TMQ

Teaching Violence and Video Games with *Joystick Warriors*

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Overview

Video games are important objects of study within a media studies curriculum. Games are, as Ian Bogost reminds us, "not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented – for critique, satire, education, or commentary" (2008, 119). Video games both reflect and challenge dominant hegemonic narratives, but also provide players with opportunities for play and agency within their myriad worlds.

The Media Education Foundation film *Joystick Warriors* (Sorkin 2013) is an ideal screening for helping students grapple with the complex relationship between video games and violence. This set of lesson plans provides a series of readings, activities, and lecture notes to accompany the film *Joystick Warriors.* These teaching tools will help teach students to be informed and critical analysts of the relationship between violence and video games. *Joystick Warriors* provides multiple examples to help students grasp the relationship between violence and video games at the structural level, while not losing sight of how individuals engage with video games on their own terms. It also provides contextual examples for understanding the different kinds of rhetorical strategies at use in video games, such as procedural rhetoric and visual rhetoric. The lesson plan is designed with a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule in mind, with readings and screenings taking place outside of class, and lectures/discussions taking place in class.

Rationale

Video games are particularly salient objects of consideration when attempting to understand the complex relationship between violence and media. Popular discourses about video games are often caught between two forms of shallow determinism: technological determinist discourses which describe video games as directly responsible for individual acts of violence, or discourses of cultural innocence which disavow any consideration of the relationship video games have in maintaining systemic patterns of structural violence (Dyer-Witheford and de Pueter, 2009). In reality, neither perspective captures the complicated relationship between violence and video games.

Joystick Warriors forwards the argument that video games demonstrate an overdetermined relationship between media and violence. Overdeterminism here simply means that any event has multiple causes. Media effects research is at best ambivalent in establishing the claim that playing violent video games causes people to become more violent. Scholars have linked violence to a multiplicity of causal factors working at both the structural and individual levels: militarism, the gun industry, poverty, individual histories of trauma and abuse, toxic masculinity, and so on. While many people who do engage in physical violence in the real world have played violent video games in the past, many people who play violent video games never

engage in real world violence. Additionally, many people who do engage in real world violence don't play video games. The media effects problem holds that while we can guess as to the correlational factors which influence real world violence, it is difficult to draw a causal line directly from any one media practice to any behavioral outcomes.

Joystick Warriors offers a more complex, critical-cultural argument in favor of understanding the overdetermined relationship between video games and violence. The film shows how video games emerge out of a culture of violence and militarization by detailing the linkages between the military industrial complex, the gun industry, and the video game industry. *Joystick Warriors* lays out the concept of the Military Industrial Entertainment Complex to describe how the military and arms manufacturers collaborate with video game designers to include realistic guns and war scenarios in order to advertise weapons and increase cultural identification with the military. *Joystick Warriors* critiques shallow deterministic arguments which ignore the agency that individuals have when playing video games, a form of agency which is not reducible to pre-determined structures of violence. However, the film does marshal evidence from a number of academics, video game industry experts, and military officers to show how video games can work to desensitize people to acts of violence and glorify broader cultures of militarism and imperial violence.

Joystick Warriors also provides teachers with ample opportunity to teach students about the rhetorical nature of video games. Bogost has outlined how video games function as persuasive arguments about the nature of the world and reality. Specifically, video games create arguments through their visual rhetoric, the visual representations of people and things contained within the games, and through their procedural rhetorics, the set of actions and behaviors the gameplay encourages players to engage in. Video games interpolate users into a world by asking them to engage in certain procedures, and then they stylize that world through visual stereotypes and signifiers. In other words, video games teach players specific scripts for how to see the world and how to act in the world. Jason E. Custer's set of lesson plans in this journal, "Understanding Procedural Rhetoric" offers another helpful set of teaching tools for using in-class video game play to help students engage the concept of procedural rhetoric. The teaching tools provided here for *Joystick Warriors* could be useful when placed in conversation with Custer's lesson plan. *Joystick Warriors* offers viewers numerous examples of both procedural and visual rhetoric as inroads for understanding violence in video games. It shows how violent video games are visually coded as hyper-masculine and violent, and how the procedural elements of first person shooters can work to desensitize players to gun violence.

Joystick Warriors provide media studies students with a fruitful avenue for applying critical communications theories which challenge simple answers by asking complex questions: How can we understand the effect of media without seeing these effects as totalizing? How do media both produce and challenge forms of social inequality? To what degree does media shape our lives, and to what degree do our lives shape media?

Other Academic Uses

While this lesson plan was designed for an introduction to media studies curriculum, it could also be used in other courses within Communication Studies, Journalism, and Mass Communication curricula. For example, *Joystick Warriors* and the accompanying lectures on procedural and visual rhetoric could make for an excellent topic in an advanced rhetoric or criticism of public discourse course. *Joystick Warriors* would be very helpful for getting students to think about video games as a form of rhetorical practice. The sections of the lesson on race, gender, and representation could be helpful for an intercultural communication course or any courses on diversity and representation in Communication Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, or Critical Race Studies.

General Timeline

This set of lesson plans is designed for a Monday – Wednesday – Friday block of time, with the screening assigned to be watched the weekend before.

About the Film

Joystick Warriors is a film released by the Media Education Foundation, directed, produced, and edited by Roger Sorkin, and co-produced by Sut Jhally and Nina Huntemann. The film has a 58 minute run-time and is available to educators through library screening services such as *Kanopy* online. The film contains interviews with media studies scholars, psychologists, historians, and other experts on the subject of video game violence and militarism. The central argument of the film is that popular debates about violence in video games often ignore the real, complex relationship between video games and cultural violence. Specifically, by asking the question of whether video games cause individuals to be violent, we ignore how video games emerge out of economies of militarization and work to make militarism and hegemonic masculinity natural and inevitable. The film does contain graphic depictions of simulated video game violence, and is best accompanied by a content warning regarding the violent content.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Day One: Violence and Overdetermination

Before Class: Assign Joystick Warriors and Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter.
During Class: Mini Lecture & Activity

General Objectives and Desired Outcomes

At the end of this lesson, students should be able to:
1. Discuss the kinds of questions "media effects" video games research are asking (i/e do video games cause or not cause violence?)

2. Explain how overdetermination (multiple causes for every event) complicates the questions "media effects" research asks about video games. This includes discussions of how users have agency in the face of the media they consume, how there are multiple social and individual factors that cause violence, and how structural theories of violence differ from individual/ cause-and-effect theories of violence.
3. Define the Military Industrial Entertainment Complex and detail some of the interactions between the gun industry, the military, and the video game industry.

Mini Lecture: "Violence and Overdetermination in Video Games"

- The "Media Effects Problem" - Difficult to judge effect of a given media on a person
    - Media is one of many influences
    - Effect is always overdetermined
- Key Concept – Overdetermination
    - Define "Determinism" – Social Determinism, Biological Determinism, Tech Determinism, etc…
    - Overdetermination – Multiple causes to any one event.
        - Examples: Does violent media make people violent?
            - Hard to say – could be biological, social, cultural, and also COULD BE media influence. Media studies may show correlation, but impossible to prove causation beyond a doubt.
- Key concepts – Structure and Agency
    - To what degree do structures shape media? Do what degree do humans have agency within these structures?
    - If media causes violence, why don't all people who consume violent media become violent?
- Structural Violence and Video Games:
    - Close collaborations between the military, gun industry, and video game industries.
        - Video games as weapons advertisement
        - Video games as military recruitment.
    - The Military-Entertainment Industrial Complex
- Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter on overdetermination and structural violence:
    - "What interests us about GTA here is not the game's inspiration to individual instances of criminal mayhem but the relation of its virtualities to the structural violence of Empire, that is, the systemic patterns of inequality and marginalization inherent to global capital, of which violence and crime are often only symptomatic." (p. 156)

Discussion Questions

- *What is the relationship between the gun industry and the video game industry? How might some of our concepts from our discussions of advertising and consumerism help us think about this relationship?*

- *What is the "Military Industrial Entertainment Complex?" What are the various ways video games play into the Military Industrial Entertainment Complex? How might our Dyer-Witheford and de Pueter reading on video games and Empire relate to this concept?*

Activity
Joystick Warriors Graphic Response Activity (See [Appendix A](#))

Day Two: Visual Rhetoric and Procedural Rhetoric

Before class: Assign Bogost.
During class: Mini Lecture & Activity

General Objectives and Desired Outcomes

At the end of this lesson students should be able to:
1. Define and explain the difference between procedural rhetoric and visual rhetoric.
2. Use the vocabulary of procedural rhetoric and visual rhetoric to explain key quotations and passages from the film *Joystick Warriors*
3. Think critically about the complex relationship between violence and video games and how different kinds of rhetoric work to establish and maintain the culture of violence in video games.

Mini Lecture: "The Rhetoric of Video Games (Visual and Procedural)"

- Video games are rhetorical – they make arguments about the world (Bogost)
  - Visual/Representational rhetoric – How video games represent the world
    - Representation shapes reality
    - Stereotypical/Problematic Representation (tropes):
      - Race
      - Gender
      - Sexuality
      - Disability
  - Procedural – How video games make arguments through the procedures players follow in games.
    - Affordances – What a technology allows you to do

- - I/E – Can you turn a lightswitch on and off, or can you dim it and also use it to change the fan speed?
  - Same with video games – Can your character fire a gun? Can they engage in negotiations? What your player is allowed to do in the game shapes how players engage – i/e it shapes games as a possibility-space.
    - Video games allow players to do certain things, and not do others
      - I/E - Who can you act *as* and who can you act *on* in a video game? Why do women tend to be Non-Player-Characters who you can act *on* in violent ways?

Discussion Questions
- Interpellation – How do video games invite players into worlds? How do they call on different modes of subjective engagement?
- Bogost says that procedural rhetoric is how video games make arguments about the world through the affordances they create. In Joystick Warriors, Sut Jhally says, "When we think of depictions of violence in videogames, one way of approaching it is to ask… 'Who can do what to whom and get away with it?' That is, media violence is never just an act, it is a story about the role of violence in life, about who are victims and who are perpetrators." What does Joystick Warriors tell us about the role of procedural and visual rhetorics in violent video games?

Activity

Joystick Warriors Quote Gallery Activity (see Appendix B).

Day Three: Race, Gender, and Video Games

Before class: Domise TED Talk to be watched before arriving in class.
During class: Mini Lecture & Activity

General Objectives and Desired Outcomes

At the end of this lesson students should be able to:
1. Make and discuss relevant connections between *Joystick Warriors*, and the assigned readings and screenings for the week.
2. Describe the kinds of problematic representations and procedural rhetorics that plague women and people of color in video games.
3. Discuss the dynamics of video game culture which function to exclude women and people of color from video gaming spaces.

Mini Lecture: "Video Games, Race, and Gender"

- *Visual Rhetoric and Stereotypical Representations*
    - *Gender*
        - *Men are visually coded as hyper-masculine and violent*
        - *Women are rarely depicted, and when they are they are hyper-sexualized*
    - *Race*
        - *Often relies on problematic racial stereotypes*
            - *Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter on Stereotypical representations of race and crime in Grand Theft Auto:*
                - *Not just problematic because of the stereotypes, but because of how those stereotypes fit into the cultural discourses of empire and neoliberalism.*

- *Procedural Rhetorics*
    - *Playable Characters vs NPC's (Non-Playable Characters) – Who gets to act, who gets to be acted upon? Who is a subject, and who is an object?*
    - *Gender*
        - *Women are often treated as accomplishments in game – damsel to be rescued.*
        - *Or women are objects to be manipulated, shot, beaten, raped.*
        - *Few playable characters.*
    - *Race*
        - *Few playable characters*
        - *Oftentimes they are NPC enemies who are meant to be killed or acted upon.*
- *Political Economy of Race and Gender in video games*
    - *Women and people of color are often under-represented in video gaming industry.*
    - *A lack of diverse perspectives in game-creation can lead to problematic visual and procedural rhetorics in-game.*
- *Video Game Culture*
    - *Video game culture, especially for first-person shooters, tends to be hostile towards women, gender minorities, LGBTQ folks, and people of color*
    - *Video game chat filled with racial slurs and gendered insults.*
    - *Video games as masculine bonding through violent talk and insults.*

Discussion

- What is the relationship between hyper-masculinity and videogames? What is the case of Anita Sarkeesian discussed in *Joystick Warriors*? What might that say about video games' place in American culture?
- Rhetorics of Gender:

- What are some of the dominant visual representations of women in video games?
- What are some of the dominant procedural rhetorics women in video games?
- Can you think of exceptions that offer better representations or procedural rhetorics of women in video games?
- What did you learn about the perspective of racial minority gamers from watching Dormise's talk? Do you agree or disagree with what Dormise had to say?
- Rhetorics of Race:
  - What are the visual representations of people of color in video games?
  - What are the procedural rhetorics of people of color in video games?
  - Can you think of exceptions that offer better procedural or visual rhetorics of women in video games?

- Besides just the way women and people of color are represented in video games, what are the cultural dynamics of video game culture that might exclude women and people of color?
- What are some things video gamers or game industry professionals could do to make their culture more inclusive?

Activity

Joystick Warriors Critical Evaluation Writing Prompt <u>(See Appendix C)</u>

Teaching materials

Below, I have included multiple activities and discussion prompts that specifically accompany the film Joystick Warriors. Typically, this unit will have one day of lecture and two days of discussion. These discussion activities can be used in any order and to the instructor's discretion as they are unpacking the film in the two class days following the initial lecture and film screening.

Appendix A: Joystick Warriors Graphic Response Activity

This activity pulls one of the graphics from Joystick Warriors, and has students craft a response to it. This exercise allows the instructor to connect the conversations about video game violence to earlier class conversations about overdetermination, agency, structure, and the "media effects" problem. You can use this as a quiz, as a note-taking activity, a Think/Pair/Share prompt, or a general guide for discussion.

[Figure 1 (Sorkin 2013)]

1. *What is the concept of overdetermination, and how does this graphic demonstrate the role of overdetermination in our scholarly treatment of video game violence?*

2. *What does this graphic have to say about the "Media Effects" problem?*

3. *What other factors contribute to cultural violence which might be left out of this chart?*

Appendix B: Joystick Warriors Quote Gallery Activity

For this activity, print out each of the following quotes on a sheet of paper, and place them in different spots in the room. For each quote, also print out a separate sheet of paper with the following four tasks written on them.

1. **Summarize**: Explain the quotation in your own words
2. **Conceptualize**: What are some of the concepts and vocabulary we have developed in this course that might help you make sense of this quote?
3. **Evaluate**: What do you think of this quotation? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. **Connect**: What connections can you make to the previous quotations, or to any real world examples from your own life?

Divide the class up into four groups. Send each group to a station. Have the first group answer the first question, lasting approximately five minutes. Then, rotate the groups four times, until all questions are answered. Then, come together as a large group to discuss the results.

For a potential modification: split the class up into groups of four students, and print out enough quotations and discussion sheets so each group of four has one of each of the quotations and discussion sheets, and a single student fills out each question before rotating quotes to the other students in their group.

Quote 1

"It's 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's the real tragedy."
-    Sut Jhally, Joystick Warriors.

Quote 2

"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 don't understand when they see people playing a violent agme is that on some level after like the fourth hour, they sort of stop seeing some of the stuff that looks egregious. They're really thinking about the game mechanics in a deep way. So in one sense, this is good news, because it means that what you're actually playing is the game system, you're not really playing a war game. On the other hand, it is terrifying news because this is exactly the desensitization people worry about. We start looking at something that ought to be terrifying and ugly and just see it as vectors of force."
-    Clive Thompson, Joystick Warriors.

Quote 3

"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 controlling the bombs dropping?'
But then, of course that leads us down a problematic road, because what we are seeing is so constructed, and so simplistic, and so reductive. And so, games allow us to be close, but also distant."
-    Nina Huntemann, Joystick Warriors.

Quote 4

"The war games do a really good job of making war seem incredibly cool and acceptable, an acceptable part of every-day life. So when this is 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 in some respects is 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's taken so many eyes off the real impact that some of the games can have which is to normalize the idea of a permanent state of war."

- Clive Thompson, *Joystick Warriors*

Appendix C: Joystick Warriors Critical Evaluation Writing Prompt

This is an activity which can be done as an in-class journaling prompt or an out-of-class writing assignment. Whereas the other discussion prompts ask students to consider the content of the film and its relationship to video game violence, this prompt asks students to consider the film itself as a cultural and rhetorical production.

Writing Prompt

Write a 2-3 paragraph critical review of *Joystick Warriors.* In this review, I want you to critically evaluate the film itself.
To help you write this review, please consider some of the following questions. You don't have to answer all of these questions, but they may help you formulate your critical response:

- What were the film's strengths? What may have been some of its weaknesses?
- What did you think about the film's portrayal and representation of video game violence?
- What are some of the connections you made between the film, and our readings/screenings by Bogost, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuer, and Domise?
- What were some of the production choices the film-makers made? How did they stage the film to make their argument?
- What may have been left out of the film? Are there any other examples from video game culture which may complicate the argument the film is making?

Author biography

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