

Going to War with a Stick

War-themed video games reflect politics of the day.

By Sara Brickner

A new frontier of interactive war simulations has taken the glorification of war to an entirely new level. Since their creation, violent video games have been a source of contention for parents and academics alike. The first video games portrayed little if any violence, in part because of graphic limitations and because Atari had created rules about how much violence their games would contain. However, the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), a more technologically sophisticated system with better graphics, Nintendo began breaking the initial taboo against violence to boost sales.

The expansion of the commercial video game industry and advances in technology led to the inevitable creation of more violent video games — including those with military themes. The advent of video games caused uproar about the possible effects on children being exposed to violence, but surprisingly little dialogue about violent war games — perhaps because war toys have enjoyed popularity since toy soldiers became a toy box staple during the 19th century.

Randy Nichols, a Communication Studies graduate student at the UO, said military toys are not a new trend, citing toy guns and army figurines as examples of military toys. During wartime, however, military toys are not simply playthings; they are connected to the political climate, serving (intentionally or not) as propaganda. Whatever the government involvement, war-themed video games continue to be popular, and video game companies such as UBI Soft, EA Games, and Global Star Software are buying in to the time-tested trend.

However, the Army does have a hand in the video game industry, although the government is reluctant to acknowledge these ties, said Nichols. While the government has “tried to find ways that they can get a useful product for themselves from the video game industry,” “America’s Army,” a video game released by the U.S. Army to increase recruitment, is “one of the most expensive that’s been made,” said Nichols. Although the game is available free both online and in recruitment offices, the budget is \$6 million, although the average commercial video game budget is \$1 million. The target audience is “guys around 18,” Nichols continued.

The Army also advertises online at the links to several war games; as of Dec. 9, the gamespy.com links to “Call of Duty: United Offensive, Terrorist Takedown,” “Army Men: Sarge’s War,” and “WWII Tank Commander” displayed Army advertisements before continuing on to the actual website.

Wendy Varney, author of *Playing with War Fare*, said that although military toys were hugely popular during World War I and World War II — wars that had a huge base of popular support — the sale of war toys fell off in Vietnam after the public “sickened of the enduring conflict,” further pointing to the



Screenshot from “Terrorist Takedown”

connection between military-themed toys and the political climate of the day.

These toys, Varney said, served as “channels for the demonization of enemies and celebration of military supremacy.” The Gulf War, however, was the first conflict during which the video game industry tapped into the market for military toys. “Operation Secret Storm,” an original NES game released in 1992, is based on Operation Desert Storm — alongside more traditional toys with Gulf War themes, such as “Desert Storm Barbie,” the “Nomad Desert Warrior” and the “Butcher of Baghdad” board game.

However, the Gulf War was 15 years ago, and since then, technology has grown exponentially. The sheer volume of video games is tremendous; hundreds are released throughout the year, the majority of them non-violent. “Violent games make up a pretty small percentage of the market,” Nichols said. But they retain their appeal as a sub-set of action/adventure and shooter games, and the conflict in Iraq has made the market for war video games grow.

A Great Year for Gamers

By Justin Field

EDITOR'S NOTE: Justin Field is the owner of Big City Gamers on Willamette Street downtown.

This holiday season has been a most anticipated one in video gaming with sequels to some of the biggest games in the biz. The end of the year is in sight for the XBOX, PS2, and Gamecube, and we’re about to witness the greatest collection of games being released in their short history.

One cool thing about video games is the variety offered. When people tell me “I don’t like Gamecube” or that “PS2 is better than XBOX,” I always say that it’s not the system, it’s the games you’re playing. The truth is that there are some amazing games on all

three systems. The library of video games is always expanding, and companies like Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft are constantly pushing the boundaries and evolving the technologies.

While shopping this season you’ll probably be asked to buy a video game system, or at least a game, and if you’re not in touch with that culture you may need some advice.



Each of the above mentioned systems has a good selection of games. The Gamecube has the least amount of games (more than 100), but it has the most kid-friendly games and the unit is only \$99.95. PS2 and XBOX are competing for the die-hard gamers between the ages of 15 and 30 who consistently play over 20 hours per week. With these needs in mind the PS2 and XBOX both cater to those gamers, with a huge library (over 300 titles apiece) and more T and M rated games. The PS2 and XBOX also offer many online games, which allows for endless gameplay providing value to the customer. Both the PS2 and XBOX sell for \$149.95.



It can be tough to decipher between good games and worthless ones. Games do have ratings: E for everyone, T for teen, M for mature, but with only three different ratings comes a huge gray area. Many T games were made for kids and could have easily been rated E, and there are some M games which could have passed for a T game. Then again there are some games that truly deserve their rating. The challenge is figuring out which is

which. I have made an effort to educate as many parents who come into BCG as possible, but if there isn’t someone willing to help walk you through the differences it can become a guessing game.

Shopping for kids ages 5-12 means you probably have a wish list to work with. I’ve seen many of these lists in my day and most add up to about five times your budget. Understanding the list and picking out the best option is important. If you see any of these games on the list feel good about buying them, all of these games will provide a great gaming experience and will be content appropriate. They are listed by title, rating and platform:

Sly 2: Band of Thieves (E) PS2. **Jak 3** (T) PS2. **Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal** (T) PS2. **Mario Power Tennis** (E) Gamecube. **Madden NFL 2005** (E) PS2, XBOX, Gamecube. **NBA Live 2005** (E) PS2, XBOX, Gamecube.

If you’re searching for a game to give a kid between 13-16 you’re probably flooded with a list of M titles to choose from. Of course it’s up to you to grant these wishes, but I’ll tell you that there are plenty of T games out there. Below are some awesome T games as well as some tame M games.

Jak 3 (T) PS2. **Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal** (T) PS2. **Need For Speed Underground 2** (T) PS2, XBOX, Gamecube. **Metroid Prime 2** (T) Gamecube. **Tony Hawk Underground 2** (T) PS2, XBOX. **Ghost Recon 2** (T) XBOX.

For the older gamer out there, like myself (29), you can choose from any of the games. But, just because you can play M games doesn’t mean you’re entire collection should consist of M titles. The games mentioned above are so good that no matter what your age, you will enjoy them. There are a ton of M games coming out this season and below is a list of the best:

GTA San Andreas (M) PS2. **HALO 2** (M) XBOX. **Fable** (M) XBOX. **Prince of Persia 2** (M) PS2, XBOX. **Metal Gear Solid 3** (M) PS2.

