



## VIRTUAL WAR: TRANSCRIPT

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BROOKE GLADSTONE: On Monday, WikiLeaks posted a leaked video from a 2007 American military operation that killed 12, including two Reuters journalists. The aerial footage was from an American helicopter gun camera as soldiers mistook journalists' camera equipment for weapons. We see the targets marked by crosshairs. We see the bodies fall.

[CLIP]:

MAN: — Roger. Engage.

[BEEPING SOUNDS]

MAN: One-eight, clear.

MAN: Come on!

[SOUND OF GUNFIRE]

[END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Many argued whether the gun camera video captured a too-casual attitude toward killing or a tragic mistake by soldiers hovering over a war zone. Here's WikiLeaks' founder, Julian Assange, on why he released the video.

JULIAN ASSANGE: We really have unique material that shows how modern aerial warfare is done. It hasn't been revealed before. And it seems like they are playing video games with people's lives.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Journalist Clive Thompson, a columnist for Wired Magazine and a contributor to The New York Times Magazine, says the footage does remind him of the video game Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, specifically the level called Death From Above.

CLIVE THOMPSON: It's pretty similar. In fact, I've talked to soldiers that have been playing war video games for years and they have frequently said how startlingly similar a lot of the visualization on some of the weapon systems are. You know, when you look into, you know, a rocket launcher in a game, it can look quite similar to when you're looking into a rocket launcher in reality.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And video games are used to train soldiers. Part of the training is to sharpen skills, but people who train soldiers also say that part of it is to depersonalize the enemy.

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CLIVE THOMPSON: Yeah, the military has actually spent like 100 to 200 years trying to get soldiers to kill people. One of the things they found, coming out of the First World War, was that a lot of soldiers, even faced with gunfire right in their face by the enemy, would not return fire. So the military worked for years on operant conditioning, you know, when something pops up, just sort of shoot at it, to get past this innate resistance to taking human life. And I think one of the reactions people are having to that video is that the behavior, judging by the audio, seemed kind of callous, and it seemed that there was this deep remove and lack of sense that, that there are actually people there. This gets into very complex terrain because, you know, to some extent, this is exactly what we as a society requires the military to do; we require them to basically put people in situations where they are able to kill people, without being tormented by it for the rest of their lives. And that - that's why I'm sort of a little uncomfortable judging what's going on in that video, apart from, I think, the perfectly legitimate question of there is a moral and ethical aspect to the way you design weapon systems. It's been generally acknowledged that the further away the person is, the less you can see them, the more they're just a blip on the screen, the easier it is to pull the trigger.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And a lot of people say that the problem is, is that killing in real life is feeling more and more like a video game, but the fact is killing in war is more like a video game.

CLIVE THOMPSON: Sure. Predator drone strikes, they're highly virtualized situations, right? I mean, you have someone sitting on American soil or in a nearby country, you know, piloting a drone able to shoot and kill. And so, everything is done through an interface in the same way that everything on a video game is done through an interface. It's going to be a constant question for us as a society and for the military whether or not, as they become more game-like, that creates an effect that makes it easier to kill people in a way that you might not want to make it easier to kill people.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So Clive, a moment ago you were talking about the moral implications of building weapon systems that feel like video games and that they put more distance between a soldier and his or her target. Are there any war games that shrink that distance?

CLIVE THOMPSON: Yeah, video games have actually gotten more morally complex as time goes on. There's a game called God of War. It's the third sequel in the series. And you're this very violent creature going around just like slaughtering stuff in your path.

[SOUND FROM GOD OF WAR 3/UP AND UNDER] And there's a striking moment in this third game where you are suddenly teleported into the eyes of someone that you're attacking, while you're attacking them. So even as you're controlling your protagonist and trying to kill this other creature, you are in that creature's eyes looking at yourself -

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Wow!

CLIVE THOMPSON: - killing yourself. And you realize that, that you look incredibly terrifying and that everyone you've killed has seen you coming at them like this absolutely nightmarish spectacle. And it's a very, very interesting moment.

[SOUND FROM GOD OF WAR 3] And there's been more moments like these inside games. I mean, war games, in particular, what they've done, they've put a lot of situations in which there are innocent bystanders there or civilians. There are people you're not supposed to kill, And if you make the wrong decision, you can have a very detrimental impact on the way the game is played.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: What's the detrimental impact on the game?

CLIVE THOMPSON: Well, your mission might end. You might flub the mission.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Video games used in military training may desensitize you. Can we foresee games that would sensitize you?

CLIVE THOMPSON: Sure, sure. In fact, you've already seen them. If you look away from the big budget war games, there's been a real ferment amongst these smaller independent, almost art games really that have tried to basically use games as a mechanism to think about moral decisions, ethical decisions, emotional decisions in everyday life and how they affect you. And there was this very famous game that came out about a year and a half ago, called Passage.

[SOUND FROM PASSAGE] It literally looks like you're playing some crazy game from like 15 years ago, tiny little blocky characters, and you have just this tiny little strip. And you, you walk around - it's only three minutes long - you die, always in the three minutes. You notice that your character's sort of getting older as you walk, and it becomes a sort of a memento mori game where like you only have a limited time. How much can you explore? Why would you want to explore? And you can also pair up with a woman but the two of you age together and she dies before you. And when you're paired up there's some places you can't go inside the little maze. It was a very simple game, but metaphorically it mimicked and made you think, in the way that a good poem does, about aspects of life and death and how the choices you make affect what happens to you.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So it's possible, certainly, you're saying, within this medium to create opportunities to consider one's place in the world, to look at complex moral issues. But, like a good poem, it won't sell.

CLIVE THOMPSON: Yeah well, big-budget games these days, they cost like 10 million dollars to make, and so if they're going to make money back they have to stick to these very tried-and-true genres. It doesn't mean that the big games won't chip away at these questions of morality that are very interesting, but it can never really be their primary directive because they're trying to make back 10, 20, 30, 100 million dollars.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So is there any proof that playing violent video games makes us more violent?

CLIVE THOMPSON: No, no generally-agreed-upon studies have found that. They've found temporary aggressiveness like, you know, for the next five minutes you might be kind of jittery and what-not, but they haven't really been able to demonstrate that people that play a lot of violent video games who are not already violent are going to go out and be more violent or desensitized. You know, we've been playing really violent games for 20 years now and rates of violence amongst the people who play them the most, young people, have just sort of steadily gone downwards. So we're running the experiment, and it seems to be coming up zero in that regard. I think some of this has to do with the fact that games fundamentally are about playing, which means you're trying to accomplish these missions. And sometimes when you're playing a shooting game it's really just like hitting a target over and over again. You might as well be throwing a ball at a can on a fence. And after a while, you sort of stop even noticing the cultural totems on the screen. Here's a really good example:

[GAME SOUNDS UP AND UNDER] The Medal of Honor series is, you know, a violent video game set in World War II. There was a version of it called Rising Sun, where you went to Japan and you killed a lot

of Japanese soldiers, as an American.

[SOUND OF GUNFIRE/VOICES] This game was released in Japan, and a lot of commentators, myself included, said [LAUGHS], is that a good idea? Are young Japanese men going to want to sit around for hours upon hours slaughtering virtual representations of their fathers and grandfathers? But the game did quite well. And when I talked to some players of the game, they said, no, after a while I don't even notice who I'm killing because it's just a really good game.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: But a game is a game, is a game. They aren't really killing their fathers and grandfathers. They're just firing colored lights at colored lights.

CLIVE THOMPSON: Yeah, and as I've always said, and I still firmly believe, you have to be pretty unglued to seriously mix up reality [LAUGHS] and fantasy in a game world. I mean, one of the things that's really interesting about a lot of ultra-violent video games is that, you know, if you stand back and look at it from ten feet away, you often go, wow, that's, that's just sick. And if you're playing it, it's often sometimes weirdly funny because it's so over the top. It's more like Quentin Tarantino than Saving Private Ryan as an -

[OVERTALK]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Or maybe Monty Python.

CLIVE THOMPSON: [LAUGHS] Yeah exactly, you know, like it's just a nick. Sometimes I think games that actually have a kind of a moral commentary on violence are the ones that push it to an absolutely ludicrous extreme, in the same way that in Ovid's Metamorphosis when he describes battle scenes, it's not just cutting off someone's head, he like goes on for stanzas about how the blood, you know, shot to the ceiling and knocked over lamps and stuff like that. And he was intentionally mocking the conventions. He was sort of like laughing at a lot of heroic war poetry, at the same time as he was using that stuff.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And so, to sum up your position on the incident that prompted this discussion, the helicopter in Iraq, the panic over the fact that video games are so much like war is really a panic over the fact that war is fought so much more like a video game.

CLIVE THOMPSON: I think that they worry that soldiers put in these situations might treat reality without the, the gravity and purchase that it demands. But there was a famous example where someone was piloting a drone, they lost power in the drone. They were trying to land the drone safely and just before the drone hit the ground they reached below their seat for the ejection button because it just felt like they were there. And there's a lot of people who do work into the cyborg psychology, what it feels like to be sort of working inside a machine, that would argue persuasively that no, these systems don't desensitize you to the violence. You feel like you're there. The soldiers are trained to understand this stuff, and this isn't really a problem. Are weapon systems designed in a way that they become game-like? Does that change the ethical dimensions of warfare? I think it's an incredibly interesting question that we are going to run into more and more because a lot of war is being fought virtually.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Clive, thank you so much.

CLIVE THOMPSON: Thank you.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Clive Thompson is a columnist for Wired and a contributing writer to The

New York Times Magazine.

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[Virtual War](#)



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