



Opening Shot



THESE DAYS, VIDEO GAMES ARE RECEIVING MUCH MORE CRITICAL ATTENTION than they did when Pong and Pac-Man were viewed as cutting edge video entertainment. Why are they earning so much attention? Will video games one day have the resonance of a movie or book, or will the only ache they produce be to your thumbs?

Talking Points

IN THIS issue are several stories about newspapers — large and small — deciding how to cover stories on topics ranging from video game reviews to murderous drug gangs (and, as the photo on this page shows, video games about murderous drug gangs). How are these editorial decisions made? Are they determined by the reporter's political views, by the editor's personality and interests, by pressures from the advertising department, or by other factors, such as the desire to serve the common good? As other articles in this issue point out, reporters have come under attack because of the way certain important stories were covered. That doesn't mean the reporters or editors were wrong. In journalism, the right decisions often create the most trouble. Are you willing to take that risk?

To get CJR into your students' hands through low-cost subscriptions, contact Dennis Giza: dfg2@columbia.edu

OFF COURSE, PP. 28-34:

What makes *The New York Times* a “national” newspaper? Why does it wield so much influence? According to Michael Massing, how is *The Times* lacking in its cultural coverage? What remedies does he propose? Why does he believe the paper should pay more attention to the concerns of evangelicals? Do you agree? Why or why not? What is Thomas Frank's central notion about the impact of popular culture? Find any statistics or evidence that either supports or debunks his thesis. What does Frank Rich mean when he talks about “determinist correspondences”? Why is he skeptical of it? What is the danger of relying on anecdotal reporting? Massing suggests that *The Times* needs to go outside its immediate coverage area to improve its cultural reporting. Do you agree? Why or why not? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Reread the questions posed by Massing on page 30 which suggest that anger over pop culture may have led to a rise in evangelicism. Write a story that seeks to answer at least one of the questions. Suggest how the remaining questions might be reported. Select what you think is an important pop culture issue and write a story about it along the lines suggested by Massing.

KEEPING UP WITH THE SIMSES, PP. 9-10:

Why does the author believe that there is a growing need for more critical analysis of video games? Do you

agree or disagree? Would people who play the games benefit from such reviews or care about them? Why or why not? Why do you think that up to this point, games haven't received such attention? Will the situation change? What do the suggestions made in this story have to say about the economic and sociological influence and importance of pop culture? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Select a video game that you think is worthy of an in-depth analysis and review it in the manner suggested by the author. Research the history of popular music criticism. How did critics respond to rock and roll in its early years? When and why did pop music begin to receive serious critical attention? Are there parallels to the changing views of video games?

"The Vigilante"

As a newspaper editor, would you risk your life and/or the lives of your reporters in the way that Jesús Blancornelas has in his fight against corruption in Tijuana? Are there stories worth dying for?

THE CROWDED THEATER, PP. 24-27:

What are the underlying reasons why journalists — and to some extent journalism itself — have come under heavy attack in recent months? Is the criticism deserved? How much, if any of it, is politically motivated? Why are there more liberals than conservatives in journalism? To what extent does a reporter's political leanings impact his or her work? What is the danger of power, according to Douglas McCollam? Should journalists oppose power? Why have journalists been criticized for using anonymous sources? Why do some journalists defend their use? As an editor, would you ban the use of anonymous sources? Why or why not? What is behind the fear of assigning undercover operations? If you were an editor, would you assign them? Why or why not? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Find a copy of "Preserving Our Readers' Trust" and discuss its conclusions. Do you agree with McCollam's assessment of it? Explain. Research journalism history and select five important undercover stories. Discuss each operation and assess its impact. What was the key to its success? Suggest three ideas for undercover stories and give the reasons for your choices. Explain how you would set each of them up.

QUEST FOR FIRE, PP. 36-43:

How can a local newspaper have a positive influence on a town or city? What qualities make a local paper a good one? Michael Shapiro writes that he had a difficult time finding an excellent small newspaper. Why do you think quality small newspapers are so rare? From the point of view of a reporter, what are the benefits of working on a local newspaper as opposed to being on the staff of a large-circulation daily? Why is the *Mesabi Daily News* an excellent newspaper, according to Shapiro? What qualities does Bill Hanna bring to the paper? What are his strengths and weaknesses as an editor? What are the potential downsides to his power and influence in Virginia? Would you want to work for Hanna? Why or why not? Are there ways you would handle specific stories cited by Shapiro differently from the way Hanna did? Explain. Compare Hanna as an editor to Jesús Blancornelas ("The Vigilante"). Who do you think is the superior editor? Why? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Go online and read a sample of the *Mesabi Daily News*. Then research other small dailies. Select two and read their news coverage. Compare their strengths and weaknesses to Hanna's newspaper.

Between the Lines

- 1) Should *Newsweek* have apologized for its story about the mistreatment of the Koran at Guantanamo? Explain. Discuss what you think are the most important aspects of the controversy.
- 2) Read "Closing Ethical Loopholes" (p. 10). If you were the managing editor of a newspaper, what policy would you adopt? Why?
- 3) Should *The New York Times* have cut the quote from Deborah Solomon's Q&A with a prominent evangelical about whether Muslims could go to heaven? Why or why not?

BITTER PILL, PP. 45-51:

List some of the reasons why newspapers are often complicit in the promotion of pharmaceuticals. How was Sepracor able to get such positive spin for Lunesta? As an editor or reporter, how would you make sure that stories involving drug companies and their products are properly reported? What is the best way to deal with a situation when a reporter is frozen out by an agency (in this case the Food and Drug Administration) for asking questions that are too tough? **ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES:** Select three major newspapers. Compare and contrast their coverage of the connection between Vioxx and heart attacks since the issue was first raised in 1999. Imagine you are a newspaper publisher. Write a memo laying out the newspaper's guidelines on the relationship between your news and advertising departments.