that took place during my days as a graduate student. Although I am unable to recall the course, the voice of a student who was a forceful advocate of showing the violence has come to mind frequently over the years. She strongly believed these scenes provided a vehicle for those of us who lived far from crime-infested areas to understand lifestyles we do not experience first-hand. At the time, and still, I find myself torn. As much as I oppose censorship in any form, whenever I think about the ramifications of continual exposure to this kind of brutality, I fear it normalizes the behavior in a way that is not socially beneficial. Over the years, as I have watched violence increase, pondered the escalating conflicts within our polarized world and watched new technologies easily circulate events such as the Saddam execution, my mind has often returned to that class debate.

Playing the News is a film that speaks directly to the dilemma. Keith Halper is the chief executive officer of a company that markets game simulations based on battles from the Iraq War. The Kuma War on-line games, he explains, are designed as an "intense, boots-on-the-ground experience" for those who play. He sees this experience as a positive way to understand the actual events for, in his view, young people do not watch television news or read newspapers. Rather, they play hour after hour of video games, so why not convey war reports to them through their recreational activities?

To its credit, the script responds to this question through the voices of both critics and enthusiasts. Commentary from figures outside the gamer community is the film's strength. Henry Jenkins, who teaches Comparative Studies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asserts that the game allows a player to see the world as an embedded journalist would. This conclusion seems to correspond with the game's intention. Andreas Kluth, a technology writer for The Economist, is a bit more skeptical. Kluth concedes that the videos may educate people about the war, but concludes that this type of experience would be more voyeuristic than real. A gamer may learn about the mechanics but would miss the agony of the population, for example. This skewed perspective comes about because heroic events are included in the games, while less attractive actualities (such as U.S. military torture at Abu Ghraib prison) are not. A war
correspondent, Philip Robertson, articulately expands on Kluh's point. Voicing suspicion of Kuma's claim that it is much like a news organization, he asserts that integrating a game format with "news stories" misconstrues the very nature of the war itself. Speaking persuasively against being swayed by the "educational" thesis, he asks whether a video game focused on simulating the violent engagements of the war is a form of entertainment that sanitizes too many aspects of what is essentially a complicated and chaotic environment?

Black Caesar, Rick Harris and Steve Jefferson offer the gamer perspective. They are among those who download the episodes from the Internet, and each conveyed his fascination with the product. One, for example, said he becomes so involved in the game that he has no idea what is going on around him. Another states it is "funner" to watch the game than to look at the real news on television, I found Steve Jefferson's experience representative. He plays 5 to 6 hours a day and has concluded that the war is pointless but believes that we have to do what we have to do. He also notes that he has friends posted in Iraq and that, to his mind, the game gives him some sense of their experience. By contrast, he acknowledges that the game is still just a game, and he can walk away from it.

The need to engage with the distinction between actuality and the shades of a video game experience can capture goes far beyond Playing the News and video games. Neil Postman's Amusing Ourselves to Death is a forceful book that comes to mind as a recent critical commentary on replacing media-based education with engaged, critical commentary and involvement with genuine events. Indeed, the conflict between reality and the shadows we mistake for it has long been debated. They are part of a tradition we can trace back to Plato, who wrote that people who see the shadows on the wall as real are less likely to venture out of the cave and meet the truth provided by actual experience.

After watching the film, I am inclined to ask what it teaches us when we see it in terms of a broader picture that includes how the war began and the background of those who initiated it. It is well known that George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and their team have never actively had "boots-on-the-ground" experiences. Perhaps this explains why their "leadership" created a quagmire and why they do not seem to clearly perceive the wrenching reality of the war now. Bush, in particular, brings to mind the idea that real leadership and "gaming" are distinctly different activities. In light of his cowboy attitude, it is (morbidly) ironic to realize that he was an active game player in his younger days. Old friends have said that when he was losing a game, he would change the rules until he won. Kuma Wars, of course, was not available in his youth, so he was not nurtured within its environment. While in college, however, he was an avid fan of another game, Risk: The Game of Global Domination. Players in Risk control armies with which they attempt to capture territories from other players. The goal of this strategy game is to control all the territories, or "conquer the world," through the elimination of the other players. An aggressive player then, Bush, now a world leader, seems to carry the same sort of bluster into the "battles" he "leads" today. My point is that although it is hard to say if a Kuma player might mature into someone as out-of-touch with the realities of war as Bush, a former player of Risk, this kind of parallel seems to underscore why it is critical to distinguish between the educational experience of games and reality. (To be fair, as Hurricane Katrina showed, Bush is out of touch with reality in general, not just the handling of a war.)

In summary, this even-handed video narrates the history of the Kuma War video game, introduces the game's audience and raises critical questions. Although the Kuma company's intention is no doubt well placed, and the news commentary does appear to accurately set the stage for the sequences, the "game news" that frames the video war served more to remind me of the quandary between an embodied actuality and a simulation of it. I was also reminded of the young people I know who do not play video games for hours on end and who follow the news closely. Thus, Kuma's argument that the value of the game comes from its focus on coupling accurate reporting with a careful replication of real events in the episodes seemed more self-serving than convincing. A provocative, balanced and thought-provoking film, it is not surprising that Playing the News has received many awards (for example, in 2005 it received the Currie Documentary Prize from the U.C. Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. It was also recognized in 2006 at the Middle East Studies Association Film Festival, the Tribeca International Film Festival, SXSW Film Festival, Seattle International Film Festival and the Florida Film Festival.) Given the deference shown to all sides, I would recommend it for classrooms, particularly those focusing on culture, entertainment and the role of media in society. The tensions within the questions raised by the film are perhaps timeless. Given this, I believe, it is critical that each generation looks at them, particularly if we aspire to live as citizens within a peaceful world.

Playing the News directed by Jeff Plunkett and Jigar Mehta. First Run/Icarus Films. (Reviewed by Amy Jone, Leonardo, Volume 40, Number 5, October 2007, pp. 505-506.)