

WOMEN WARRIORS: POPULAR NARRATIVE AND WOMEN IN COMBAT

by

Amberly Russell, B.A.

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Committee Members:

Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Chair

Kathleen McClancy

Mark Busby

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to female veterans and women warriors who are brave and bold in their unwavering dedication to protecting our freedom in the United States of America.

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I. INTRODUCTION

As a female U. S. Army veteran, I find it extremely important to weave my military experiences into my research. I joined the Army Reserves before I chose to go on active duty right after the 9/11 attack. That moment in history left an indelible mark on me. Knowing that I was already trained to serve and protect, when I witnessed the televised footage of people jumping from the Twin Towers, I immediately decided to take charge of my future and join the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Military Police (MP) company. I was deployed in 2002 to the Balkans on the Kosovo and Albanian border. This experience ultimately led me to the focus for this thesis on women, rape, and war in 20th and 21st century literature, gaming, and film.

In the year 2001, women were still not technically allowed to serve in the infantry, so the 1st Infantry Division was, of course, mostly men. I was lucky enough to be stationed in Schweinfurt, Germany, and the town was beautiful and peaceful. My time in the service was anything but peaceful, however. Being one of only a handful of women on an Army infantry base was challenging. My very first day as an MP set the tone for what would end up being a trend for the remainder of my time there. I was ordered to go arrest two of five infantry soldiers involved in gang raping one female soldier. That was day one. The situation was so surreal it felt like a movie. I learned what it meant when people described something as an out of body experience, as I watched myself coping with and handling such a brutal and shocking event. After separating from the military, I finished my Bachelor of Arts in Literature at Texas Woman's University, where I experienced another wave of culture shock. Most classes had elements of feminist theory woven into the curriculum, and training my brain not to think in masculine terms after my

army experience was a challenge I embraced. Next, I taught English in South Korea and Thailand before entering the Master of Arts in Literature program at Texas State University.

After a seven-year break between degrees, I found that taking my first class with a professor whose husband is a Vietnam veteran eased my mind because it gave me the freedom to explore my military duties and trauma. I connected these experiences with my first conference presentation, titled “Women Warriors: Breaking the 21st Century Fighting Fuck Toy Archetype and Ethics in Military Retail,” at the University of Riverside, California. The work of Tim O’Brien subsequently inspired the section “Vagina Dentata: She Ain’t No Sweetheart,” a further exploration of research on women, rape, and war.

Statement of Problem and Purpose

The topic of women and violence in the military appears in popular narratives from *G.I. Jane* to the television *China Beach* series, *Homeland*, *Fort Bliss*, and the recruiting game *America’s Army*. For the purposes of this study, I focus on two areas: popular narratives in war-related film, video games, and literature. Works by such authors as Tim O’Brien depict contemporary female soldiers through a masculine construct of the female soldier. O’Brien’s short story “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” was adapted for film in *A Soldier’s Sweetheart* (1998). In *Vietnam and Beyond*, Tim O’Brien and the Power of Storytelling, Stefania Ciocia compares O’Brien’s Mary Anne Bell character in “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” to Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. The character of Mary Anne is usually discussed in masculine terms, but through a female soldier’s point of view, hers can stand alone as an example of a purely

“female soldier” experience. Even if women could not technically enter combat in the United States from 1940 to 2015, women have fought alongside men since the dawn of armed conflict. Constructing war in purely masculine terms disregards the volumes of historical evidence that women have contributed significantly as warriors and support personnel.

Furthermore, there are myriad other sources in recent scholarship to suggest that women in combat are starting to gain recognition and find their voices through memoir and fiction to express what it looks like for women on the front lines of the battle field in Iraq and Afghanistan. Still, former Army Military Intelligence sergeant Kayla Williams argues, “Public recognition of our honorable wartime service has not grown as swiftly as our numbers and opportunities.” She lists about ten such memoirs and fictional novels, but admits the stories are a small percentage compared to male accounts of war in contemporary literature. A few of the most commercially and critically successful books written exclusively by and about female war veterans include *I’m Still Standing* (2011), *Rule Number Two* (2007), *Hesitation Kills* (2011), *Iraq and Back* (2006), and *Warrior Princess* (2013) (Williams). With regards to public acknowledgement of female veterans in general, Williams notes that “without the close-cropped hair cut our male peers sport by regulation, we are less likely to be easily identifiable out of uniform, and military women are too often portrayed in the media as victims rather than heroes.”

Caroline Heldman argues for the importance of examining the intersection of women, rape, and war culture in film from a feminist perspective. She discusses the trope of hyper-sexuality in female protagonists like the one used in creating the character Lara Croft in the film *Tomb Raider*. Coining the term *Fighting Fuck Toy* (FFT) she describes

such figures as "hyper-sexualized female protagonists who are able to 'kick ass' (and kill) with the best of them. The FFT appears empowered, but her very existence serves the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer. In short, the FFT takes female agency, weds it to normalized male violence, and appropriates it for the male gaze" (2012). Yvonne Tasker's work to define what a soldier looks like in the realm of popular film narratives in the movies *Courage under Fire* (1996) and *G.I. Jane* (1997) provides examples of what Susan Jeffords identifies as the "remasculinization of America" that took place during the Vietnam War (186). Combining and expanding the work of these two scholars as a foundation, I will analyze two of the most recent films depicting female in order to explore and test their theoretical insights.

The kind of violence against women Heldman identifies in film is prevalent in gaming as well. Game theory is extremely interdisciplinary, employing approaches from the social sciences, humanities, psychology, economics, and industry. Since violent video games constitute an important recruiting tool and a huge part of a violent military culture—with one in three women reportedly raped in the military—a review of the research surrounding aggression and video games is warranted to consider possible connections among these social networks. The literature surrounding this topic—violence against women in games—can be divided into two simple subgroups. One camp claims that videogames do not provoke aggression in the gamer and the other argues that it certainly does, at least to varying degrees. Arguments on both sides will be presented, analyzed, and weighed in this study.

One potential problem I see in the realm of women, rape and war research is the absence of analysis by authors who have gone through this experience themselves. As a

female military-veteran author, I will provide added insight through discussion of my real-life experiences. To combat this scholarship gap in women, rape, and war research, this thesis will extend Caroline Heldman, Susan Jeffords, and Yvonne Tasker's research to include personal narratives and media surrounding my focus on the images and lived experience of the woman warrior.

Lee-Jane Bennion-Nixon writes about the need for gender representations of the warrior woman to keep up with the new and increasing digital age. She states, "while digital technology provides the capacity to manipulate gender identities, contemporary digital representations of women often seem to belong to an analogue world, as a discussion of the warrior woman will demonstrate" (2010). Her argument is substantiated by reminding readers that the warrior woman has existed in popular narratives for a long time, but in the past decade has made a resurgence especially in the action genre and is not specifically confined to Western cinema. As far as advertising is concerned she points out that the cover of the film *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) has a photo of Cate Blanchett in full armor. Bennion-Nixon observes, "This type of advertising strategy suggests that the notion of women as national warriors is widely understood by a general audience. The figure of a violent, fighting, brave, heroic woman is not only culturally legible, it is familiar" (2010). She does note that this is a rare occurrence, but it does highlight a shift in gender representation involving women in combat.

To expand on existing scholarship, in this thesis I approach the study of film and gaming through the prism of the following research questions:

- What popular narratives in film and gaming may have contributed to real-life violence against women in the military?

- How has the study of women, rape and war changed over the last thirty years?
- How has the evolution in scholarship advanced our understanding of rape prevention, awareness, and social responsibility, particularly as it relates to governmental research and regulations involving military sexual trauma (MST)?
- What effect has the prohibition of women serving in recent U.S. military combat units had on our perception of women's ability to serve in combat?
- Has this restriction of female participation led to the degradation of women in the military and has this government-mandated assumption of female inferiority contributed to a perceived weakness, which may in turn contribute to conditions that may normalize so many women being raped in the military?
- What are the current implications of this deeply ingrained regulation of the past and how will this situation continue to shape perceptions, especially now that women are technically allowed to serve in infantry units?

Methodology

This thesis employs current research based on the focal topic in fictional narratives and enhances this research with experimentally based research on trends and effects of the portrayal of violence against women in several forms of popular narrative. The conclusion will consider possible connections to real-life experiences of male and female military personnel through biographical research and a series of focus groups. With approval from the International Review Board at Texas State University, I completed three focus groups with military veterans with productive and interesting results. Of the three groups of U.S. military veterans one was mixed female/male, the second was all-male and the third focus group was all-female.

The reason for doing focus groups was to seek patterns in the personal accounts of female and male military personnel in relation to violence in media. The focus groups included various ages and ethnic backgrounds of women and men who have served on active duty and will be described and analyzed in the section titled “Topic in Gaming.” Each focus group consisted of at least six to eight participants with a total of twenty people interviewed. The range was from the Vietnam War and Gulf War to post 9/11 Afghanistan and Iraq duty.

I led the focus groups with one assistant who took notes. Eliot and Associates claim that, “the focus group moderator nurtures disclosure in an open and spontaneous format” (2). My goal was to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions from as many different people as possible in the allotted time of 45 minutes. Sample questions are as follows:

- Do you think violence against women in the military is a problem?
- What challenges did you experience in the military that were unique to being a female in the military?
- What do you think portrayal of women soldiers in the media contributes to real women in the service?
- How was sexual assault handled by leadership in the military?
- What examples of female soldiers in the media are the most accurate (film, news, music, etc.)?
- Is accurate representation of women soldier avatars in gaming important to you?
- Does being an active participant in playing video games contribute to more aggression than passively viewing violence against women in film?

As the moderator, I used both a voice recorder and took notes in keeping with standard practices. Myers asserts, “Of course, the content analysis and the interpretation, if done by the moderator, may draw perceptively on a complex intuitive sense of what went on in the session (that is why moderators are encouraged to write detailed notes soon after the session)” (86). Eliot says, “In order for all participant comments to be understandable and useful, they must be boiled down to essential information using a systematic and verifiable process. Begin by transcribing all focus group tapes and inserting notes into transcribed material where appropriate” (11).

I used the expertise of faculty at Texas State University who have run focus groups with highly sensitive topics such as mine. Taking these considerations into account represents an attempt to ensure that participants in the study would not be re-traumatized by talking about their experiences. Taking breaks as needed from the group resulted in focus groups were said to inspire an atmosphere of safety and confidence.

My thesis will not only offer a survey of current research, but it will strive to connect this research to the physical, emotional, and real-life implications of military rape culture and violence against women in media. This study seeks to examine and establish possible connections between theoretical analysis and current regulatory issues in media and the military. In seeking out counter-arguments, I am sensitive to the fact that I have been out of the military for twelve years. I also take into account the current state of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) research and policies are in the U.S. Department of Justice.

Personal Challenges

In undertaking this study, I wished to avoid allowing my trauma to cloud my

research. To mitigate these possible side effects, I noted my emotions, recollected from the past, and recorded them periodically throughout the study. I took these responses into consideration, maintaining a clear focus on the chosen topics. There is a dearth of analysis by authors who have gone through the military. I am aware, however, that validating analysis of narratives only from those who have been in the military can lead to an exclusionary and reductive discussion. As true as my real-life experiences are, they are still only the experiences of one person, and to extrapolate a generality from them is misleading. Therefore, I adapted methods of reception studies and conducted a series of focus groups to gain a broader perspective. A final challenge was to integrate several different theoretical approaches and narrative forms, considering fiction and non-fiction, media from popular culture and social military structures.

II. TOPIC IN FILM

From the 1990s to the present, several war-related films were produced, but some stand out for their focus on female fighters: *A Soldier's Sweetheart* (1998), *Courage under Fire* (1996), *G.I. Jane* (1997), *Fort Bliss* (2014) and *Camp X-Ray* (2014). This selection represents three main war periods including the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the Post 9/11 Wars. We see in these films that times have changed for the better when it comes to depicting women in the military and combat roles. Films have gone from the motherhood trope and the fighting fuck toy to evolving into a more complex character for women in combat; however, the fact that I could only find two recent films to compare shows a lack of diversity in film that is unparalleled in comparison to male figures of all kinds.

The first question to consider is how the representation of female soldiers in film has changed since the 1990s. How war is perceived “for many is now embodied in films like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and more recently *Saving Private Ryan*, just as the Vietnam War has become encapsulated within *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *The Deer Hunter*. In this way, contemporary films about current conflicts provide a battleground for interpretations of a war, how it is viewed now and how it will be seen in the future” (McSweeney 63). With this idea in mind I will explore how the narrative and images surrounding female soldiers in two recent films, *Fort Bliss* (2014) and *Camp X-Ray* (2014), compare to the last major wave of films with a female U.S. soldier as a lead character from the 1990s: *A Soldier's Sweetheart* (1998), *G.I. Jane* (1997) and *Courage under Fire* (1996). To what extent has the narrative involving female soldiers evolved in recent films, considering common “women in war” images like the Fighting Fuck Toy

(FFT) and motherhood tropes? Also, how has the dialog—the way female soldiers are spoken to in these films—contributed to normalization of the derogatory way female soldiers are addressed in real life, given the effect media has on society? I analyze the language of male soldiers towards women in both film eras to show how fellow soldiers perceive women in combat and to consider whether the narrative and attitudes have evolved over time.

There appears to be a societal shift in the way women in war are portrayed in the media from Vietnam to Post 9/11 era war films. Vietnam had a galvanizing effect on the common narratives involving modern warfare, as the first highly televised war. One of the most thorough analyses of the Vietnam era regarding gender and popular narrative is Susan Jeffords's seminal work, *The Remasculinization of America, Gender and the Vietnam War*. In it she states that “‘collective consciousness of America’ is a prominent motif of Vietnam films, personal narratives, novels, and analysis; the military unit in wartime as a location for the eradication of social, class, ethnic, and racial boundaries” (54). Jeffords claims, “Like race, class differences are most readily forgotten during battle. But while race, class and ethnic variety populate Vietnam, one difference is not presented, one boundary is not broken, and that is the difference of gender” (59). Gulf War era and Post 9/11 war films begin to interrogate that paradigm, especially ones involving a female soldier protagonist. In the 1990s-war film genre, we begin to see women in the military and combat gain prominent roles. There were no other major roles depicting woman in the U.S. military and in combat outside of the fantasy genre until 2014 and those films were small budget independent films. Although they present a more masculinized woman, it is questionable whether they provide accurate portrayals of

women and their circumstances.

***A Soldier's Sweetheart* (1998)**

Two of the most common depictions of women in war fall into the categories of the *motherhood trope* and the *Fighting Fuck Toy trope*. One of the first depictions to challenge this dominant paradigm of female extremes in modern war literature and film appears in Tim O'Brien's story, "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" (1990). The film adaptation, *A Soldier's Sweetheart*, released in 1998, follows closely the original short story. O'Brien's short story, published in *Esquire* and later as a chapter in the novel *The Things They Carried*, has a female protagonist who flies to a military camp in Vietnam from the U.S. to visit her soldier boyfriend and ends up becoming a soldier herself. Because this story of a contemporary woman in combat is both in a novel and in film, we can compare O'Brien's original work and commentary in the screenplay with the final film production to see whether the film version strengthened the female character's role and deepened its complexity or weakened and simplified it.

The main difference between *A Soldier's Sweetheart* and the other four films under consideration is that it is categorized as fantasy. It would be highly unlikely for an American civilian woman to come onto a base during the Vietnam War and, without any military training, become a Special Forces soldier. Although scholars argue that this story is magical realism, I argue that there are elements of realism in terms of the emotional content. Perhaps terms like realist fantasy or psychological expressionism would be more apt for this particular case. I felt a kinship with Mary Anne that perhaps many female soldiers and other women touched by war relate to their own experiences and emotional responses. As I witnessed Mary Anne transform from doe-eyed innocent to full-fledged

warrior, I was reminded of my own transition while serving in the U.S. Army and being the only female in my platoon. In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien successfully breaks from the purely masculine depictions of war for which he is well known and bestows female agency on women warriors. I prefer the term fantastic psychological realism to describe O’Brien’s story, because magical realism is too limited a term that implies impossibility and unbelievability.

In the 1990s, the common “women in war” trope in film altered the perception of the female soldier character so that they seem unreal. Susan E. Linville states that with regards to the 1990s war film, fantasy, and Freud’s *uncanny*,

while the uncanny ostensibly stands outside of the binarisms aligned with the sublime and the beautiful—male-female, immensity-smallness, strength-weakness, terror-pleasure, wartime-peacetime, Anglo-Saxon-French, and so on—it exists between them and functions to reveal how, in Derrida’s words, ‘each allegedly simple term is marked by the trace of another term’ (29).

Along similar lines, in *The Modern Amazons, Warrior Women On-Screen*, Dominique Mainon and James Ursini argue that “fantasy is probably the most traditional genre for warrior women,” but they go on to argue that “female characters of the fantasy genre often have origins rooted in history” (31). *A Soldier’s Sweetheart* is traceable to a rumor that spread widely on the ground among U.S. soldiers in the Vietnam War. The popular version of the story was that another soldier’s girlfriend was sneaked into the Song Tra Bong combat zone because her boyfriend missed her.

Patrick Hicks interviewed O’Brien about the influence this myth had on shaping the story. O’Brien estimated that he had heard the story at least twelve times, and this

repeated story inspired the creation of Mary Anne's character. He said, "I had to ask myself why I didn't believe it. Logistically it was wholly believable. All you had to do was buy a plane ticket and fly from Cleveland to LA to Bangkok to Saigon" (Hicks 88). O'Brien mentions that there were plenty of women in Vietnam such as female war correspondents and hippie tourists. This phenomenon made O'Brien ask himself, "Could a woman be sucked into war the way that a man could be?" (Hicks 88). Hicks rightly mentions past females in combat as examples of real-life women warriors, such as Joan of Arc and Queen Boadicea. O'Brien responds, "Women are capable of violence. We know that from reading history" (Hicks 88). Unfortunately, Hicks also generalizes with the outdated view that "women say... I don't want to read a war story, I don't like them, it's a concept that is completely foreign to me, I'll never have to go through anything like it" (89). This claim is simply not an accurate depiction of many women's interest in political science, history, civilization, and armed conflict, and it serves only to perpetuate stereotypes.

In both O'Brien's story and *A Soldier's Sweetheart* Mary Anne is introduced as an FFT. This term not only applies to the hyper-sexualization of female characters in movies, like *A Soldier's Sweetheart*, but also in popular fiction. Toward the beginning of the film there is a scene with Mary Anne playing volleyball in short shorts and a cleavage bearing halter top while the soldiers blatantly ogle her. In the novel the soldiers initially discuss Mary Anne in sexual terms of her having a "come-get-me energy," being "flirtatious" and having "terrific legs" (O'Brien 91). Mary Anne does motivate her soldier boyfriend and stands as a love object for him, but in the end, the novel and subsequent film successfully go beyond this common limitation to a more complex

version of womanhood. Susan Linville argues that the war genre “relies on female characters as structuring absences, love objects who motivate and enable the warrior to fight, as they validate his heterosexuality within the homosocial world of combat” (39). In discussing the concept of motherhood in war, Linville states that the “depiction of female characters serves doubly as the maternal bearers of soldier’s sons and as harbingers of the intractable fact of death in battle” (39). Mary Anne becomes a symbol of motherhood within the medic base in Song Tra Bong. In the film version, *A Soldier’s Sweetheart*, she is seen innocently walking through the village and speaking Vietnamese to the children without a weapon and she is shown on the base camp cooking for the soldiers and her G.I. boyfriend Mark Fossie. Mary Anne’s gradual transformation from “Fighting Fuck Toy” (FFT) to woman warrior is truly progressive for the ’90s-film era.

Collective Consciousness and the Burden of Confinement

Despite the progressive elements in O’Brien’s story, his depiction of the marriage between Mary Anne and Mark Fossie is problematic. After Mary Anne returns from her first foray into the jungle with the Green Berets, Mark attempts to control and confine her by his proposal of marriage. “Nobody’s business,” he told Rat that night. “One thing for sure, there won’t be any more ambushes.” Then Rat asks, ‘You laid down the law?’ Fossie replies, “I’ll put it this way, we are officially engaged” (O’Brien 99). This engagement cements her confinement, a constant theme throughout the story. During this era in the nation’s history, the assumption of women’s inability to fight is exemplified in the Department of Defense ruling women ineligible to serve officially in combat roles, confining them to more traditional feminine roles, such as working in administration units until a change in 2015. Mary Anne is confined by forces around her that she has no

control over because she is locked into a military base with medics who rarely are able to travel outside of their base camp. However, the Green Berets offer her a chance at escape that confinement because they are constantly out on missions in the jungle.

Mary Anne does not speak up for herself and seems to forget the wild nature within; eventually, she joins the Green Berets, breaking away from her traditional female role. The loss of agency when women are excluded from combat finds a parallel in Michel Foucault's theory on confinement discussed in *Discipline and Punish*. Just as in the visual control and entrapment of prison systems, depictions of a complex identity for women soldiers in the media and contemporary literature is controlled and limited through formal structures. Foucault argues that confinement is a systematic and political affront using the panoptic theory, which suggests how this technique works:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.

(Foucault 202)

Foucault's assessment of surveillance can be likened to Laura Mulvey's description of the male gaze. In spite of this limiting framework, one can see that women under surveillance still have the power to change and alter the power dynamic for their respective identities if their depictions can manage to change the dominant views of women in combat within popular narrative. The second half of Mary Anne's journey into the jungle with the Green Berets represents just such a change, as she breaks from the traditional contemporary trope of victimized women in combat, reclaiming her power.

Escape into the wild has historical precedents. Ciocia discusses the many ways O'Brien's "Sweetheart" drew from *Heart of Darkness* and the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by transforming the gender of the basic story behind Conrad's character. The main difference Ciocia identifies are the gender roles played by the protagonists Kurtz and Mary Anne described as, "the ultimate male fantasy" who "embodies the very ideals of white American suburban femininity" (191). On her transformation in the second half Ciocia notes that when she falls "prey to the Conradian gloom, Mary Anne has moved into a liminal space—the mythical 'middle landscape' (to use Leo Marx's expression) between savagery and civilization, which American military strategists envisioned as the Special Forces' domain" (193). Unlike Kurtz, Mary Anne simply disappears, in an ending that leaves her fate undecided, open.

Language of Soldiers

Despite the potential for female liberation in O'Brien's depiction of a figure like Mary Anne, the language of his male soldier characters contributes to a limited popular conception of women in war and perpetuates the objectification and disparagement of female characters in popular narratives. Language is one of the key ways of putting women in their place. In O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, women are referred to as "cooze," "pussy," "cunt," "poontang," etc. Mary Anne is referred to as being "A real Tiger" and having "D-cup guts, trainer-bra brains" (O'Brien 92). In real-life military situations, this demeaning language is not confined to men. I learned this when I was in basic training and one female drill sergeant sat all fifty of us female soldiers down in our barracks and told us, "You are either going to be a bitch or a whore; make your pick now." In my experience and that of many of the focus group participants of this study,

this kind of labeling still occurs in the so-called “New Army.” I heard one of the more creative ones from a male soldier in my platoon, who referred to most women as “orifices.” In spite of demeaning language, O’Brien’s novel disrupts the paradigm of feminine submission through character Rat Kiley’s description, when Mary Anne’s female agency returns as she transitions from sexual object to actual fighter:

This Mary Anne was no virgin but at least she was real. When she came through the wire that night, I was right there, I saw those eyes of hers, I saw how she wasn’t even the same person no more. What’s so impossible about that? She was a girl, that’s all. I mean, if it was a guy, everybody’d say, hey no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. (102)

Finally, O’Brien gives Mary Anne the power to stand alone as a fighter no matter her gender and circumstance. As a woman who is displaced onto fantasy, she comes to life as a fantastic yet psychologically realistic depiction of what real-world female soldiers might transition to during combat. In the final analysis, for males or females, war is war and the way people react to it has a certain commonality, regardless of gender. Survival mode among trained soldiers knows no gender category or exclusive weakness or superiority. In reference to his chapter, “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien asserts the notion that “there’s a rage that goes through that story, that was entirely intentional... the rage that could be a consequence of men doing all the fighting and women being back home” (Artful Dodge).

Courage Under Fire (1996)

In today’s military, men no longer do all the fighting while women are stuck at

home, but in films like Edward Zwick's *Courage under Fire* (1996), female soldiers are still portrayed in as weak. The film stars the soft-spoken Meg Ryan as a female Gulf War soldier named Karen Walden—killed in action and posthumously investigated for her heroism or lack thereof to determine if she has earned the Medal of Honor. Walden clearly fits the motherhood trope seen in many war films, just as Mary Anne is depicted in the first half of O'Brien's story. One scene that exemplifies this pattern in *Courage under Fire* occurs when the female protagonist tells a subordinate male soldier to go eat something because he looks famished. Rather than being depicted as a commander, Walden is portrayed as a nagging mother figure to her troops.

Both female characters undergo skeptical scrutiny from male characters throughout the narrative, even after they have exhibited strong combat skills. Mary Anne is teased repeatedly in ways that reduce her capacity to become a soldier. For example, when Mary Anne is being trained on using the M16 weapon, Rat Kiley and his buddies sun themselves and laugh at her and the soldiers at camp, teasing her about being “their own little native” after hanging out with the South Vietnamese Army. Mary Anne is rarely taken seriously until she joins the Green Berets in the jungle. Walden's qualifications as a war hero are undermined through gender-specific character assassination. When she displays control of her troops she is called “butch.” Linville suggests in “The Mother of All Battles” that the contradictions represented in *Courage under Fire* juxtapose more common masculine war efforts with a more feminine imagery through phrases such as “mother of all battles” and “birth of a revolution.” Linville notes that the Gulf War was termed “the mother of all battles” by Saddam Hussein. She writes:

The film's preoccupation with birth and technology also suggests the

significance of the West's vaunted display of technological superiority over Iraq: the goal of that display was to align anew the disruptive Muslim Orient with the feminine while making possible Western patriarchy's appropriation of the East's mythic generative power. (116)

Yvonne Tasker describes soldiers' looks in popular film narratives in the movies *Courage under Fire* and *G.I. Jane*, focusing on the limitations of gender representations. She argues for a more flexible model of gender in cinema in "Soldier Stories: Women and Military Masculinities in *Courage under Fire*" (2002). After all, these two films set the bar for masculine-rendered female soldiers in film in the '90s. *Courage under Fire* includes multiple non-linear stories about Karen Walden's character told through the eyes of her combat squad. For some she is "butch" and to others she is very maternal. One of her soldiers renders her as totally in control of her situation being in command of her troops and simultaneously another describes her as incompetent and scared. In *Courage under Fire*, "a rejection of the butch/military woman as inappropriate comes here from a marginalized female character, defined primarily as a civilian, and then later from Monfreiz who defines himself as a good soldier, a combat veteran and Walden as a 'cunt,' a term of abuse that explicitly seeks to recode her in terms of the (female) body" (Tasker 216). Linville suggests that in the film's coding of Walden and the motherhood trope, the narrative "initially codes the body of the tank, with its androgynous blend of phallic and womblike parts, as a realm of potential confusion and chaos—not unlike Walden's combat identity" (113). These devices that take us from the "womb" to the "tomb" are places where Freud's *unheimlich*—the uncanny—occurs. She explains how "uncanny moments often reduce women to eerie dolls and abject monsters, beings

stirring repressed memories of both womb and tomb” (Linville 3). At the same time, she notes how “the uncanny can alternatively serve as a springboard to unconventional cultural critique and to the engendering of less masculinist depictions of the past” (3). In a film like *Courage Under Fire*, the uncanny seems to characterize women in combat during the Gulf and Vietnam Wars.

***G.I. Jane* (1998)**

In *Courage Under Fire*, Walden’s story is told through the eyes of others, but with Ridley Scott’s *G.I. Jane* we get the female soldier’s perspective of her experiences in SEAL training and combat. Scott tells the story of female naval intelligence officer Lieutenant Jordan O’Neil (Demi Moore), who is selected to be the first female to go through Navy SEAL training. A Texas Senator uses O’Neil as a bargaining chip for political gain to keep military bases in Texas from closing. O’Neil has a boyfriend who is also in the Navy and we see the negative effects of her training on their relationship. O’Neil goes through Hell Week with her fellow trainees and successfully passes, arguing all the while that she wants to be treated just like the men. She asks to have the same physical fitness standards and sleep in the same barracks, and she also shaves her head. By the end of the film O’Neil completes her training and leads her team on a highly successful combat mission.

Through analysis of *Courage Under Fire* and Ridley Scott’s *G.I. Jane*, Tasker explores “gendered concepts, terms and images that are regularly used in both feminist-informed (typically psychoanalytic) film studies, and more sociological explorations of masculinities, not to mention popular discourses about gender.” Additionally, she “argues for a more flexible model of gender in thinking about popular cinema” (209). Gender

concepts in *G.I. Jane* are expressed physically through the coding of female bodies in combat and SEAL training in particular. Expressions of this point include O'Neil shaving her head as the most striking symbol. Gender concepts are also expressed through the film's narratives about women in combat. Examples are the Texas Senator stating, "American families just aren't prepared to have their young mothers and daughters in harm's way," and "No politician can afford to let women come home in body bags."

Unlike *A Soldier's Sweetheart* and *Courage under Fire* and their reliance on the motherhood trope, *G.I. Jane* does not employ this imagery. Instead, Lieutenant Jordan O'Neil is depicted in many ways as an FFT. While Mary Anne and Walden successfully break free from the FFT trope, I argue that in *G.I. Jane*, Scott tries and ultimately fails to do so. The number of egregious '90s workout scenes that are similar to other workout scene montages in the '80s and '90s contribute to the film's failure. These types of montage were made famous with actors such as Tom Cruise in *Top Gun* (1986) and Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky V* (1990). O'Neil is in physical training in the whole of this film, but it is the way she is dressed that makes the workout scenes unbelievable and exploitative. Most women with large breasts have to wear a sturdy sports bra to train as hard as she does. It seems like O'Neil rarely wears one at all while working out. This non-regulation costuming is not practical or representative of military practice, and the lack of verisimilitude takes away from the film's authenticity and impact. In contrast, there are scenes where O'Neil proves her worth to her fellow soldiers, like the end of SEAL training where she delivers the film's most famous line, "suck my dick," to the Master Chief. It is unfortunate that Scott did not portray her character without the repeated hypersexualization of her body, which appears to only satisfy prurient interests.

Even on the cover of the DVD Demi Moore is wearing a brown military issued t-shirt with her right nipple prominently poking through. Who made that decision? As Tasker argues, “Within war movies female bodies, defined primarily in terms of sexuality, have typically been disposable in rather different ways. Ironically, it is in part an American anxiety about female bodies that, officially at least, so long kept women out of combat” (218). Tasker specifies “officially” here because there have always been women who have served in combat, but they were not allowed to occupy official combat roles in the U.S. military until 2015.

Single Sex Workplace vs. Integrated Military

Transgressive fiction is a category of literature and narrative that focuses on characters who feel frustrated by the norms and expectations of society and who break free of those confines in unusual or illicit ways. *G.I. Jane* can be seen as transgressive to the untrained eye, but Tasker argues that such a narrow view limits the female soldier character to a masculine point of view rather than constructing a new concept of the masculine rendered female. Walden, O’Neil and Mary Anne are the only females in their tactical teams. Tasker says, “The played for straight performance of masculinity articulated around the military women in both *G.I. Jane* and *Courage under Fire* can be situated within the context of a wider discursive presentation of military women in terms of a threatening sexualization of a single-sex workplace” (220). In *G.I. Jane*, when O’Neil gets to SEAL training and enters the chow hall the men refer to her as a “split-tail” and we hear a fellow soldier say, “I just need one night with her and I’ll set her straight.” The women in the three 90s films discussed are all assigned to units where they are the only females. This study illustrates how the dynamics change regarding gender

representation when female protagonists are in integrated military units.

***Fort Bliss* (2014) and *Camp X-Ray* (2014)**

Unlike the previous three films from the '90s, in the 2014 films *Fort Bliss* and *Camp X-Ray* the female soldier protagonists are in integrated military units that have a significant number of females in their respective army jobs of combat medic and military police. Looking back to O'Brien's Mary Anne character, "As a rule, when women appear in Vietnam narratives, it is never as part of the 'brotherhood' that is created in battle. They are instead usually trying to stop their husbands, sons or lovers from going to Vietnam" (Jeffords 64). Mary Anne is ultimately successful in breaking free from that common narrative. As we transition to a discussion about films made in 2014 about the female soldier experience in the Post 9/11 war era, we must consider the extent to which more recent narratives involve greater integration of women into combat. As we look back at Linville's assertion that the war genre "relies on female characters as structuring absences, love objects who motivate and enable the warrior to fight, as they validate his heterosexuality within the homosocial world of combat," I argue that *Fort Bliss* and *Camp X-Ray* break these rules, at least in part, and successfully restructure gender roles in the Post 9/11 war genre (39).

Nonetheless, there are some comparisons with the motherhood trope seen in *Courage under Fire* and Claudia Myers's 2014 film, *Fort Bliss*. In fact, the tagline on the cover of the DVD for *Fort Bliss* reads, "SOLDIER. MOTHER. SO MANY EXPECTATIONS." *Fort Bliss* is the fictional story of Staff Sergeant Maggie Swann (Michelle Monaghan), a combat medic for the U.S. Army. She is stationed at Fort Bliss, an Army post located in El Paso, Texas. The film opens with Swann serving her second

tour in Afghanistan and riding in a convoy that gets ambushed. More so than in any other film discussed in this study, the motherhood trope is extremely prevalent throughout; however, the trope evolves in a positive way. The difficulty of striking a balance between being a mother and being a soldier is portrayed in a non-linear set of scenes showing what it was like for Swann on deployment and what it was like for her to try and transition back to civilian life as a mother with full custody. Her son has a hard time adjusting to her coming home after a fourteen-month deployment; and, just when they get reacquainted, Swann is deployed again at the end of the movie for a third tour in Afghanistan. Though the motherhood trope is dominant, with Swann the balance is depicted in a way that contrasts with Walden's character. While we see Walden mothering both her child and her troops, we never see Swann mothering her troops. Instead Swann is portrayed as capable and in charge of her soldiers throughout the film. As a ranking enlisted soldier, Swann takes control of a combat medic platoon toward the end of the film, which is not a common opportunity for women even in the 2017 military climate.

Fort Bliss has a well-rounded character and complex plot with relation to gender roles. In an insightful interview with *The Daily Beast*, lead actress Michelle Monaghan describes what it was like playing Maggie Swann: "She's so complicated, tough, vulnerable, flawed, and all those things that you can creatively sink your teeth into. But also, it felt original. Stories about female vets are very absent from our culture" (Dubber). While television has been reflecting the impact of war on female soldiers for some time, the film industry is sorely lacking in examples. The interview mentions the budget for the film was small, just like the film *Camp X-Ray* (five million dollars). When Monaghan

was asked why most complex female characters are relegated to independent films, she said, “These sorts of roles only live in this indie world. I would love to see more mainstream movies about complicated women, and I wish they didn’t have to be labors of love” (Dubber 2014). *Fort Bliss* is successful in subverting gender roles: “Swann is the macho, troubled, and charismatic center of the film, while Ron Livingston plays her nagging ex-husband (see: the wife), and Manolo Cardona is Luis, a hunky Mexican mechanic she toys around with” (Dubber).

A Soldier’s Sweetheart and *Fort Bliss* both address the burden of confinement through the lead character’s romantic relationships with men. Another theory that is relevant to this discussion is Sigmund Freud’s use of *Vagina Dentata*, a recurring pattern within feminist critique. The vagina dentata (literally “vagina with teeth”) symbolizes the fear that women have the power to castrate men. Toward the end of the story Mary Anne begins to represent the dreaded vagina dentata as her Army boyfriend becomes psychologically and emotionally castrated by losing Mary Anne to the jungle. We see her boyfriend Fossie transform himself as he tries to confine her through the promise of matrimony, but Mary Anne resists and turns to warfare instead. Mary Anne’s actions emasculate Fossie and further promote the element of independence she gains as she becomes more confident in her ability to perform in a combat role. Essentially, Mary Anne breaks from her confining role as a weak woman incapable of violence, but there is a cautionary tale about the seduction of violence there too.

In addition to proving her worth to fellow male soldiers as an aggressive fighter, Swann also contends with the disapproval of her ex-husband throughout the film. He constantly discourages Swann from staying in the Army. At one point she asks him if he

thinks she cannot take care of their son and her ex-husband says, “I think if you wanted to take care of him you wouldn’t stay in the Army.” Swann is constricted by his constant disapproval of her being a soldier. After she re-enlists, her ex-husband is upset, but Swann points out the double standard for male and female soldiers stating, “See that’s the thing. If a guy has to go away to work, nobody questions it. But if a woman leaves her family to go to work, she’s a bad mother.” She goes on to say, “I love my son and I love my country and I don’t think I have to choose between them.” This response depicts independence from masculine influence combined with the heroine’s sense of maternal duty.

Fort Bliss is the only film analyzed in this study with a female director, and it may be argued that she offers a more accurate portrayal of women in combat roles because of her experience making the WILL Interactive video called *The War Inside* for the U.S. Department of Defense prior to *Fort Bliss*. This interactive video game is designed to aid soldiers coming back from combat in dealing with PTSD. This experience paid off, for “due to Myers’s relationships making that film, as well as the interactive movie *Outside the Wire*, the Army granted full access to film at the real-life Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas” (Dubber). Myers empowers her film heroine to resist a sexual attack, a technique that may empower victims of harassment, assault, or rape.

In the examples considered, the depiction of sexual assault differs according to the gender of the director. *Courage under Fire* and *A Soldier’s Sweetheart* depict gender-based harassment of the female protagonist, but *G.I. Jane* has a sexual assault scene. Scott does not deal with the aftermath or possible PTSD of the victim, however. During training O’Neil is bent over a barrel by the man leading her training, and he simulates

raping her from behind in front of the other trainees. This simulation is performed to demonstrate how the men's "natural" sense of chivalry will overcome their esprit de corps and logical judgment. While the rape scene in *G.I. Jane* depicts only a simulated act, at least Scott attempts to address the issue. On the other hand, the film does not ever address the issue of sexual harassment and assault in the military outright, unlike the 2014 films *Camp X-Ray* and *Fort Bliss*. Swann's love interest in *Fort Bliss* is a mechanic from Mexico and the film shows the struggle Swann has in her relationship with him from having PTSD as a result of a sexual assault attempt while she was deployed the second time. According to the actress who played Staff Sergeant Swann, "I spent a lot of time with female vets at Fort Bliss, and every single one shared an experience with me about some level of sexual assault. It's incredibly prevalent, and it's a huge problem" (Dubber). Swann was on deployment with Staff Sergeant Donovan (Pablo Schreiber) who was her superior and closest friend. Swann sits on his bunk and he asks if she misses her kid. Then he leans in to kiss her and she pushes him away. He forces himself upon her even though she says no. Swann then pulls scissors from her pocket and stabs him while he is on top of her and he jumps away from her. Then she grabs her assault rifle and points it at him. He asks her what she is doing, and she says, "I will fucking shoot you." Notably, after the assault, Swann does not report the incident to anyone. This silence is realistic because often reporting comes with repercussions for female soldiers, but It would have been more effective if the film had modeled the behavior of reporting as a good example in my view.

Camp X-Ray, the last film for discussion, is the only one in which the female soldier protagonist is not involved in combat. The film is relevant to the evolving

discussion about representations of female soldiers in film because it is one of a handful of films to have a Post-9/11 female soldier protagonist. *Camp X-Ray* is a film about the fictional story of a Private First Class, U.S. Army Military Police Officer named Amy Cole (Kristen Stewart) from a small town in Florida who joins the Army, in her words, to “do something important.” The film opens with a scene of the Twin Towers burning on an old television set in the apartment of an unspecified Arab-speaking country with an unidentified Middle Eastern man in his dining room handling a group of cell phones on his dining room table. We cut to detainee number 471, otherwise known as Ali Amir (Payman Maadi) in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, being shoved into a dog kennel. Cole is stationed at the Guantanamo Bay military prison, which houses mostly Middle Eastern men captured after the 9/11 attacks. Cole’s job is to guard cell blocks and the film is about the relationship she forms with prisoner Ali Amir, her relationships she with her fellow soldiers, and the day-to-day tasks of life as a military police officer at Guantanamo Bay.

The subjugation of other cultures dovetails with the depiction of women’s roles in the film. Jeffords asserts that “we can see that any definition of patriarchy in contemporary cultures must include not only ‘male dominance over women’ but the socialized domination of masculine over feminine, in which the patterns of power relations established in the domination of men over women are employed to set systems of dominance over other groups as well” (xii). For instance, in the shower scene in *Camp X-Ray* we see the dominance over both the female soldier (Cole) and the detainee (Ali) as one in the same. They are both persecuted in the same way for operating outside the hegemonic power structure of a white male-dominated U.S. Army. Cole is forced to

watch Ali strip off his clothes to complete nakedness while one of her superiors Corporal Randy Ransdell makes her watch. Cole tells the corporal that she does not want to watch Ali shower because it is against the standard operating procedure (SOP) relating to opposite sex detainee/soldier rules, but the corporal forces her to violate the law and witness this scene, in a way that simultaneously humiliates and disgusts two oppressed groups.

The fact that the corporal who forces her to watch Ali shower was the soldier who attempted to sexually assault her in a previous scene suggests that this is the price she pays for resistance. In a previous scene the soldiers are on a rented motor boat fishing. Cole is seen flirting with Corporal Ransdell (Lane Garrison). He slaps another female soldier on the butt. Later that evening Cole is drinking with the guys. She is drunk and goes to the bathroom where she finds a stack of *Playboy* magazines when Ransdell walks in and catches her. She asks him, “Is this what you like?” and he responds that they are his roommate’s and not his. Then he attempts to kiss her. She appears to want to kiss him, but he becomes aggressive and pushes her into the bathroom mirror. She tells him to calm down. When he becomes even more physically aggressive, she pushes him away, and he yells, “Fuck you, bitch,” as she runs out the door. After Cole reports the incident to the post commander, nothing happens to the corporal. The post commander tells her that she will be moved to the night shift. Seemingly she is punished for reporting the shower incident.

There are not a lot of interactions with other women in any of these two recent films that feature female soldier leading characters. Given that the units are integrated female and male in *Fort Bliss* and *Camp X-Ray* it is unrealistic that the protagonists are

seldom shown interacting with other female soldiers. The same goes for all of the other films discussed except for *G.I. Jane*. With O'Neil the interactions with female soldiers is prevalent but only shown as having negative consequences because she is accused of being gay at a time when the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy was in place. This pattern truly renders females as Other in the military, and male characters often suggest that women who enter this masculine domain are "abnormal" in some way. O'Neil is accused of being a lesbian and is photographed by the press with other female soldiers on the beach, conforming to the portrayal of Walden's character as "butch." This structuring of sexuality makes the brotherhood that much more impenetrable for women. Jeffords says, "This posture of protection/exclusion is indeed typical of the masculine as it perceives itself in relation to the feminine, in effect maintains the feminine as distinct and separate in order to insure its own constitution, its own viability" (61). When Cole tries to enter into the brotherhood, she is rejected repeatedly, and even though there are other female soldiers on her base, she never interacts with them. This pattern of not being allowed into the brotherhood is depicted accurately for the type of military job Cole has, especially in combat positions in the military.

Conclusion

Although each of these stories reach their endings through different means, either by promoting outdated narratives of women in war or progressing the narrative as the 2014 films do, they do take an important step in offering portrayals of women in combat roles. Hilary Neroni's book, *The Violent Woman, Femininity, Narrative, and Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*, examines films that usually depict a woman's capability for violence, arguing that "nothing can bring up the discussion of proper

womanly traits like a violent woman. The character of the media response to the violent woman is, in almost every case, hysterical” (60). Neroni goes on to claim that rendering the violent woman as the Other provokes confusion: “When confronted with a woman’s violent act, we immediately begin to question her desire, to wonder why she acted violently” (60). In other words, the common view of what a combat soldier looks like in the masculine sense causes cognitive dissonance within readers. In the case of O’Brien’s Mary Anne, however, she ends as a male soldier ends up—not hysterical, but calm, stealthy, and focused on her mission. In Swick’s film, Walden ends up posthumously receiving the Medal of Honor because of her heroism in the face of combat, even though she is sabotaged by her own troops and left for dead in the desert. In *G.I. Jane*, O’Neil ends with a successful combat reconnaissance mission in the face of repeated scrutiny and abuse during SEAL training. Swann’s story ends with her deploying for a third time to Afghanistan and in charge of a combat medic platoon and Cole goes home to Florida having served in one of the U.S. military’s toughest prison camps. American filmmakers must take a step further and create more realistic and nuanced depictions of women in combat, as more women take on these roles in our society. Considering the fact that, “since September 11, 2001 over 300,000 women have deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq; 166 women have been killed during combat operations and more than 1,000 have been wounded” (“Women in Ground Combat”), women warriors deserve more acknowledgement and accurate representation in film.

III. TOPIC IN GAMING

During the late 20th century, violence against women in the adult video game industry contributed to the normalization of misogynist attitudes in the United States, and little has been done to improve the image of women in gaming since then. Just as women warriors in film are sexualized, women in power positions in games, such as Laura Croft, are usually hyper-sexualized and turned into what Caroline Heldmen has termed the “Fighting Fuck Toy” (FFT) archetype, examined earlier. Gaming sub-culture has a large influence within the U.S. armed forces as a recreational tool on post, especially during long deployments. A brief survey of the ways the military has used video games for education, equal opportunity training and healing health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reveals a pattern that is similar to that of film depictions. In this chapter, I examine these types of products, called “serious games,” as evidence of the signification of game-based learning, and will analyze them through a series of focus group findings. Patterns in responses serve as a means to detect the influence such narratives may have on military culture and to interrogate and test the argument that games depicting violence against women should therefore not be sold at military retail facilities.

21st Century Fighting Fuck Toy Archetype and Ethics in Military Retail

The time for addressing depictions of hypersexualized women fighters and the connection with military retail is long overdue. Espen Aarseth, the principal researcher at the Center for Computer Games Research in Norway, says, “it must be noted that ‘games’ are not simply games, but complex software programs that can emulate any medium, including film, text/novel, graphic novel, and, for that matter, simulate board

games and sports” (130). There is a debate surrounding the terminology used to define the study of games. One argument suggests that the term *narratology* be used. For the purposes of this paper I will use the term *ludology*, taken from the Latin term *ludus*, meaning “game.” Aarseth mentions that the study of games came into practice around 2001 and with it the narratology vs. ludology debate was formed by traditional ludologists claiming that narratology is too narrow a term for the study of games. The first article ever published by the journal titled *Games and Culture* was in 2006, so comparatively speaking, ludology is very new. As Tom Boellstroff explains, “The newness of interactive media means that scholarly work in the area is marked by a refreshing intellectual openness and interest in foundational questions” (29). Game theory is highly interdisciplinary, employing approaches from the social sciences, humanities, psychology, economics and industry. In light of the fact that video games are a huge part of military culture and that rape is a persistent problem in the military, a review of research surrounding aggression and video games is warranted. The literature on violence against women in games can be divided into two simple subgroups: those that say video games do not provoke aggression in the gamer and those contending that it certainly does.

It may be true that in order to change or diminish the prevalence of the FFT archetype, reformers will have to meet men where they are. After all, it has been estimated that people collectively spend three billion hours a week playing video games worldwide. I argue that it is not just the entertainment industry that needs a change in attitudes towards female soldiers. A key solution to the empowerment of women in the military can be facilitated through the military retail chain called Army and Air Force

Exchange Services (AAFES) because it is already run on the benefit corporation model, which includes in its mission: “We go where you go to improve your quality of life through the goods and services we provide.” AAFES collects \$8 billion in revenue and \$300 million in earnings annually, and all annual earnings go toward contributions to Army morale, welfare and recreation and Air Force services funds. Among constructive suggestions for improvement, this study explores the possible implementation of a public relations campaign selling entertainment units with strong female protagonists and designating those proceeds to fund a women’s leadership mentoring program.

The study of violence in video games has taken on an extensive debate between researchers who study the effects on gamers. The most common model for studying violence in video games was developed by Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman, who created the General Aggression Model (GAM). The GAM uses meta-analytic procedures to test the effects of violent video games on aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, physiological arousal, empathy/desensitization, and prosocial behavior (Anderson et al. 151). Their findings indicate that violence in video games has both short-term and long-term effects on aggression. Craig Ferguson responds critically to the GAM studies by stating that the results of their experiments are due to the large samples by stating, “Of course with very large samples, almost any effect will become statistically significant” (Ferguson 128). However, this group of scientific researchers has longitudinal validity as well. They have been studying aggression and video game violence in the U.S. and Japan for over fifteen years and a large sampling is generally considered an asset in statistics. As Anderson states, “Concerning public policy, we believe that debates can and should finally move beyond the simple question of whether

violent video game play is a causal risk factor for aggressive behavior; the scientific literature has effectively and clearly shown the answer to be ‘yes.’ Instead, we believe the public policy debate should move to questions concerning how best to deal with this risk factor” (Anderson et al. 171). According to this (GAM) model, the aggressive content of violent media may affect a person’s present internal state, consisting of cognition, affect, and arousal. The present internal state, in turn, determines a chosen behavioral reaction. As described above, this model has received considerable empirical support (Greitemeyer et al. 797).

Still, researchers argue that there is no conclusive evidence to support violent video games cause real world aggression. Craig Ferguson argues that study results using the GAM have never been conclusive and it is time to retire the research surrounding violence in media (220). However, advocates for the reduction of violence in video games, such as The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association and the American Psychiatric Association, all wrote a joint statement in July of 2000 stating that viewing violence on screen can lead to desensitization towards violence (“Joint Statement”). More recently, in 2015, the American Psychological Association released a resolution from their 2005-2013 Task Force on violent Media that stated their research concluded, “all existing quantitative reviews of the violent video game literature have found a direct association between violent video game use and aggressive outcomes” (“Resolution”).

The United States government has done ample research surrounding the effectiveness of video games on learned behavior for the purpose of training soldiers. The term for games that are educational in nature is “serious games,” a genre of video game

that has been used to educate and train the U.S. Armed Forces since the 1980s. Cory Mead, lead researcher in this field and author of *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict*, provides a complete history of the military and gaming, noting that “what is unique about the military’s employment of video games is that it is deploying them on a broad, institution-wide scale” (5). He explains that the military now uses video games successfully at every organizational level for a variety of purposes. Educational video games or “serious games” within the military simulate tactical training exercises, teach anger management after war, and help soldiers cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Based on their research into the power of gaming to accomplish real-world goals, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) and the Navy are even crowd-sourcing the innovation of gamers by challenging groups of online gamers to solve problems like combating Somali pirates. The DARPA funded game *Foldit* enables players to contribute to major scientific research (Mead 162). The military budget for video game innovation is \$20 million a year and yet they still have not collected data on the effects of video game violence. In spite of this gap in data collection, developers have made great strides in the constructive use of gaming. For example, WILL Interactive is a contractor to the military that creates serious games for wounded veterans. They have a game called *Saving Sergeant Pabletti* that focuses on sexual harassment. In this game the goal is to keep a female officer from getting raped. Mead explains, “The initial response from soldiers was positive enough that years later, following the 2004 Abu Ghraib prison scandal, the army ordered incoming soldiers to play the game on their flights to Iraq” (119). This is evidence of the high value that the military puts on the effectiveness of

gaming, yet they are still selling games with depictions of violence against women in military retail facilities. In addition to standard minimalization of female figures, other practices contribute to the negative effects of gaming for females. For example, in the commonly marketed *Grand Theft Auto, San Andres*, there is a code that is widely available on the internet that allows a gamer to hack into the game in order to rape female characters.

Economics is, of course, a driving factor in decisions on whether to control the industry. The United States video game industry grossed \$15.4 billion in 2013 according to a 2014 report by The NPD Group/Retail Tracking Service (npd.com). The biggest lobbyists for the video game industry are located inside the Entertainment Software Association. They gather and report statistics on sales, demographics and usage in a yearly report called “Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry.” The 2014 report shows that women and men buy video games at almost the same rate. Given this market data, why are most games male-centered and why are women still depicted in such a demeaning and limited manner in most of games?

In *Gaming at the Edge* by Adrienne Shaw, qualitative research was gathered and analyzed to support the argument that recognizing and identifying marginalized groups in the video game industry should move researchers to critically address when and how marginalized groups are included in game texts (Shaw 148). Since women spend as much money on video games as men do, it is time to retire or, at the very least, offer alternatives to images of the hyper-sexualized female and employ a more substantial, varied, and realistic depiction of women in video games. Market logic cannot be the only justification for considering why identity and representation matter in video game

narratives, however. Shaw conducted interviews about identity, agency and meaning-making in video games and her findings suggest that “the market logic that focuses on marginalized groups as the target for diverse representation hinders the more political goals of media diversity” (157). While Shaw acknowledges the fact that developers cannot assume precisely how gamers will identify with narratives, she argues that they absolutely shape the potential for identification. Gaming as an active viewer allows individuals to make meaning on their own, and without offering the presence of a diverse population of characters, developers are denying personal agency to women. It is important to note that a few strides have been made in having a more diverse representation of women in games. This is not to conflate all games that minimize women figures or depict women in derogatory ways. For instance, *World of Warcraft* has created a realistic female soldier avatar, but these positive examples represent only a tiny fraction of the female types depicted in games.

Some male gamers argue that men in video games are just as misrepresented in video games as women, since male characters usually have only one body type—very large, masculine and muscular. However, Bob Chipman argues that this is true only to a certain extent, since much of communication is nonverbal; poise and comportment are crucial to an image as well. Posture, speech, bearing, and manners all convey a message. In a predominantly visual medium like video games, poses—especially default stances like hero poses—become important, at least for male characters. These male poses usually convey powerful emotions like bravery, resolve, strength and discipline while female poses “are not meant to convey character, they are simply posed in a way to break the fourth wall and put on a peep show for a presumably male audience” (Chipman “Gender

Games”). Thus, women in video games and women in the military are often categorized and subjected to the same form of sexual confinement that is typical of depictions in film and literature. All of these have a potentially negative cumulative effect on viewers, both male and female.

The lines between reality and escapism can get even more blurry when it comes to interactive media. Because the player is hooked up to headsets and talking to or chatting with real people online during conflict-based games, the reality can get pretty ugly. In 2014, #GamerGate was one such incident where lines were crossed when female gamer Zoe Quinn was harassed online after her gamer boyfriend posted a blog listing of men in the video game industry with whom she had allegedly had sex. After the blog list was posted Quinn began to get death and rape threats through social her social media accounts (“Gaming Culture”). A *Washington Post* article argues that #GamerGate, “was always about how we define our shared cultural spaces, how we delineate identity, who is and is not allowed to have a voice in mainstream culture. It is about that tension between tradition and inclusion — and in that regard, Gamergate may be the perfect representation of our times” (Dewey). This is an instance where general video game aggression became pointed aggression against women. In other words, this is another case where the “brotherhood” is impenetrable to women and any attempts to enter into the brotherhood can become physically and emotionally dangerous for women.

Focus Groups

A look at results from three focus groups discussing adult video games offers anecdotal evidence of the patterns already identified, and it provides deeper, more complex insights into the physical, emotional and real-life implications of rape culture in

the military. The purpose was to collect personal accounts of female and male U.S. military personnel in regards to video games and violence against women in the military, and to seek a more profound understanding of the lived experience of male and female soldiers who served on active duty in the United States military.

Demographics

The first focus group was held on the Texas State University campus in a conference room in San Marcos, Texas, on 17 November 2016. Eight people participated in the focus group and out of those people four were not currently enrolled at Texas State University. Of the eight participants, four identify as female and four identify as male, four participants were in the Army, two were in the Marine Corps, one was in the Navy and one was in the Air Force. The years of service ranged from 1979 to 2015 with a combined total of years of service equaling 59 years. The second focus group was held on 2 March 2017 at Texas State University. Six people participated in this group and they were male only, four were in the Army, one was in the Marine Corps and one was in the Air Force. The years of service ranged from 1984-2017 with a combined total years of service equaling 74 years. The third focus group was held on 8 March 2017 at Texas State University. Six people participated who were female only. Six females participated in this group and three served in the Army, two were in the Marine Corps and one was in the Air Force. The years of service ranged from 1985-2013 with a combined total years of service equaling 34 years.

Survey

The focus groups were given a six-question survey at the beginning of the meeting to determine the statistics above and included a question asking if they ever

played video games and when. Only one participant had never played a video game before, six played them before the military, three played them during the military, and three played them after the military with a mixture of all three among a few of the participants. One question asked if real life representations of avatars (characters) in video games was important and two disagreed that avatar representation was important, four participants said they were not sure, and two agreed that it was important. The last question asked what the gender characteristics of their military units were. Two participants had only males in their units, one had an equal number of males and females, and the other five participants said that the majority were male with very few females. One of the female participants said that males outnumbered females overall and especially in leadership roles.

Research Findings and Discussion

The second part of the focus group was a 45-minute series of questions based on the participant's personal experiences in the military regarding violence against women. They were also shown a series of images and video clips containing video game violence and asked questions about what they were seeing. The veterans were very vocal about their opinions and with such small groups we had a really great range of ethnicities, ages and experiences as noted previously. This made for a lively discussion about the problems within society regarding violence against women and the role of media in this issue.

Research Questions

Research questions were brief, easy to understand, and delivered in a consistent way to participants, in order to avoid leading their responses or skewing results from one

focus group to the next.

Q1: Does being an active participant in playing video games contribute to more aggression than passively viewing violence against women in film?

Q2: Is violence against women in the military a problem?

Q3: Should the post exchange carry media that depicts violence against women, yes or no?

Q4: How limited is the portrayal of women in video games?

Does this image empower women? Appendix 1.

The overall consensus of the group was that the image showing a weapon-wielding woman in a low-cut top that revealed her large breasts was ridiculous, sexist, and unrealistic. One male participant said there was “an enormous amount of cleavage and that to me is degrading” and a female participant said, “That’s not how I dressed in the military.” While the image does contain images related to the military such as dog tags and a camouflage pattern on the attire, one male said, “I don’t think it is military at all.” A discussion about what constitutes power was a theme. One male said, “It depends on what one defines as power as far as empowering and is that what you want to portray. It’s not a very dignified form of power.” He went on to qualify his statement by saying, “because there are people who use sexuality as a form of power.” The participant observed that it is not a dignified form of power and “it gives people an unattainable standard for that and so yes, it is degrading.” Regarding the functionality of the female characters’ outfit, a female participant commented, “I do want to say that if she actually tried to beat somebody up with that outfit that there is no way she is staying in there.” She continued, while laughing, “That outfit is just going to fall to pieces,” referring to her

low-cut shirt and cleavage. Some females in the third focus group felt that she looked “tough” and “strong” and that she carried herself well. Someone in the second, all-male group mentioned that, “She’s from *Mortal Kombat*. I know that. She is CIA or Special Forces. I mean, she’s in a fighting game so she kicks ass you know. So, I think maybe the character is empowering to women, but I’m not so sure about the image depiction here. Especially showing the cleavage.” With regards to posing it was said that, “In my opinion the image is trying to portray two things. One is sexual attraction and the other is aggressiveness and they are almost in conflict with each other because one is saying come towards me and the other is saying go away from me.” This kind of cognitive dissonance was recognized by the majority of respondents.

Watching a clip of *Grand Theft Auto* game depicting violence against women.

The next media shown to the group was a clip of a female jogger in *Grand Theft Auto* being brutally beaten with a hammer. The group was asked to describe the violence and respond to it. Almost all of the participants said it was “crazy” “shocking” “overkill” and “brutal.” One of the male participants had another view of the clip though. He said, “I mean I took it as, it’s a video game. I understand that regardless of the gender of the player that it is a video game. And so, I am pretty sure that whoever is sitting behind the controller, I mean they are trying to accomplish whatever the mission of the game is.” This view would be echoed later on in the focus group by a female veteran also. The second and third focus groups were shown a different clip from *Grand Theft Auto* depicting scenes with a male avatar physically assaulting random women while walking down the street and then asked the following question.

Does being an active participant in playing video games contribute to more aggression than passively viewing violence against women in film?

The overarching response to this question was yes, that video games contribute to real world violence. A female said that the repetition causes the player to be “numbing themselves.” One of the older male participants said, “There is a phrase that goes, ‘garbage in, garbage out’ so given what you constantly see being something that you could possibly act on down the road, I think there is a higher likelihood that’s true.” Another participant mentioned, “That wasn’t something being played or something being scripted so somebody was choosing those actions in that video game and so being actively involved in that activity, I think that contributes to aggression simply because they’re sort of experimenting on a very small level on a virtual level in this case where it was looked like a city populated with women in this case.”

A common theme that ran throughout the group involving this question was also about the role of parenting. For instance, with this question one female found the image troubling, “especially if they are getting their hands on it when they are really young. It’s kind of, I don’t know, setting them up for violent aggression.” Other factors were brought into play here. As with the previous opinion of it being “just a game” a female asserted, “If it was put in the hands of a seven-year-old then it would be a problem.” She added, “It seems like there are a lot of dimensions to that. You know, who’s playing that, and are they playing that because they can’t do that in real life so this is their substitute?”

One male participant said he was a gunner on deployment in Iraq. When he came home kids would always ask about the real-life war compared to games that the kids played like *Ghost Recon*. He said, “They equate combat to what they see in those video

games.” He also went on to suggest that video games are a form of conditioning and that made them dangerous. He went to buy a PlayStation just to play *Grand Theft Auto* when he was stationed in Washington state. He said, “I was driving to Hollywood Video to get a movie and some food and stuff and there was a semi-truck that stopped in front of me and for a split-second I almost got out and jacked the car. Like my thinking went there.” It scared him so he stopped playing and watching TV. He mentioned that at a friend’s house he was watching his friend play a game and had to excuse himself because the violence in the game made him “nauseous.”

Is violence against women in the military a problem?

Again, the overall answer to this question was yes, violence against women in the military is a problem. This question by far garnered the most attention in the group. A few participants said that it happens simply because the military is violent, “by nature of the beast,” so it was expected. A female participant said, “Quite a bit of incidents that happened while I was deployed not only to myself but to other females that were with me in my unit and usually there were known people that we were trying to warn each other about.” She went on to say that if women complained or reported sexual harassment, then they would face discipline or be held back from promotions, so they rarely reported violence against female soldiers. Another female mentioned that one in three women in the military are raped. A male participant said he dealt more with drug problems than violence because he was a Marine and stationed mostly with men only.

United States Society and Other Nations’ Societies

A general theme of being deployed with other countries’ militaries began to emerge with this question and many participants elaborated about their experiences

dealing with other cultural gender norms outside of the U.S. One of the Vietnam era veterans said, “Is there violence against women? There’s no question about that. And when you put the female gender in a man’s institution and you increase the numbers, and the military is a violent world, then you’re going to have those types of violence increase.” A few female participants mentioned that the United States is currently undergoing a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to violence and sexual assault against women in the military, that when they were deployed with other countries they had to deal with harassment from those nations’ soldiers who had seemingly no sexual assault and harassment policies. One female said, “When you go down range [being deployed] and you serve with other militaries, their values and their policies are not the same. So being down range in Egypt, we didn’t have a lot of sexual assault accusations from the enlisted (U.S. military), but we had a lot of different militaries... the Fijians, the Colombians were very aggressive with the Canadian women and the Brazilian women.” Another female said she had the same experience on deployment and was upset that her unit did not “back her up” when she was harassed by other nations’ militaries.

The major theme of society being the problem versus media being the problem led to conversations in this case pertaining to video games that prompt the age-old question: Is life imitating art or art imitating life? A female participant observed in an anthropological sense, “What we just saw is a reflection of the world we live in today. I think it’s very accurate. I think that by watching this or by people being exposed to this that it may seem like this is what we became and what we value and what we don’t value anymore. Many male participants concluded that the military is a microcosm of American society which amplifies problems that arise due to the constraints of being

confined to a small area. It is as if all of America's issues are under a microscope in confined situations typical of military deployment. For instance, a male group member observed:

I don't want to oversimplify it, but if it occurs once anywhere, military or anywhere then it's a problem. I can say that it seemed almost unit dependent on how bad the problem can be. A close friend of mine, female, had been a victim and had known other victims during her period of service and I not once. We came from two very differently managed units. Whereas you might as well have been putting yourself in a grave had you done anything along the lines of assaulting a female or fellow soldier for that matter where I came from. Whereas in her neck of the woods it was not so tightly managed.

The all-male focus group had a theme that the others did not, and it had to do with the media's portrayal of sexual assault in the military. Half of the group shared this view from one member, "I do believe the media does sensationalize and fear monger. I believe the military tries very hard to give all victims an avenue to speak out without retribution and seek justice for it. However, I do think female abuse in the military is a problem still." It was interesting that all of them stated it was a big problem and half mentioned that the media was sensationalizing. A male former Marine stated, "Yes, it is a problem. It happens a lot. Most of our safety briefs when we got out of work was, 'Don't drink and drive and all that stuff,' and then it always ended with 'Don't hit your wives,' and it was something funny that we all laughed at but it was said for a reason. Because at least once a month you had a case where a marine would hit his wife."

Should the post exchange carry media that depicts violence against women, yes or no?

With this question, I was asking who is responsible for what types of media are sold on the military base through the retail facilities on base and on deployment. Overall the answer was divided with about half saying it was the responsibility of the base commander to make this decision and the other half saying that it was not the base command's responsibility to police what the soldiers watch or play. However, one point was brought up by a male participant, "How do you police something like that? Is it a sergeant looking over the shoulder of the soldiers or what?" A female responded, "I mean when you are in the military everything is censored. They're looking at your emails. They're looking at your phone calls. They're looking at your videos. They're looking at everything." Still other male participants argued that yes, they tell you how to speak to the media because of security clearances and that was very different from regulating what media soldiers use to entertain themselves.

Limitations of the Case Study

Limitations of this study include the fact that the groups were mostly students from Texas State University. I would have liked to see what the results of the all-male group would have been if I were not leading the group and instead had a male leading the group with no females present. Due to the size restrictions of study, I had to be very brief in my analysis of the responses.

Conclusions: Social and Practical Implications

The main point of this study is to analyze a sampling of the literature and conversation surrounding violence against women in video games and the narratives

surrounding women in combat. I have identified a clear pattern of abuse and misrepresentation. In my view, the way women are depicted in video games is way behind the film industry and this representation is damaging to women in the military. The big patterns of the focus groups were notions that women are physically abused in games because women are constantly harassed in games. The consensus is that there should be better control of content since children have access and finally that all of this has a negative social impact on women in general and particularly in the military. The respondents, both male and female, had generally the same views on violence against women in video games and its negative impact.

I hope to take the conversation one step further by proposing a feasible public relations campaign to bring to light the issue of violence against women in the military. The video game industry was started by the military for the military, and this conversation has come full circle, with a call for accountability. Video games are a huge part of military culture. On long deployments that last sometimes more than a year, soldiers are allowed to take their game consoles with them on deployment. This paper is not arguing that we should take away all soldiers' video games that promote violence against women. Rather, by simply not selling these products on military facilities, we can take this opportunity to create a public discourse and publicly acknowledge rape culture in the military and perhaps reduce the promotion of such materials through their ready availability and tacit endorsement. We can create more ways to combat it so we can add value to the conversation and hopefully effect change.

More specifically, AAFES, the largest military retail chain has a history of removing violent and degrading content from its facilities and should maintain standards

across the board when it comes to merchandising. In 2014, AAFES Commander Major General Bruce Casella decided to remove a *Medal of Honor* game from their shelves because the first-person shooter game had the option of selecting a Taliban soldier as an avatar to engage U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Over 300 bases worldwide and 49 GameStops located on military bases banned the game (Dan). Another incident where AAFES removed explicit content was in 2013, when a list of 891 “adult sophisticate” magazines were banned from the stores (Lindenburg). With this in mind we can utilize market logic and socio-political goals to support the reduction of violence against women in the military by implementing a public relations campaign through AAFES to financially support programs seeking to reduce violence against women in the military. AAFES operates under the social enterprise model in that more than 70% of AAFES earnings are paid to Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Programs. In the past 10 years, more than \$1.93 billion has been contributed by AAFES to the Army and Air Force to spend on quality of life improvements for soldiers, airmen and their families-- libraries, sports programs, swimming pools, youth activities, tickets and tour services, bowling centers, hobby shops, music programs, outdoor facilities and unit functions.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this study I present not only the need for adequate female representation in media and especially video games, but I also argue that the impact of violence against women in video games presents a larger problem for women in the military. It is clear to me that the military is sending a conflicting message in the deployment of serious games teaching equal opportunity and anti-sexual harassment, while promoting and selling violent video games depicting women being physically and sexually abused in military retail facilities. These “serious games” are evidence of the signification of game-based learning and they indicate the importance influence that games have on military culture. Given the military’s understanding of their powerful influence, it seems self evident that games depicting violence against women should not be sold on military facilities. Soldiers may have these games from other sources, but offering them such easy access on base constitutes a tacit encouragement of such behavior. Furthermore, this paper suggests other opportunities to reduce violence against women in the military by using proceeds from the revenue of pro-social games to fund mentorship programs for at-risk military populations through mentorship programs funded by AAFES.

By assessing the historical representation of women in media, both in the film industry and the video game industry, alongside the real-world impact on the societal microcosm that is the United States military, we find that gender representations and narratives about women in the military are grossly misguided and inadequate from the Vietnam War era until 2017. Having more women behind the scenes as directors would help produce a more accurate portrayal of women in all areas of life, not just the military. The fact that the only female director in this study, Claudia Myers, got the depiction of

women in combat right supports this contention. Within the gaming world the fact that women make up half of the gamer population is still overlooked, since focus groups revealed that gender representation in games was vastly skewed to the advantage of male gamer representation on screen with men often put in power positions and women left abused and weakened through avatar poses, comportment, and narratives. This study of military culture and women in war genre films and games proves that gendered female representations in media are sorely lacking. They must improve, because violence against women in the media does have a negative societal impact by seeming to promote or, at best, ignore aggression against women in real life.

APPENDIX SECTION

1. *Mortal Kombat 9* Image



This image was shown to military veterans in all three focus groups. It is an avatar named Sonya Blade from the game *Mortal Kombat 9*.

Mortal Kombat 9. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2011, Burbank, CA.

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