in the game — what kind of destructive power one weapon has over another — is all calibrated to reflect what this weapon actually did during WWII.

For example, a game that came out a couple of years ago called *Black Hawk Down* is about the conflict in Somalia, and in particular the final battle in Mogadishu. Again that game, in the marketing and the design, has a hyper-intensive focus on the technology that was available during that conflict, and that is part of how they sell the game. People who play the game are looking for that realism. A game that does not take the time to replicate the technical specifications of whatever weapons or aircraft or seacraft are available, either in a contemporary battle or historical battle, is not going to become popular. You will read a player's reviews of it, and almost all of the players are commenting on the realism of the game, and if it fails, it doesn't get reviewed well — it doesn't become as popular, or played and purchased as much. There are retired military personnel, who are consultants on the design of the game. So the game is pushing as much realism as possible because the game designers know and the marketers know that's what makes the game popular.

So connecting that to how the war's being covered is a fairly well established critique by now. Coverage of the first war with Iraq in 1991 and coverage now have both been technologically focused. In 1991, it was all about the patriot missile; now, it's all about cruise missiles. What kinds of damage can these weapons enact? What kinds of weaponry does the enemy have? And what can we use to counter that? Certainly the attention on potential chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction capabilities is a lot of what the focus has been on in media coverage.

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. And when you're talking about news coverage, they only have so much time in a 22-minute spot, or only have so much access to the Pentagon. And what they're getting fed are lots of pictures of what the weapons can do, lots of technical information about what kinds of weapons they use. So, I find the parallels to what is focused on in video games and what the news is focusing on striking.

MB: *Can you talk about the game America's Army? What is it?*

NH: The focus on the technological aspect of war in video games is something that I've called 'a propaganda mechanism'. In the early 1900s, prior to the U.S. joining the fight of WWII, there wasn't large public support

for getting involved with the global conflict. WWI was still recent history, and the country was struggling with its own issues of immigration and economic problems and so forth, so there just wasn't a lot of public support for entering into WWII. And, one of the ways in which the war department, which is now the Pentagon, gathered support for the United States entering into WWII, was they launched a propaganda action. What they did was they hired a filmmaker by the name of Frank Capra, who directed *It's A Wonderful Life*. They hired him to create a series of films that would teach the American public about why it was important that the U.S. enter into WWII. It was a series of seven films called *Why We Fight*. They explained what Germany, under Hitler, was doing, what diplomatic promises Hitler broke, who he had already invaded, what they suspected his next moves were, and so forth. In effect it answered the question 'why'.

Well, the way that I think about current video games that are focused on militarism and warfare is, they're sort of like *Why We Fight* films, except they've morphed into 'how we fight' video games, which takes away from a lot of the other 'why' questions, and all the moral questions that are connected to that. I think that the ultimate purpose of these games is [for them to serve as] recruitment tools. They are, to use a recent turning phrase, a kind of 'shock and awe' display of what the American military is capable of, without the consequences of context. That is seductive. It's very powerful clearly, both in its destruction capabilities and in the fear that our military can provoke in other countries.

To suggest that video games are recruitment tools might seem far-fetched, except that in November of 2002, the United States Army released a game that it spent \$6 million. That is a very expensive game. Your average high-end video game is going to cost about \$1-1.5 million to develop. A team of retired and current military personnel designed the game, and *America's Army* was released for free. So why spend \$6 million to develop a video game and release it for free? Well the purpose of the game — and this is not a hidden marketing tool (this has been said by the developers of the game) — is that this game was a recruitment tool. In different press releases designers have stated, *We know that the audience we want to reach — the potential soldiers we want to reach, are playing video games*. Boys, teenagers about to graduate high school, are a huge section of the video game market. It's available for free download, and if you go to an army recruitment office, they have it on CD to hand out to people who are potentially interested in signing up. If you go to the web page of the game, there are links to finding local recruiters in your area, there's information on being in the army, and the game itself is an introduction to what it's like to be in the army: you start off in boot camp, go through a series of missions until you are deployed in an operation with other soldiers. So, it is again, a 'how we train', and then 'how we fight', propaganda tool to recruit young boys to be in the military — and this is said so quite straight out by the designers. The designers created the game — I want to add, with U.S. tax dollars! Frightening!

MB: *Would you say that this game is as attractive and popular as regular retail games? Is this game so effective because it is even more realistic than other games?*

NH: Yes, you can pretend to be part of something that is real, because until you're 18, you can't be part of it. The game is on par in terms of its technical design with any of the other retail-based games, and it's as popular. There aren't the same sales figures for it because it's actually not sold, but there are download hits. The *America's Army* web site that one can go to get extra add-ons for the game gets 3 million hits per month. It's definitely a popular game.

MB: *Does the profit come merely from army recruitment? Is that, in itself, profitable enough?*

NH: It probably would have been doing fairly well — they might have missed out on an opportunity to make some money, but again, the purpose was not profit. It's very interesting that the purpose was recruitment. Another aspect of video games and militarism, is not just the connection between what the games might be teaching players and what cultural messages they are sending about warfare, but the political-economic connection between the video game industry and the military industrial complex. For example, the U.S. Marine Corps has used the very popular video game *Dune* in its training of soldiers in tactical combat. They have taken the game's basic design and modified it for training soldiers. They find some value in using video games as training devices, which is significant when we think about those same games, slightly modified, being played in the culture at large, outside of a military organization.

Also, in 1999, the Pentagon and Hollywood formed the Institute for Creative Technology (ICT) in California, with the Pentagon giving ICT \$45 million “to explore the use of commercial entertainment technology and content for military training and education.” So there was a \$45 million contract designed to see what Hollywood could create that would be useful for military training and education. This includes, for example, the visual display monitors that are being developed for both computers and video projection. So the technology that you might be developing for an entertainment system might also be useful for training soldiers. The military uses simulation where the soldier will stand in front of a large video screen and shoot with a fake gun connected to a computer, and the target is on the screen.

The actual technology of those video screens is being developed in Hollywood for use in theatres, for use on desktop computers and so forth. Again, technology is being developed by the video game industry to push the realism, so the players have a more visual experience. There's a connection in terms of the political-economic structure of the entertainment industry to the military. There are contracts created between the entertainment sector and the military sector. One of the most recent and on-going projects of ICT is a game called *Rainbow 6: Rogue Spear*, which is a military-based game: you work with the squadron to run around in a small unit, neutralizing a threat. They're working on a version of that to literally train soldiers in small unit combat. So you're taking a game that's available over the shelf and modifying it for use in the military. There is an 'infrastructural' connection between the two industries.

MB: *What effects do the video games we've been talking about have on the players?*

NH: 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.

MB: *Well, thank you for taking the time to talk with me. You have shed some important light on a subject most people don't give much critical thought.*

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Nina B. Huntemann is a doctoral candidate in Communication at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research interests include new media technologies, the political economy of communication, critical cultural studies, feminist media studies and media literacy. Most recently she produced and directed the educational video, *Game Over: Gender, Race & Violence in Video Games*, distributed by the Media Education Foundation. She has published several articles on the image of women in video games, women's use of the Internet for social change, and the political economy of the US commercial radio industry. In addition to her academic work, Huntemann designs web pages and maintains her own interactive/educational site at www.mediacritica.net. She is available to lecture and can be reached via e-mail at nina@mediacritica.net.