Tracking Moral Panic as a Concept

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Social scientists anxiously police their own borders at the same time that they disrespect others’ frontiers. Perhaps most notoriously, economists claim to understand all forms of social organization, disregarding historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who fail to subscribe to the ratiocinative, desiring, selfish, monadic subject at the heart of the neoclassical belief system. They rarely pay attention to heterodox economic ideas either from within their own elect or as they are incarnated elsewhere (Ruccio 2008).

Sociology, anthropology, literary studies, communication, and cultural studies are similarly imperialistic in their panoramic gaze at the world—but it does not really matter what they say outside college cloisters. Their social and political influence is minimal by contrast with the rational-actor true believers, who have successfully parlayed their precepts into three decades of influence over economic policy, military recruitment, bombing, regulation, the law, medical provision, and so on. Rarely does a concept from socio-cultural theory even begin to penetrate the sciences or the bourgeois media, by contrast.

Moral Panics

Moral panic is different. It is not just an externally imposed scholarly category that circulates in scholarly space or lands on an unsuspecting and unaware public to organize and pronounce upon their lives from within commercial or governmental bureaucracies. The idea of moral panic has successfully migrated from musty libraries and neglected websites to the public realm. Unusually for sociological and cultural theories, it is frequently used by, for example, the mainstream United Kingdom, Australasian, and Filipino press and the British National Council for Civil Liberties. Even the US media recently caught on (contemporary media references include Dewan 2000, Wilgoren 2002, Hendershott 2003, McLemee 2003, Shea 2003,

For some keepers of the academic flame, this development is threatening. It is to be condemned, because it leads to methodological impurity and theoretical impiety. As a consequence of its public popularity, the notion of moral panic has supposedly become too imprecise and easily redeployed to retain scholarly legitimacy absent a rescue mission by accredited ologists (Rohloff and Wright 2010, Klocke and Muschert 2010).

In this chapter, I am not greatly interested in occupational loyalty or theoretical purism. Rather, I am concerned to look at the work done by the idea of moral panic—not as it is debated by academics in our journals and halls, but as the concept circulates in the public sphere. Having established its creative provenance in popular culture, I draw on it to investigate the contemporary discourse and material circumstance of young people in the United States. Perhaps perversely, I suggest that the energies of a moral panic be redisposed to help demilitarize yanqui youth, starting with electronic games, which are key recruiters and trainers for their empire. In other words, I go so far as to oppose the moral panic about moral panics, arguing instead for the tactical utility of creating such a force against prevailing imperialist ideology. Moral panics are popular-cultural reactions to limit cases of riskiness, played out in highly exaggerated ways and projected onto scapegoats or folk devils. The term was coined within critical British criminology in the early 1970s to describe media messages that announced an increase in the crime rate, and the subsequent establishment of specialist police units to deal with the alleged problem. Moral panics are usually short-lived spasms that speak of ideological contradictions about economic inequality. They exaggerate a social problem, symbolize it in certain groups, predict its future, then conclude, or change. So, we might summarize them as sudden, frequently brief, but seemingly thoroughgoing anxieties about particular human subjects or practices. Generated by the state or the media, then picked up by interest groups and social movements (or vice versa) their impact is generally disproportionate to the problems they bring into being (Thompson 1998: 7, Barker 1999, Jenkins 1999: 4–5, Goode 2000).

Moral panics are often sustained by activists (known as moral entrepreneurs) who seek to protect a majority they see as feckless and vulnerable. Turncoats, rejects, dissident former insiders, or professional experts can be crucial witnesses (Shaps 1994, Thompson 1998: 3, 12, 91). The dual roles of experts and media critics in the constitution of moral panics see the former testifying to their existence and the latter sensationalizing and diurnalizing them—making the risks attributed to a particular panic seem like a new, terrifying part of everyday life. The cumulative impact of this alliance between specialist and popular knowledge is a heightened, yet curiously normalized sense of risk about and amongst the citizenry (Wagner 1997: 46).

Moral panics tend to function synecdochally: part of society is used to represent (or perhaps distort) a wider problem—youth violence is a suitable case for panic about citizenship, whereas systemic class inequality is not; adolescent behavior and cultural style are questionable, but capitalist degeneracy is not; rap is a problem, the
situation of urban youth is not; Islamic violence is problematic, Protestant violence is not. Particular kinds of individuals are labeled as dangerous to social well-being because of their deviance from agreed-upon norms of the general good. Once identified, their life practices are then interpreted from membership of a group and vice versa (Cohen 1973: 9–13, Yúdice 1990, Cohen 1999: 192–3, Wichtel 2002).

Critics of the moral panic process propose that we ask not why people behave like this, but why this conduct is deemed deviant and whose interest does that serve (Cohen 2002: 12–13)? Attempts to retrieve folk devils for progressive politics, historical and contemporary analyses of slaves, crowds, pirates, bandits, audiences, minorities, women, and the working class have utilized archival, ethnographic, and textual methods to emphasize day-to-day noncompliance with authority via practices of consumption that frequently turn into practices of production. For example, British research has lit upon teddy boys, mods, bikers, skinheads, punks, students, teen girls, Rastas, truants, dropouts, and magazine readers as its magical agents of history, that is, groups that deviated from the norms of schooling and the transition to work. Scholar-activists examine the structural underpinnings to collective style, investigating how bricolage subverts the achievement-oriented, materialistic, educationally driven values and appearance of the middle class. The working assumption has often been that subordinate groups adopt and adapt signs and objects of the dominant culture, reorganizing them to manufacture new meanings. Consumption is thought to be the epicenter of such subcultures.

Historically, moral panic discourse was the province of progressive critics: reactionaries at the British Medical Journal and the Daily Mail have attacked use of the moral panic framework to evaluate science or criticize carceral practices, progressives at The Lancet have found moral panic persuasive, and groups such as lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender coalitions deploy the concept. But it has developed beyond these origins, appealing, inter alios, to the true believer libertarians at Reason. They love the idea of moral panic as a means of criticizing notions such as public health and occupational safety (Daniels 1998, Barker 1999, Tan 2001, “An Avalanche” 2002, Wichtel 2002, Critcher 2003: 2, 53, Fitzpatrick 2003, Gillespie 2003, Power 2004: 12, Žižek 2005, Gilman 2010, Gilligan 2011, Sullum 2011).

Risk Society

I think the success of the concept of moral panic is closely tied to what is described by a related idea: risk society. The contemporary world is laden with institutions that seek to protect people from social, political, economic, and individual risks and ensure the time discipline required by capitalism (Beck 1999, 2001, 2002). Risk societies must come to terms with the unintended consequences of modernity, not only via technocrats seeking solutions to problems created by themselves or other technocrats, but also via transparent decision-making systems that encourage public debate, rather than operating in secret or deriding public perceptions as ipso facto erroneous (Beck 1999: 3, 5). If early modernity was organized around producing
and distributing goods in a struggle for the most effective and efficient forms of industrialization, with devil take the hindmost and no thought for the environment, today’s society is about enumerating and managing those dangers (for example, establishing markets for pollution that send murky industries offshore). It organizes what cannot be organized, embodying and propelling the desires of capital and state to make sense of and respond to problems, whether or not of their own making. Risk is sold, pooled, and redistributed (Power 2004: 10, 17).

Put another way, whereas early modernization was primarily concerned with the establishment of national power and the accumulation and distribution of wealth, developed modernity produces new risks for its members beyond collective security and affluence and provides them with incentives and systems for a carefully calibrated self-management. But such practices often appear of limited value in the face of iatrogenic crises brought on by deliberate policy, for example nuclear energy, genocidal weaponry, biotechnology, and industrial pollution—professional miscalculations and scientific discoveries hurtling out of control (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997: 320). These can lead to a raft of governmental responses. In Western Europe, the last twenty years have seen new consumer-protection legislation to increase safety. In the United States, the response has been more a matter of litigation (Smutniak 2004).

From where I write, the United States is the risk society, with 50 percent of the population participating in stock market investments. Far from residing in the hands of professionals, risk is brought into the home as an everyday ritual or an almost blind faith (sometimes disappointed) in mutual funds patrolling retirement income. In 1999, US residents spent US$800 billion on insurance—more than they paid for food and equivalent to 35 percent of the world’s total insurance expenditure. The insurance costs alone of September 11, 2001 have been calculated at US$21 billion and the industry’s global revenues exceed the gross domestic product of all countries, barring the top three. At one level, this represents a careful calculation of risk, its incorporation into lifelong and posthumous planning—prudence as a way of life. At another level, it is a wager on hopelessness and fear that has since emerged in politics because so many risks that yanquis worry about are uninsurable. As dangers mount, safeguards diminish. So, whether we are discussing nuclear power plants or genetically modified foods, the respective captains of industry argue that they pose no risks, but insurance companies decline to write policies on them for citizens, precisely because they are so risky. It is significant that Paul Bremer, George Bush Minor’s patrón of Iraq after the invasion, quickly established a crisis consulting practice after September 11, 2001. He is part of the emergent category of risk managers who quantify danger and the costs of meeting it—for a fee (Beck 1999: 53, 105, Strange 2000: 127, Martin 2002: 6, 12, Klein 2003, World Trade 2003: 2, Zorach 2003, “Covered” 2004).

The contemporary cultural-political agenda is characterized by an actuarial gaze, a visual management of threats and responses, with the media simultaneously a mirror and a site of creation, reflection, policy, and action that bind the everyday to the spectacle and the private to the public (Feldman 2005: 206–7). This is where risk society encounters, or is embedded in, moral panic. The epithet once used to deride
local news television in the United States—if it bleeds, it leads—today applies to network news, where the correlation between national crime statistics and coverage of crimes shows no rational linkage. The drive to create human-interest stories from blood has become a key means of generating belief in a risk society, occupying 16 percent of network news in 1997, up from 8 percent in 1977. When ratings are measured, US television news allocates massive space to supposed risks to viewers. The idea is to turn anxiety and sensation into spectatorship and money. Local news in particular is remorselessly dedicated to youth violence (Auletta 2001, Lowry et al. 2003, Hickey 2004, Grossberg 2005: 43, Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005).

Risk society is abetted and indexed by incidents like the media hysteria over anthrax in October 2001—responses that were out of all proportion to reality, given the under-reported plenitude of dangerous industrial chemicals and organisms confronted by US workers every day and the extraordinary hazards posed by chemical plants to literally millions should there be an accidental or deliberate release of their deadly product. Bush Minor’s Presidential addresses enunciated this helplessness and risk. Ever ready with a phrase describing or predicting catastrophic, apocalyptic terror, the ratio of negative, pessimistic words to positive, optimistic ones was vastly greater in Minor’s lexicon than those of Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George Bush the Elder, Bill Clinton, or Barack Obama. In his first term, the word “evil” appeared over 350 times in formal speeches. The 2004 presidential election testified to the efficacy of this approach: risk of attack was the key issue determining older voters’ choices. Clearly, risk is crucial to panic, and governance and the media provide staging grounds for its symbolic work (Brooks 2003, Kellner 2003: 82–3, “Congressional Report” 2005, Feldman 2005, Trends 2005: 4).

The Young

The United States today is a risk society laden with such moral panics. For example, when school drug use diminishes, people believe it increases. The basis for such misconceptions is media reportage—so when the number of murders declines, the coverage of murders soars. The classic case is young African-American men in the United States over the past two decades. As rates of violence, homicide, and drug use fall dramatically amongst black men under thirty, press panic about their conduct heads in the opposite direction. The disparity between the imaginary and the symbolic in the public circulation of these men is central, even as they suffer massive material discrimination (Glassner 1999: xi, xxi, 29, Males 2004). While the specifics of this assault on blackness are clearly articulated to slavery and racism, they also derive from a historical discourse of risk and panic aimed at young people in general, as indexed in popular culture.

US popular culture has long been a risky locale for the combustion of moral panics about the young. In the early twentieth century, opera, Shakespeare, and romance fiction were censored for their immodest impact on children (Heins 2002: 23). Such tendencies moved into high gear with the Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s,
which inaugurated mass social scientific panic about young people at the cinema (Mitchell 1929, Blumer 1933, Blumer and Hauser 1933, Dale 1933, Forman 1933, May and Shuttleworth 1933). These pioneering scholars boldly set out to gauge youthful emotional reactions to the popular by assessing galvanic skin response (Wartella 1996: 173). That example has led to seven more decades of obsessive attempts to correlate youthful consumption of popular culture with antisocial conduct. The pattern is that whenever new communications technologies emerge, children are immediately identified as both pioneers and victims, simultaneously endowed by manufacturers and critics with immense power and immense vulnerability. This was true of 1920s Radio Boys, seeking out signals from afar, and 1990s Girl Power avatars, seeking out subjectivities from afar. They are held to be the first to know and the last to understand the media—the grand paradox of youth, latterly on display in the digital sublime of technological determinism, but as always with the superadded valence of a future citizenship in peril (Mosco 2004: 80). Youth’s grand paradox is to be simultaneously the most silenced population in society and the noisiest (Grossberg 1994: 25).

Complex relations of commodification, governmentality, and conservatism fueled these tendencies. Popular Science magazine coined the word teenager in 1941, Seventeen magazine appeared on newsstands three years later, and by the 1950s the white-picket family and home seemed under threat from a newly enfranchised shopper and worker, whose physiological changes were supposedly exacerbated by the temptations of consumer culture and irresponsibility. In 1957, Cosmopolitan gloomily predicted teenagers taking over via a vast determined band of blue-jeaned storm troopers (soon to be among its valued readers, of course) (Griffin 1993: 22, Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997: 1–2, Mazzarella 2003: 230, Grossberg 2005: 3).

Congressional hearings and trade publishers promoted psychiatric denunciations of comic books, for example, as causes of nightmares, juvenile delinquency, and even murder. To elude regulation, publishers developed codes of conduct that embodied respect for parents and honorable behavior in their precepts of self-governance (Heins 2002: 52–4, Park 2004: 114). A decade later, young people lost free speech protection, because the Supreme Court differentiated youthful from adult citizens in permitting state governments to legislate in ways that would be unconstitutional if applied to adults (Ginsberg v. New York 390 US 629). Both mass movement and mass market, the right was horrified by this commercial child (Liljeström 1983:144–6, Lewis 1992: 3).

Why? The privatized nuclear household with its male breadwinner, female homemaker, and dependent children shifted from an insurgent ideal of the white middle class in the nineteenth century, to a tentatively achieved, but ideologically naturalized, norm in the twentieth. In the 1950s, 80 percent of children grew up with their married, biological parents. But that was true of just 12 percent of children by the end of the 1980s, and only 7 percent of them lived with an employed father and home-duties mother, while the 2000 census disclosed that married couples with children were just 25 percent of the population (Reeves and Campbell 1994: 186–9, Coltrane 2001: 390). To the horror of evangelical Christianity, these numbers reveal the family to be a contingent form of association, with unstable boundaries
and varying structures (Shapiro 2001: 2). At the same time, conservatives adopted a moral panic argument to the effect that state intervention and progressive ideas had melded to create lost generations. A new risk-society prudence and prudery, allied to economic deregulation, would rescue them for sanctity and capital (Grossberg 2005: 37).

These familial crises, understood as failures of ethical principle, have displaced attention from the horrific impact on the young of the cessation of vital social services during the disastrous presidencies of Reagan, the Bushes, Clinton, and Obama. The data on youth welfare demonstrate the centrality of big government to the family solidity that these hegemons rhetorically pined for, but programmatically undermined thanks to massive erosions in expenditure on health care, nutrition programs, foster care, and a whole raft of services for young people. A succession of judicial decisions further disenfranchised them. Conservative justices were contemptuous of privacy rights for children, and the United States repeatedly established new records amongst developed countries for the execution of people under eighteen, with the longstanding support of the Supreme Court, half of whose justices favored killing those aged under fifteen before the 2005 *Roper v. Simmons* decision that executing those who were under 18 when they committed their crimes was unconstitutional (Males 1996: 7, 35, Kaplan 2004: 21). The bizarre 4parents.gov website (defunct) suggested condoms were ineffective, stigmatized HIV patients as risky young people, ignored queer children—and was the product of a pet Bush Administration nongovernmental organization, the National Physicians Center for Family Resources. The outcome of these policies has been that US citizens over forty are the wealthiest group in world history and have the lowest tax payments in the First World. Whereas in the first half of the twentieth century few teenaged children in the United States worked for money, almost half had to do so by its end, and one child in eight has no health coverage. In 1999, at the peak of the New Economy, child poverty was up 17 percent from 1979, 50 percent higher than the national average across all age groups, while the twenty-first century recession was accompanied by reductions in youth employment programs (Ruddick 2003: 337, 348, *State of America’s Children 2004, 2004 Report* 2004, Liebel 2004: 151, Grossberg 2005: 59, 64, Ivins 2005).

Despite this disenfranchisement, the little beasts are prevailed upon to love their country, as per Bush Minor introducing a Lessons of Liberty schools program to ideologize them into militarism. In 2004, 83 percent of US high schools ran community-service programs, up from 27 percent two decades earlier, and some required anti-leftism (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). For all the world a throwback to Soviet era yanqui drills that involved scurrying under school desks to elude radiation, Minor’s (“Kids’ Role” 2004) Ready for Kids initiative hailed children in emergency responses to terrorism. He announced policies to improve students’ knowledge of American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country, requiring that children learn that America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people (Westheimer 2004: 231). And Senator Lamar Alexander (Westheimer 2004: 231), a previous head of education and university bureaucrat, sponsored the American History
and Civics Education Act so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American. Meanwhile, progressive political activism by young people led to immediate sanction. In West Virginia, a high school pupil was suspended for inviting her colleagues to join an antiwar club, as were a ninth-grader in Maryland for marching against the invasion of Iraq, and a high schooler in Colorado for posting peace flyers (Westheimer 2004: 232). Wrong knowledge of American history, wrong type of civic involvement.

Meanwhile, social statistics were indexing youth trauma. Thirty thousand people kill themselves in the United States each year, making suicide the eleventh most frequent cause of death, but it is third amongst the young (Romer and Jamieson 2003). Suicide levels fell across the population between 1950 and 1995, but the rate for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds quadrupled. Key social measures of unhappiness correlate with youth today in a way that they did not up to the mid-1970s, and young people report greater distress than before, beyond even the concerns of the elderly (Putnam 2000: 261–3). The psy-complexes argue that adolescents are ten times more likely to suffer depression than 100 years ago (Gillham and Reivich 2004: 152). Perhaps to cope with their feelings of helplessness, 135,000 teenagers packed a gun with their sandwiches and schoolbooks each day in 1990, while by 2004, eight children and teenagers died by gunshot per day (Lewis 1992: 41, State of America’s Children 2004). This in turn relates to marketing. With the white male market for firearms saturated, and attempts to sell to women falling short of the desired numbers, manufacturers turned to young people in the 1990s (Glassner 1999: xxi, 55).

Young people clearly incarnate adult terror in the face of the popular. They provide a tabula rasa onto which can be placed every manner of anxiety (Hartley 1998: 15). Hence, Clinton announcing in 1997 that “we’ve got about six years to turn this juvenile crime thing around or our country is going to be living in chaos” and the Senate Judiciary Committee declaring that the facade of our material comfort secretes a national tragedy where children are killing and harming each other—even as youth crime had just dropped by almost 10 percent in a year. In 2000, 70 percent of adults expected a neighborhood school shooting, even though pupils were much more likely to be hit by lightning than by gunfire on campus. When Bush Minor joined the chorus to proclaim a plague of school violence, he went against statistics that clearly show schools to be some of the safest places for children to be. Youth violence is dropping, even as rates of incarceration soar. A child is arrested every twenty seconds, many through violations of municipally imposed curfews. Conversely, while child abuse increases, rates of imprisonment for offending adults remain low (Glassner 1999: xiv, Grossberg 2005: 4, 41–2, 44). The economic deregulation Clinton Minor and Obama presided over, with all its attendant risks, was twinned with a moral reregulation, with all its attendant panics.

Risk and morality have merged, with mutual impact. Moral panics become means of dealing with risk society via appeals to values, a displacement from socio-economic crises and fissures. They both contribute to, and are symptomatic of, risk society. But rather than being mechanisms of functional control that necessarily
displace systemic social critique onto particular scapegoats, moral panics have themselves been transformed by the discourse of risk society. Because certain dangers seem ineradicable, moral panics are mobilized to highlight issues in keeping with the tenets of conservative and neoliberal cultural politics (Thompson 1998, Ungar 2001, Critcher 2003, Hier 2003). Religion is a key form of mobilization, with evangelical Protestantism legitimizing neoliberal risk at the same time as it promotes righteous indignation against groups that provide an alternative (leftists, feminists, queers, and foreigners), groups whose very existence brings into question foundational myths of the nation (African Americans), or groups whose fragility indexes the future of the nation (young people).

Iatrogenic risk produces moral panic. Ignorant citizens are ill equipped to understand what is happening around them. The void is filled by religiosity and other forms of superstition and ahistorical politics. The process exemplifies the governance of everyday life at arm’s length via a stress on national, personal risk rather than global, collective solidarity. It starts with young people, fetishized as unreliable custodians of a future that may not arrive, due to their amorality. Moral panic has become a crucial tool if we are to comprehend, and mend, this juggernaut of a nation. Hewing to a methodological purism that decries the use of the idea in the public realm is to miss both the value of popular culture and the reincarnation of theory in heterodox ways and fora. The concluding segment of this chapter picks up the idea of the moral panic and reverses it: instead of being things to expose and criticize, perhaps moral panics could actually enlighten us if successfully managed.

**Militarism**

The US Navy’s promotional strategy, comprising a multimedia campaign orchestrated since 2009 around the notion of being “A Global Force for Good™” (as opposed to the previous recruiting technique, which promised young people it would “Accelerate Your Life”) has produced such enticements as the following:

> Take the world’s most powerful sea, air and land force with you wherever you go with the new America’s Navy iPhone app. Read the latest articles. See the newest pics and videos. And learn more about the Navy—from its vessels and weapons to its global activities. You can do it all right on your iPhone—and then share what you like with friends via your favorite social media venues. (*America’s Navy*)

Further examples of this newly beneficent if still speedy work are offered in television commercials that show Navy personnel capturing Somali pirates, treating Haitian earthquake survivors, and handing toys to impoverished children. But there is always another side to this notion. An unbridled nationalism rides side-saddle with civil-society mythology. The Navy twins these duties via its trite but revealing slogan “First to Fight, First to Help,” and insists that “the strength
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and status of any nation can be measured in part by the will and might of its navy” (“A Global Force” 2011). Such campaigns rely on a poverty draft and the militarization of everyday life. The military is the nation’s premier employer of 17- to 24-year-old workers (Verklin and Kanner 2007). Throughout the country, there is an extraordinary reliance of working class people on military welfare as a source of work, whether through making weaponry—the nation’s principal manufacturing export—or via direct employment as servants of the Pentagon, be it in the field, the hospital, or the bureau.

Consider the student body I teach. Located just east of Los Angeles, it is working class economically and diverse culturally. There is no ethnic majority on campus, with white students comprising less than a fifth of the population. Unsurprisingly, many folks serve in the military or have relatives doing so. California has a million-person majority voting for Democrats in presidential elections—and every person, at every moment, is never further than 70 kilometers from a military establishment. That is quite a multiplier effect, both economically and ideologically. Everyday life in this putatively progressive part of the United States is not a site of resistance, as per the romantic wishes of many on the left, but a site of militarization. Similar things could be said across the country, especially in poverty zones (see Goldberg 2010).

To join the US military, it is not necessary to be a citizen—obtaining citizenship is a potential benefit that attracts recruits. Killing and dying are culturally transterritorial, with 38,000 US soldiers being aliens. Neoconservatives even call for the Pentagon to recruit undocumented residents and people who have never been in the United States, under the rubric of a Freedom Legion. The reward for service would be citizenship, following similar gifts to anticommunist East Europeans in the 1950s. Plus US military recruiters highlight free or cheap elective plastic surgery for uniformed personnel and their families (with the policy alibi that this permits doctors to practice their art) (Amaya 2007, Fifield 2009, Miller 2007, 2008).

The result? The impact of warfare on young people cannot be overestimated. A weak president like Obama is no counter to this tendency, even if he wanted to be. When that is linked to the horrors of September 11, 2001 and a supine and incompetent news media, the outcome is hardly surprising—it is exactly what Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden counted on.

Electronic games are at the core of how the military targets young yanquis to enlist and then behave as soldiers et al. Military sites such as those designed and maintained by the US Army (Downloads 2011) and the US Air Force (Videos & More 2011) offer games that simulate life as both killer and enabler. What follows gives some history to this situation and proposes a strategy for undermining it by creating a moral panic.

The Pentagon worked with Atari in the 1980s to develop Battlezone, an arcade game, as a flight simulator for fighter pilots, at the same time that it established a gaming center within the National Defense University (Power 2007: 276). In the early 1990s, the end of Cold War II wrought economic havoc on many corporations involved in the US defense industry. They turned to the games industry as a natural supplement to their principal customer, the military. Today’s new geopolitical crisis sees these firms, such as Quantum 3-D, conducting half their games business
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with the private market and half with the Pentagon (Hall 2006). Players of the commercial title Doom II can download Marine Doom, a Marine Corps modification of the original that was developed after the Corps commandant issued a directive that games would improve tactics. Sony’s U.S. Navy Seals website links directly to the Corps’ own page. TV commercials have depicted soldiers directly addressing gamers, urging them to show their manliness by volunteering for the real thing and serving abroad to secure US power.1

It should come as no surprise, then, that visitors to the Fox News site on May 31, 2004 encountered a grey zone. On one side of the page, a US soldier in battle gear prowled the streets of Baghdad. On the other, a Terror Handbook promised to facilitate “Understanding and facing the threat to America” under the banner: “WAR ON TERROR sponsored by KUMA WAR” (a major gaming company). The Kuma War game includes online missions entitled “Fallujah: Operation al Fajr,” “Battle in Sadr City,” and “Uday and Qusay’s Last Stand.” Its legitimacy and realism are underwritten by the fact that the firm is run by retired military officers and used as a recruiting tool by their former colleagues. Both sides benefit from the company’s website, which invites soldiers to pen their battlefield experiences—a neat way of getting intellectual property gratis in the name of the nation (Deck 2004, Power 2007: 272, Turse 2008: 137). The site features “Quotes from Players in the Trenches” and recreates the mission that assassinated Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. It boasts, “Kuma War is a series of playable recreations of real events in the War on Terror. Nearly 100 playable missions bring our soldiers’ heroic stories to life, and you can get them all right now, for free. Stop watching the news and get in the game!” Such ideological work became vital because the military-diplomatic-fiscal disasters of the 2001-7 period jeopardized a steady supply of new troops. So at the same time as neophytes were hard to attract to the military due to the perils of war, recruits to militaristic game design stepped forward—nationalistic designers volunteering for service. Their mission, which they appeared to accept with alacrity, was to interpellate the country’s youth by situating their bodies and minds to fire the same weapons and face the same issues as on the battlefield (Power 2007: 282, Thompson 2004).

The Naval Postgraduate School’s Modeling, Virtual Environments and Simulation Academic Institute developed a game called Operation Starfighter, based on the film The Last Starfighter (1984). The next step was farmed out to George Lucas’s companies, inter alia. America’s Army (AA) was launched, with due symbolism, on July 4, 2002—doubly symbolic in that Independence Day is a key date in Hollywood’s summer release of feature films (Phoenix) The military had to bring additional servers into play to handle 400,000 downloads of the game that first day. The Gamespot website (Osborne 2002) awarded it a high textual rating and was equally impressed by the business model. AA takes full advantage of the usual array of cybertarian fantasies about the new media as civil society, across the gamut of community fora, Internet chat, fansites, and virtual competition. And

the game is formally commodified through privatization—bought by Ubisoft to be repurposed for games consoles, arcades, and cell phones and turned into figurines by the allegedly edgy independent company, Radioactive Clown. Tournaments are convened, replete with hundreds of thousands of dollars prize money, along with smaller events at military recruiting sites (America’s Army 2011, Lenoir 2003: 175, Power 2007: 279-80, Turse 2008: 117–18, 123–4, 157).

A decade later, AA remains one of the ten most played games online and has millions of registered users. Civilian developers regularly refresh it by consulting with veterans and participating in physical war games, while paratexts provide promotional renewal. With over 40 million downloads, and websites by the thousand, the message of the game has travelled far and wide—an excellent return on the initial public investment of US$19 million and US$5 million for annual updates. Studies of young people who have positive attitudes to the US military indicate that 30 percent formed that view through playing the game—a game that sports a Teen rating, forbids role reversal via modifications (preventing players from experiencing the pain of the other), and is officially ranked number one among the Army’s recruiting tools (Craig 2006, Mirrlees 2009, Nieborg 2004, Ottosen 2008, 2009a, 2009b, Shachtman 2002, Thompson 2004).

Concluding Remarks

Many of us who draw on moral panic discourse criticize media effects studies—from a comfortable distance—as crude, unproven, anti-child, and anti-pleasure. But we need to address, for example, the fact that the American Academy of Pediatrics (2009) denounces the mimetic force of violent electronic games on young people, yet fails to describe how this is preyed upon by the Pentagon. Are we prepared to criticize games that promote death, at the same time as we criticize scientists’ neglect of this tendency when it abets empire?

We need to take the next step: creating a moral panic. This can start at home, that is, in the academy, by working to counter the Pentagon’s ideological incorporation of untenured faculty, whom it seeks to engage via the “Young Faculty Award,” whose goal is “to develop the next generation of academic scientists, engineers and mathematicians in key disciplines who will focus a significant portion of their career on Department of Defense and national security issues” (“Opportunities” 2011). This is an outrage given the horrors perpetrated by militarism around the globe. It should have no place in universities, which should be centers of peaceful inquiry with applications for culture and commerce, not killing.

Faculty must take a stand against military research: make public statements, refuse to publish in journals or visit research centers that are complicit, refuse to publish military-funded studies, require that ethics norms of human subjects research be applied to Pentagon money, and so on. Scholars in other countries should boycott military-endowed US universities and researchers if we fail to contest these murderous paymasters.
The task is massive, and it will require people with progressive politics to collaborate as never before. Far from retrieving game players from the status of folk evils and transforming them into popular heroes, we need to draw public attention to the killing work of empire, to criticize the excessive nationalism that underpins gringo love of violence, and generate a moral panic about the unsustainability of empire. Pretty clearly, the United States is in monumental decline as a global suzerain. Its death throes may be violent. We need to restrain and retrain it. Any and all peaceful tactics are worth trying—why not moral panics?

References


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Ellipsis in original.


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