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WarGames: A Commentary of the Technological State of the US

To provide a comprehensive analysis of “WarGames” as a tool for civic education, this paper will do the following: examine the accuracy of the film's depiction of the American government, discuss the integration of course themes and the implications for civic engagement, and conclude with reflections on the broader implications of the film for civic education efforts.

"WarGames" explores a cyberpunk story centered around a teenage hacker who accidentally triggers a global crisis by hacking into the American military's supercomputer. The film explores the potential dangers of unchecked technological advancements while offering insights into how the American government operates institutions. This paper aims to analyze the portrayal of the American government in "WarGames" to assess its accuracy and implications for civic education.

The main hacker is David Lightman. He can best be described as an unchallenged high school student with an inclination for technology. Bored with the failing school system, he gains unauthorized access to a military supercomputer, initially intending to play a game but triggering a simulation of global thermonuclear war. The government perceives the simulation as a real threat. David finds himself positioned poorly with the government during World War II while fighting to prove he isn't working for the Soviets.

The film starts with a realistic portrayal of a typical American high school, where a teacher struggles to maintain control over a classroom of energetic teenagers. It captures the chaos as students converse, throw things, and disregard their coursework. Among them is the technically inclined boy who is disengaged and unchallenged by the educational system. He begins hacking into their systems and changing his grades to be better out of sheer boredom and distaste for the school. Though this is where his hacking began, his outcome could have been drastically different. If the school systems had programs in place for technical people, or perhaps just a better attitude about teaching, the boy could have used his skills in alternative manners. This depiction prompts viewers to question why public schools often fail to meet their intended objectives. It underscores the necessity of active civic participation in advocating for educational reforms that address systemic shortcomings.

Citizens must hold their representatives accountable. Actively participating in reshaping the objectives of the American education system will ensure quality education for all. The likelihood of one making well-educated decisions increases with their level of education. If the majority of Americans desire a higher quality of person, then it is the responsibility of the government to aid them in finding a solution to achieve the educational sector. How society collectively should go about ensuring that is the question. Many opt to send their children to private schools, but this does not justify why the schools that taxpayers fund are not up to par. People today are not holding educational systems accountable as they should. If they did, we would have better quality citizens to contribute to society.

Scholarly materials emphasize the correctness of the analysis of the current school system. Tocqueville argues that in "democracy, the people constantly occupied as they are with

their affairs and jealous of their rights, prevent their representatives from deviating from a general line indicated by their interests" (Tocqueville - Democracy in America 233). This is evidently not the case in American education. It is important to note that it could be. Just as the founding fathers left and created a system in the image of what they believed, Americans today have the right to holding representatives accountable and being active in the process of redefining what the American education system should be striving for and how to go about that. If Americans collectively fail to do that, they accept the quality of humans that are produced from a subpar education. America opens itself up to having people nurture the negative side of their talents rather than evolving the positive as a tool for good, more societal improvement. Americans stager American growth directly by not being more civically involved. It becomes a negative cycle.

One aspect that Americans are not as directly involved with is the military. While the film effectively portrays the potential consequences of cybersecurity threats, such as the ease of hacking into critical infrastructure, it oversimplifies the complexities of governmental decision-making and response strategies. In reality, governmental responses to cyber threats involve nuanced considerations and multi-level decision-making processes. The Commander-in-Chief decided to test his men by staging a physical security test to see if they would fire a missile in an urgent time of disaster. When the men failed to launch the missiles because they were stunned by moral obligations in the heat of the moment, the President demanded a more dependable solution. A decision to replace military personnel with a singular algorithmic computer was done quickly. The film shows the possible repercussions were not accounted for when thinking of a solution. As a result, a few officials jeopardized the safety of

the entire nation with a few quick decisions. The actual reality of similar situations in real life is more sophisticated. WarGames presents a simplified depiction of governmental decision-making, overlooking the role of institutional checks and balances in mitigating security threats.

Systematically, officials are not allowed to behave in the manner that those in the film did.

The analysis of a structured government, provided by the Federalist Papers, shows that taking their time to deliberate is more aligned with the actual reality of how the current American government shows up for its citizens. Due to the system of checks and balances put forth in the original constitution, most of the time, our real society operates where people are held accountable for their actions and failing to properly handle official responsibilities. Citizens are expected to follow their civil duties and laws. Integrating the system of checks and balances, as advocated for in Federalist #51, helps ensure that those in authority are held accountable and prevents the concentration of power. This movie implicitly prompts citizens to critically evaluate and carefully choose their leaders for effective governance, especially the President who serves as commander of the military. He has the power to act just as the one in the movie.

The negative consequences following the president's poor decision serve as a reminder to people about the repercussions of neglecting their civic duties. It motivates citizens to actively do better. The public education system, which we have already discussed as failing the American people, should serve as a crucial realm for educating individuals about what it means to be a good citizen.

Technology is also something that has the potential to fail the American people if not implemented correctly. David broke into a system that was supposed to be secured with state-of-the-art protections; a simple modem dialing technique gave him full access to US

infrastructure in a matter of minutes. Though this movie was made in the 80s, it was just a precursor for the future. The types of attacks and hacks into US Government infrastructure have seen since the release of the movie increased exponentially since then. In fact, by 2008, we as a country were dealing with these threats externally with the same grave repercussions. Chinese nationals were able to break into government contracting systems at Lockheed Martin and steal blueprints to the F-35 jet, allowing them to make a replica for their own fighting needs (U.S. Department of Justice). The F-35 jet issue is just a tangible example of how security threats have only increased since the release of the film. Technology companies have to worry about foreign governments in critical systems. This is a clear example of how systems in the current US infrastructure are still not up to par. We are moving forward in technological evolution. The film does a great job of explaining the national level repercussions that result from the lack of viewing security as a component of society.

The aspect of how the government responds to these looming threats is portrayed inaccurately. The film oversimplifies how important the process of governmental decision-making is. A counterexample of the nature that the film shows can be found in how President Reagan reacted after viewing this movie. Reagan's inquiry about the plausibility of events depicted in "WarGames" prompted General John W. Vessey Jr. to investigate. Reagan's question, "Could something like this really happen?" led to Vessey's response, "The problem is much worse than you think" (Kaplan, 2016). This exchange led to a series of actions resulting in the signing of a classified national security directive, NSDD-145, by Reagan. This directive aimed at addressing vulnerabilities in telecommunications and automated information systems security (Kaplan, 2016). This shows that unlike the President in the film, the US Presidents have

a track record of paying these issues serious concern when they come to light. There is an active intervention on behalf of the public for issues that affect the future of America. This film overall poorly represents that positive aspect of how the American government actively acts intelligently on behalf of the people.

The film also incorporates themes of the government being behind in understanding how technology works as a whole. In the film, the teenage hacker is able to decode the backdoor, or way for people to get into a system without authentication, put in by the developer. He gained access just by knowing public information on the developer. It may be concerning to see how backdoors could so easily be used, but it is important to note that no valuable computer is completely safe. Currently, there is a strong government that is making a strong initiative to not only educate themselves on rising technology but to put systems in place to protect against coming threats. The representation that the movie gave at the time of the release was likely accurate. At the present time, though, advancements in technology have been made.

The government currently is trying to stay above looming threats and do its best to protect citizens from cybercrime. This shows persistence and a continuing dedication to imperative issues. This contrasts the movie's allusion that governing officials can just react instead of strong initiative with consistent follow-through as the movie portrays. It is not so simple in the real world. The movie misses key aspects. Cumulative actions show how the government and its members organize themselves to meet the needs of the people from a policy level to implementation.

While “WarGames” effectively highlights the importance of technological literacy and governmental accountability, it also raises questions about the limitations of individual agency in

addressing systemic issues. By exploring alternative perspectives, such as the role of institutional reforms in addressing educational disparities, viewers can gain a more nuanced understanding of civic engagement.

Previous President Trump and sitting President Biden both passed executive orders to strengthen the nation's overall security posture. The analysis of the two most recent presidents will allow for us to get a clear view of what is happening currently. President Trump's executive order did one extremely important thing among others. It ensured that a new agency was created for the sole purpose of spearheading cyber direction. This new office was called CISA, or The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. This agency sits right under the Department of Homeland Security. Placement is really important because it synchronizes all the efforts of the government agencies surrounding cybersecurity and critical infrastructure, allowing for more reporting and advancements to be done. The agency that has power and funding, with benefits just as the others but with a special mission of protecting critical infrastructure.

The President initially moved the country in the direction to adopt this. The cyber strategy, however, could not have been implemented without Congress. Both the House and the Senate strategize to figure out how to most effectively implement the desires of the President expressed through the executive order. "WarGames" did not explicitly touch on this aspect of bureaucracy. The film could have possibly benefited from the inclusion of this aspect. The government actions that came as a result of the creation of the movie itself can make this aspect possibly minute. Regardless, Congress has been working extremely hard to figure out how to best implement this strategically. The amount of progress that needs to be made can be made with proper strategy. The most important thing that Congress did was to create the role of the

National Cyber Director. Logically thinking, they knew that cybersecurity was a bipartisan issue, so they set the role in the Executive Office of the President. Explicitly, the placement means that the director reports to the president, limiting barriers that could arise if they were seated in an alternative office or agency. The balance between CISA and the Office of the National Cyber Director shows a form of checks and balances that allow for the most effective cyber mobilization. Officials have the power to ensure correct technological procedures are carried out without influence, just as Congress designed for their roles to.

The National Cyber Director has been proactive about the implementation of a better standard for security. The role addresses the lack of personnel to be able to combat the issue on a large scale. There is simply not enough talent currently to keep us secure. The strategies and reliance on government contractor partnerships help to remedy this issue. The advocacy for a change of laws now to fix the issue. The strict qualifications of 4 – year degrees to work for the government are being reconsidered. The decision was done with the knowledge that strong cyber professionals can be extremely skilled in their domain with no formal education. The Cyber Director has the expertise and placement to be able to be the bridge between Congress and actual implementation for this. A certain standard of expertise is guaranteed though the president spearheading this initiative. The governmental roles are there to protect the people who need it the most, citizens.

The nuanced key of this whole movie operation is the citizens. Arguably, citizens are the ones with the least resources to protect themselves. They are also the ones who should be the most active in the process of ensuring that protection. The film paints citizens largely as ignorant. Everyday people were shown as being stuck in their ways and resistant to change and new

opportunities. This generalization cannot be placed on all Americans as a blanket statement.

What can be said is that there is room for growth. There is room for more involvement and active input. There is space to take time to elect officials wisely.

The Office of the National Cyber Director also calls for help from the citizens. The office emphasizes how it cannot carry out these efforts alone. Everyday people have been making it their mission to better their technical skills, fill the cyber gap, and to be instruments to make the world a better place. “WarGames” had a lot of information on how the government operates as a whole. A scary tale allows for Americans to visualize their possible fate if they do not take serious accountability for their contributions as citizens. It also shows citizens that things are not over, and that Americans have the power to craft a government that serves them for a better future.

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