2010: The Year of the Shooter

By Greg Jones

ALERT

TREND

Video games wax and wane in popularity just like every other media form. This year has been a particularly successful year for one particular genre of video game: the "shooter." Three highly-anticipated "shooters" released this year, making 2010 the year of the shooter. "Shooters" are first person shooter games, which allow the gamer to walk around with a weapon (typically a gun), shooting at targets. This extremely popular genre gives the gamer the sense of being "in the fight" and, when properly designed, can make combat feel participatory. Why are so many people purchasing and playing these games? What do they tell us about the interest in violent gaming?

Halo:Reach was the first important shooter to release this year, launching in September. The game topped $200 million in sales in its first day of release, selling about 3 million copies. A prequel to the popular *Halo* series, the game provides players the opportunity to fight through a futuristic world complete with exciting weapons and fast-action combat. Many gamers find the addictive online multiplayer to be the best part of this immensely popular series.

One month later, Electronic Arts released *Medal of Honor*, which was a continuation of an old World War II shooter series. Although not quite as popular as the other two games mentioned in this article, it still sold 1.5 million copies in the first five days after its release for sales totaling $100 million. *Medal of Honor* takes place in the modern war setting, in the deserts of Afghanistan. The game's developers market their collaboration with real United States military veterans in the design of the game to ensure its accuracy. *Medal of Honor* received a good bit of press in the weeks prior to its release due to the debate over whether people should be able to play as the Taliban. Though other games have provided generic terrorists in the game, the simulation style experience resulted in controversy because the War on Terror is ongoing. This game is self-promoted as a competitor to the popular *Call of Duty* series.

Perhaps the most anticipated of the three, the superbly popular *Call of Duty* series released its *Black Ops* title in early November. *Black Ops* is the largest media release ever, recording $360 million in sales in its first day alone. This equates to 5.6 million units sold in the first 24 hours when pre-orders are considered. The game takes place in the Cold War, with gamers taking on the role of special forces operatives in Cuba and Southeast Asia. Developed by Activision, *Black Ops* boasts the deepest multiplayer game mode of any shooter.

Multiplayer is really at the heart of the popularity of these games. Close to two million gamers have been reported to be online playing the multiplayer modes all at the same time. This allows for thousands of games matching different players together at any given time of day. Rather than playing through level after level of linear challenges, multiplayer allows gamers to compete, using the combative tools of the game, against other gamers all over the world. All of these shooters allow gamers to test aim, reaction time, and strategy against seemingly anonymous people. The enemy could be a high school student, a college professor, a janitor, a baker, or a candlestick maker! Known only by his or her "gamertag" or online name, gamers have the opportunity to forge a virtual identity based on playing style and performance within the game.

One of the reasons that multiplayer is so wildly popular is that it is communal. Not only do gamers play against complete strangers, they also play the game with their real life friends. This is the heart of the appeal for many high school and college aged

gamers, who play because they do not want to miss out on something their friends are doing. The games keep statistics on in game performances, creating a competitive vibe between friends. After playing together for a while, gamers can compare with their friends, exchanging the usual insults and barbs, similar to athletic performances. The online networks have "chat" functions that allow friends to talk to one another while playing the game, making every great shot or game-saving maneuver enjoyable for all of the friends playing together.

The larger question about these games has to do with violence. With the rising popularity of games like *Rock Band* and consistently popular sports franchises, why are there so many people playing these violent games?

Although it is not a good idea to encourage violence, the real core of these shooters is their ability to promote competition. Unlike real life sports or even academics, these competitions begin with every gamer on equal footing. At the beginning of the game, every player starts with the same basic kits of weapons and tools. Only after playing, practicing, and improving the tangible skills of accuracy, reaction time, and strategy, do players find success in the game.

Gamers (and their parents) must remember with shooters (or any violent games) to limit the amount of consumption. It is always a good idea to establish limits. One of the joys (and faults) of video games is that they tend to make time disappear. Create a clear set of rules and work together on maintaining them. Allow gamers the opportunity to organize times to play with his or her friends because the communal element is crucial for many video game players.

Remember that in-game violence needs to be understood within its context. The *Medal of Honor* and *Black Ops* games both open the possibility for discussions about historical or political decision making in real life. All of the games open the air for discussions about violence, killing, and sin in a personal, as well as communal sense.

Approaching this holiday season, parents may wonder what games are appropriate for their children. All three of these games are rated "M" for mature by the ESRB. Even if you decide these types of games are inappropriate for the teens in your home, remember that there is a good chance they are being exposed to the games through friends. Prepare students to consider the themes in the game and ask them about their interest in the games. It may be a fad, just an odd year with the release of three immensely popular shooters, or it might be a larger reflection of the society in which our developers and gamers live. Regardless, these games are sure to remain in high demand as the holiday season approaches. Be aware of their content and be prepared to help your teens walk through the complex and mature themes that first-person shooters bring to the table.

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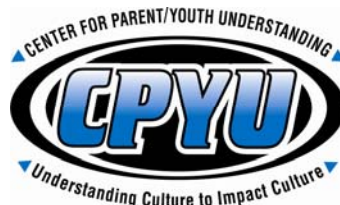
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