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## a N.ew & P.owerful C.onspiracy

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Bard

*a New & Powerful Conspiracy*

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by

Sam Harmann

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## **Violence & the Value of a Human Life**

We like to think that we would never kill a person. Well, maybe we just *would* like to believe that, and there *are* conditions under which even the most rational and peaceable among us would defer to what could be called an instinct: “I guess I would kill someone *if ...*”

If what? Is a threat to your own life an acceptable condition under which to pivot and renege a committed stance against violence? The entire span of human existence has been underpinned, and in turn structurally guaranteed, by a continual effort to coax whatever extra life-giving and -saving systems we can out of our environment. Our trophies were spirituality, medicine, and an inequitable global distribution of the generous life expectancies and low infant mortality rates that we now enjoy in the United States.

Most 21st-century scenarios of massive loss of life pale in comparison to atrocities committed in the Middle Ages, like those orchestrated by Vlad Țepeș, the 15th-century *voivode* of the state of Wallachia in present-day Romania.<sup>1</sup> One particular massacre that earned a significant amount of late-medieval media coverage was inflicted on Ottoman Turks in Bulgaria in 1462 as the Ottoman Empire gained territory in the Balkans. Vlad detailed the marathon crusade against encroaching Ottoman control in a letter, stating that he led a Wallachian army to “[kill] 23,884 Turks without counting those whom we burned in homes or the Turks whose heads were cut by our soldiers.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> And variously known as Vlad Dracul III, or ‘Vlad the Impaler.’

<sup>2</sup> Florescu, Radu R., and Raymond T. McNally. *Dracula, Prince of Many Faces: His Life and His Times*. N.p.: Little, Brown, 2009.



Vlad is speaking specifically about the number of Turkish Bulgarian denizens who were killed by impalement by himself and his army – an act that, even under circumstances of territorial expansion, was undeniably excessive in the scope of its violence. He also took the time to specify that “At Giurgiu there were 6,414 victims; at Eni Sala, 1,350; at Durostor 6,840; at Orsova, 343; at Hârsova, 840; at Marotin, 210; at Turtucaia, 630; at Turnu, Batin, and Novograd, 384; at Sistov, 410; at Nicopolis and Ghighen, 1,138; at Rahova, 1,460.”<sup>3</sup> This is all to say that, in his meticulous dedication to inflicting huge swaths of devastation, Vlad Dracul III did nothing if not his part to earn his name’s enduring association with monstrosity. 1462 was a different time, but not so different that impalement wasn’t still considered a barbaric act – and the recent invention of the printing press made records of his crimes, accompanied by sensationally gruesome woodcut depictions, medieval best-sellers (Figure 1).

And yet, despite the magnitude of Vlad’s crimes, they feel distant. At least for a non-historian like myself, the cultural memory of events that occurred prior to, say, the Industrial Revolution, and our imaginary worlds drawn from the outlandish allure of the same long-ago time periods have a tendency to de-stratify and amalgamate into one, slightly fantastical history. We get a more detailed, if not imprecise, depiction of the ancient world and the Middle Ages from contemporary television and movies than historical records could ever offer – weathered glyphs engraved in Greek urns and friezes, even crudely-inked illustrations of the impalement of thousands of Hungarian Turks, become inseparable in our minds from images of Gary Oldman and Gerard Butler

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<sup>3</sup> Florescu & McNally, *Dracula*.

in full battle dress, their digital visages and the words that come out of them high-defined to a crisp into our imaginations of what the world was like ‘back then.’

**T**iefacht sich an gar ein graussem  
liche erschrockenliche bystouen von dem wilden reüerich.  
Dracole wayde. Wie er die leut gespiff hat. vnd gepiaten.  
vnd mit den haüßtern yn einem kessel gefoten. vñ wie er die  
leüt geschunden hat vñ zerhacken lassen als ein kraut. Jetz  
er hat auch den müterñ ire kind gepiatē vnd sy habes müß/  
sen selber essen. Vnd vil andere erschrockenliche ding die in  
dissem Tractat geschüben stend. Vnd in welchem land er  
geregirt hat.



Figure 1. A German woodcut from 1499 depicting Vlad Dracul III dining among impaled corpses.  
(Markus Ayrer, *Vlad Dracul III Pamphlet*, 1499, via Medievalists.net)

‘Back then,’ untimely deaths were a standard occurrence. We can almost understand the moral reconciliation of the impalement of 23,000 Turks in Bulgaria when considering how more than one-third of infants born in the Middle Ages died before reaching the age of five.<sup>4</sup> But over one hundred million casualties in World Wars I and II, including the Holocaust and the other mass-murder atrocities that occurred during the wars, made the 20th century a contender for the deadliest in history. The industrialized world launched a silent campaign for the value of human life. The Vietnam War soon

<sup>4</sup> Scott, Robert A. “Life in the Middle Ages.” In *Miracle Cures: Saints, Pilgrimage, and the Healing Powers of Belief*. p. 9-11. University of California Press, 2011.

became the first U.S. conflict that would be broadcast on television, only for the news media to become a top target of President Richard Nixon's ire – exposing the general public to the documented fragility and cruelty of life and death was deemed not just inappropriate, but dangerous to those calling the ill-advised shots for fear of civil disillusionment and unrest. The idea of the general public bearing witness to the atrocities committed in Vietnam threatened massive political revolt. For the sake of the continuation of the productive machinations of capitalism, the ruling class has to give the impression that they believe that life is sacred, precious, and revered – so no war on TV.

In the 21st-century United States, we barely see or engage with the most violent conflicts that happen in the world today. The perceived value of human life has ballooned since then – an early death no longer a given, we regard life as precious now, especially in our comfortable Western bubble of low mortality rates. Murder-by-war is becoming more impersonal: drone strikes and strategically detonated explosive devices have taken the place of massive ranks of horse-mounted soldiers charging at one another. The serial killers of Victorian England wouldn't last a week with our advances in forensic technology. We're spoiled in America; an international military conflict hasn't taken place here in more than two hundred years, and if one U.S. soldier dies in a military operation, it is guaranteed to make national news. And forget about impalement – if Americans were victims of a mass impalement, the reaction would be felt around the world.

But people will always murder each other. Inhuman acts of violence do continue to occur around the world. I want to be clear that when I say 'around the world,' I'm not referring to the world except for the United States. Inhuman acts of violence occur here,

and with some regularity. And abroad, it's hard to argue we're anything other than one of the big-league players when it comes to large-scale crimes against humanity. But the violence has been muted, made covert. Rather than swooping across continents with massive armies, laying waste to the populations of entire cities, we strategically withhold resources and launch guerilla-style military operations. And it often feels as though America's violent gaze has turned completely inward – the injustice of drastic and widespread income inequality and the police state's systemic killings of people of color make it difficult to argue that our disdain for difference hasn't been finding most of its victims within.

There was a time in the history of the world where most young men were mandated to join the military. Few places are still like this. Human labor has been diverted to more productive venues. And despite those productive venues' roles as violent apparatuses for the continued survival of the capitalist state, we're better off for it. The central role that men have historically played in violent conflict, though, has left vestigial, psychological reverberations. Men went from having a good chance of killing someone sometime during their lifetime to mostly never having any reason to kill or even fight someone. The runoff has been crystallized in our modern constructions of masculinity. Violence's place in society has been pushed to the background, but millennia of conditioning and reinforcement of violent traits are hard to shake. In the industrialized world, most of us have barely any reason to need to be strong. We don't depend on our strength for our day-to-day survival, or our survival at almost any given time. But strength – physical brawniness, toughness, emotional detachment – has remained a core tenet of 'what it means to be a man.' Now, instead of utility, the idea of

‘strength’ exerts its biggest influence in the spheres of commodibility and psychology. The internalization of the little remaining importance of strength is a ripe tool for profit, as well as a formidable force in shaping self-image and relationships. Few industries hybridize this dual potential as effectively as combat sports entertainment – MMA, boxing, and, most notably, professional wrestling.

## **Pro Wrestling**

I should clarify that I don't understand professional wrestling the way that its longtime fans do. I didn't grow up watching it, so recollections of events from specific 'classic' matches, rival wrestlers' character arcs, and recurring 'in-jokes' are lost on me. But I've been in peripheral contact with professional wrestling for most of my life – I was a big-time nerd in middle school, and a lot of other nerds are really into professional wrestling.

I entered college with a new attention to my identity and artistic practice, and started thinking about wrestling, in my brief encounters with it through pop-culture detritus, in terms of live performance and the performance of gender and identity. This was compounded by being made aware of a previously-unknown-to-me demographic of pro wrestling fans: other trans people. I was sitting on my roommate Jordon's bed in our dorm in Robbins my sophomore year when they showed me a wild, intensely homoerotic, completely context-less clip from a live wrestling event, in which a wrestler with long, wavy blonde hair and a goatee, wearing tight, shiny purple latex shorts, sat on another wrestler's face while he had his neck stuck in between the ropes of the ring. I asked where they had found it; they told me that one of their best friends from home, a nerdy trans man, had a lifelong obsession with pro wrestling.

We talked about the intersections of gender identity, performance, costume, cosplay, and the professional wrestling 'persona' for weeks afterward. I didn't know how I hadn't come to make the connection until then. The ground-up construction of an inhabitable character is a perennial trans fantasy. The adoption of an exaggeratedly-stylized and -gendered avatar through the mediums of costume and performance, and for

such an excessive, soap-opera-level-drama performance, specifically recalled aspects of drag culture to me, as well. Drag and its accompanying theories usually fall just outside the scope of my interest, but I could recognize that what these figures were doing was some iteration of it. This idea posed an interesting tension to me, because until that point, I had conceptualized wrestling as a men's sport for the most manly of them, only to be enjoyed strictly by people who derive enduring entertainment from watching people get, well, beaten up. But there's a whole melodrama underneath the whole thing, beyond the outrageous acting, a melodrama about identity and the ways we perform to appear 'larger than life.' It's built around the construction of an illusion, and it's the most widely-consumed live theatrical event in the world – what other single live dramatic performance attracts tens of millions of viewers a night?

Wrestling's new, marginally more proximal connection to my life eventually led me to the story of Chris Benoit. Benoit's name may be more familiar to anyone at least five or ten years older than me – he was a Canadian professional wrestler who, at his peak, in the early 2000s, was widely considered one of the best in the world. Benoit travelled to Japan, a hotspot of activity in the international pro wrestling scene, to train with the New Japan Pro Wrestling Company when he was 19. He worked between the Japanese and American wrestling circuits for a few years; this is when he earned the nickname "The Crippler" – in a match against Sabu in 1994, Benoit accidentally broke his opponent's neck in a 'bump' throw move. He reportedly went to the locker room after winning the match and "broke down at the possibility of having paralyzed someone." But

the head booker of the league saw an opportunity to seize and insisted on continuing the “Crippler” nickname.<sup>5</sup>

Benoit catapulted to superstardom when he joined the World Wrestling Entertainment company in 2000, at the time called the World Wrestling Federation, just a few days after being named the WCW World Heavyweight Champion in an effort from the failing WCW company to keep him on their roster. He went on to find huge success in Vince McMahon’s WWE, winning another World Heavyweight Championship in 2004.<sup>6</sup> His physical ability cemented his place in an industry renowned for its sensational illusions and fictitious storylines as one of the more ‘legitimate’ athletes in the sport. Benoit and his wife, Nancy, met through an intertwined ‘love affair’ wrestling storyline; he gained a reputation within the league and among friends as a ‘family man.’ When asked by the Calgary Sun in 2004 to name his worst vice, he replied: “Quality time with my family is a big vice. It’s something I’ll fight for and crave.”<sup>7</sup> Benoit eschewed much of the glitz and glamour of a typical professional wrestling personality – he performed under his real name, and never bothered to fix a missing front tooth he had lost as a child while playing with his pet Rottweiler.<sup>8</sup> But the real draw to Chris Benoit’s story, and his modern-day legacy, wasn’t how good of a wrestler he was – it was the seemingly inexplicable double murder-suicide of Nancy and his son, Daniel, in 2007.

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<sup>5</sup> Finnegan, Joey. “The Life and Death of Chris Benoit.” Edited by JP Zarka. ProWrestlingStories.com. N.d.

<https://prowrestlingstories.com/pro-wrestling-stories/life-death-chris-benoit/>.

<sup>6</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. “WWE Raw Superstars - Chris Benoit.” WWE Raw. Archived October 2002. [http://raw.wwe.com/superstars/benoit\\_c/index.html](http://raw.wwe.com/superstars/benoit_c/index.html).

<sup>7</sup> Fish, Mike. “Steroids discovered in probe of slayings, suicide.” ESPN.com. June 27, 2007. <http://www.espn.com/espn/news/story?id=2917133>.

<sup>8</sup> Fish, “Steroids.”



The Benoit's bodies were found in their home in Fayetteville, Georgia, on June 25, 2007. A close friend of Chris' and fellow wrestler, Chavo Guerrero, received a voicemail from Benoit at 3:30 p.m. on the afternoon of June 23rd, in which the wrestler sounded tired and "off," and told Guerrero that he missed a flight and would be late to a WWE event scheduled to take place that night in Texas. Benoit ended the voicemail telling his friend that he loved him. Guerrero was concerned by Benoit's tone and called him back to no response. Benoit called him back fourteen minutes later, at 3:44 p.m., still sounding weary, but he assured him that he would still make the night's event despite his family falling ill with food poisoning.<sup>9</sup> Around 5:00 p.m., Benoit called WWE Talent Relations and told a representative that Daniel was throwing up and Nancy was in the hospital with him, and that he would be taking a later flight into Houston than he had originally planned. The Talent Relations representative told Benoit that he would arrive too late, and suggested that he just get rest for a scheduled pay-per-view event the next day. Benoit apologized, citing his family emergency. The Talent Relations representative called him back a few minutes later to confirm his plans, but got no answer.<sup>10</sup>

Text messages sent to WWE coworkers from Chris and Nancy's phones early the next morning were the next, and last, things anyone would hear from him. Two vague yet ominous messages were sent from Chris' phone at 3:53 a.m. to two coworkers each:

*"My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane, Fayetteville Georgia. 30215"*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Daily News*. "Chris Benoit Timeline." WWE.com via *New York Daily News*. June 27, 2007. <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/chris-benoit-timeline-article-1.222642>.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Daily News*, "Chris Benoit."

<sup>11</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. "WWE® Shares Internal Timeline And Details Relating To Chris Benoit Tragedy." World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. June 26, 2007. <https://corporate.wwe.com/investors/news/press-releases/2007/26-06-2007>.

*“The dogs are in the enclosed pool area. Garage side door is open”*<sup>12</sup>

Three nearly-identical ones were sent from Nancy’s phone, each to other pairs of coworkers:

*“My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane.*

*Fayetteville Georgia. 30215”*<sup>13</sup>

*“My physical address is 130 Green Meadow Lane.*

*Fayetteville Georgia. 30215”*<sup>14</sup>

*“My address is 130 Green Meadow Lane. Fayetteville Georgia. 30215”*<sup>15</sup>

The coworkers who received the messages reported them to the WWE that afternoon, who in turn contacted the Fayetteville County Sheriff’s Office to request they check on the Benoit residence. By 4:00 p.m., the Sheriff’s Office had notified WWE that they had found the Benois deceased in their home.<sup>16</sup>

Police reports of the crime scene would later detail that Nancy and David died of asphyxiation and that Chris had hung himself using one of his weight machines. Nancy had been killed on June 22nd, Daniel on the 23rd, and Chris killed himself on the 24th. Nancy’s feet and wrists were bound; they also found Bibles placed next to Nancy and

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<sup>12</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., “WWE® Shares Internal Timeline.”

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., “WWE® Shares Internal Timeline.”

David's bodies, as well as levels of testosterone in Chris' blood that were ten times as high as the normal range and "therapeutic" levels of hydrocodone and xanax in both Nancy and Chris' systems.<sup>17</sup> Fans and critics alike boiled over with theories about 'roid rage,' but the Chief Medical Examiner of Georgia reported that the test results didn't indicate anything that would necessarily result in a drastic change in behavior. Other sources concurred that roid rage wasn't a likely explanation. Christopher Nowinski, a former professional wrestler who worked with Benoit, said he believed

Repeated, untreated concussions might have caused his friend to snap [...] 'He was one of the only guys who would take a chair shot to the back of the head,' Mr. Nowinski said, 'which is stupid. Part of me hopes there was something wrong with his brain. The Chris Benoit I knew was always more concerned about everybody else's well-being than his own.'<sup>18</sup>

A few months following the crime scene reports, experts associated with the Sports Legacy Institute released results from neuropathological tests that indicated that Benoit suffered a type of brain damage called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). They added that symptoms of CTE can include depression, cognitive impairment, dementia, and erratic behavior. Dr. Bennett Omalu, Chief Medical Examiner of San Joaquin County and the co-director of the Brain Injury Research Institute, conducted tests on Benoit's brain tissue, as well as that of four professional football players whose premature deaths had been linked to CTE – two of whom had committed suicide.<sup>19</sup> One

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<sup>17</sup> Fish, "Steroids."

<sup>18</sup> O'Connor, Anahad. "Wrestler Found to Have Taken Testosterone." *The New York Times*. July 18, 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/18/us/18wrestler.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Sports Legacy Institute. "Wrestler Chris Benoit Brain's Forensic Exam Consistent With Numerous Brain Injuries." *ScienceDaily*. September 6, 2007. [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070905224343.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070905224343.htm).

of them, Justin Strzelczyk, died at the age of 36 and “had been telling relatives he was hearing voices from ‘the evil ones’ [...] and led police on a 40 mile high-speed chase through central New York at speeds up to 100 mph on the wrong side of the highway, which resulted in an explosive crash and his death.”<sup>20</sup> Dr. Omalu expressed similar sentiments as Christopher Nowinski’s, telling ESPN.com that “the WWE and the sport in general have to ask themselves, ‘Is this a trend?’ The science tells us that jumping off 10-foot ladders and slamming people with tables and chairs is simply bad for the brain,”<sup>21</sup> and concluded that the athletes’ brains more closely resembled those of Alzheimer’s patients over twice their age.<sup>22</sup> It’s a salient argument, and the research supports brain trauma as the likely instigator behind the murders, but questions remain: how could Benoit have been severely cognitively impaired, but also cogent enough to contact his coworkers and lie about being late to his match that night in Texas? And why hadn’t violent acts of this nature accompanied other documented cases of CTE?

The deluge of theories persisted. In an interview following the discovery of the Benoit’s bodies, District Attorney Scott Ballard noted that Daniel had needle marks in his arms, and speculated that “the boy had been given growth hormones for some time because the family considered him undersized.”<sup>23</sup> This theory played into rumors already swirling that Daniel Benoit had been diagnosed with Fragile X syndrome, a condition that hinders children’s normal physical and mental growth, and that this had been a source of conflict within the family. But family members categorically denied any hypotheses

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<sup>20</sup> Sports Legacy Institute, “Wrestler Chris Benoit Brain’s Forensic Exam.”

<sup>21</sup> Garber, Greg. “Doctors: Wrestler had brain damage.” ESPN.com. December 6, 2009. <http://www.espn.com/espn/otl/news/story?id=4724912>.

<sup>22</sup> Garber, “Doctors.”

<sup>23</sup> Fish, “Steroids.”

about Daniel's health.<sup>24</sup> Crazier, fan-perpetuated theories made the rounds on internet pro wrestling forums. One argued that Kevin Sullivan, Nancy's ex-husband and Benoit's former booker when he was in the WCW, was responsible for all three deaths as a result of some bizarre Satanic ritualistic revenge-murder. A commenter on the sports forum Hogville.net cited a now-defunct website run by "Johnny Angel (Former Pro Wrestling Champion), Now known as Rev. Johnny Lee Clary, World-Wide Evangelist:" "In my opinion, there is no way he would have murdered his family. This whole murder case has Satanists written all over it and Sullivan is a Satanist and has the motive to murder them."<sup>25</sup>

Some investigators pointed to divorce papers that Nancy had filed in 2003 as a possible explanation: the papers and accompanying petition say that Chris had "lost his temper and threatened to strike the petitioner and cause extensive damage to the home and personal belongings of the parties, including furniture and furnishings," and that the "Petitioner is in reasonable fear for petitioner's own safety and that of the minor child."<sup>26</sup> However, Nancy withdrew her file for divorce two months later; Chris underwent therapeutic intervention, and, to our knowledge, the threats of violence never materialized.

Even a history of domestic abuse wouldn't explain the nature of the murders. In a defense against accusations of the role of steroids in the Benoit's deaths, the WWE issued

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<sup>24</sup> ESPN Enterprises, Inc. "Prosecutor disputes WWE's assertion that son had mental retardation." ESPN.com. July 3, 2007. <http://www.espn.com/espn/news/story?id=2925280>.

<sup>25</sup> Clary, Rev. Johnny Lee via user threeNout. "[BENOIT] - One for the conspiracy theorists here..." Hogville.net. June 28, 2007. <https://forums.hogville.net/index.php?topic=141801.0>.

<sup>26</sup> Nancy Benoit v. Christopher Benoit. No. 658. Superior Court of Fayette County, Georgia. August 19, 2003. Archived July 2018. TMZ. [http://www.aolcdn.com/tmz\\_documents/0626\\_benoit\\_dismiss.pdf](http://www.aolcdn.com/tmz_documents/0626_benoit_dismiss.pdf).

a statement that said that “there were substantial periods of time between the death of the wife and the death of the son, suggesting deliberate thought, not rage. The presence of a Bible by each is also not an act of rage.”<sup>27</sup> The concept of *deliberation* as it relates to Nancy and Daniel’s murders is especially chilling – the intentionality of the crime only further obscures any possible motive, and no one will ever know what Chris did for two days in his home before taking his own life. In a macabre paradox, the absolution of the murder-suicide opens facts up into an inexhaustible volume of interpretations.

District Attorney Ballard also said in an interview with ESPN, “I don’t think we’ll ever be able to wrap our minds around this.”<sup>28</sup> The public shared similar feelings. The night the deaths were confirmed by police, but before the details came out, the WWE replaced its scheduled broadcast with an on-air tribute to Chris Benoit’s career. It was shortly discovered that Chris had been responsible for the murders, and the WWE scrambled to thoroughly cover their tracks. Any mention of Chris Benoit was removed from the WWE website, he was not to be referenced at live events, and past matches he appeared in were re-edited to remove the segments he was in.<sup>29</sup>

Wrestling fans and industry veterans cried ‘censorship,’ alleging the accomplishments of an undeniable legend of the business had been erased. Others recognized there was little distinction to be made between the actions of Chris Benoit, the wrestling superstar, and Chris Benoit, the person. He was asked in an interview in late

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<sup>27</sup> World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc. “WWE® Shocked At Latest Developments In Benoit Tragedy, Concerned By Sensationalistic Reporting.” WWE Corporate. June 26, 2007. Archived November 2013. [http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2007/2007\\_06\\_26.jsp](http://corporate.wwe.com/news/2007/2007_06_26.jsp).

<sup>28</sup> ESPN Enterprises, Inc. “Prosecutor.”

<sup>29</sup> Santarossa, Adam. “John Cena discusses WWE stance on Chris Benoit murder suicide.” News.com.au. July 11, 2017. <https://www.news.com.au/sport/more-sports/john-cena-discusses-wwe-stance-on-chris-benoit-murder-suicide/news-story/7be620e3f5aac407544af952c3e40b50>.

2004, less than three years prior to the murders and his death, “When Chris Benoit hangs up his boots for good, what will his legacy be? What will the next generation be saying about Chris Benoit?” Benoit replied, “The people will dictate my legacy, and my peers will dictate my legacy. I'm not going to do that. Let them decide, because it's them who paid their hard-earned money to come out and watch me, and buy pay-per-views, DVDs, shirts, and hats. They are the fans that I go out there and do what I love to do for. So they can dictate all of that.”<sup>30</sup> In an ironic, perhaps worst-case-scenario realization of his prediction, the same pay-per-views, DVDs, shirts, and hats all were made no longer available to the public.

Some televised events that Benoit performed in eventually became re-available for viewing on the WWE Network online streaming service in early 2014. While it seemed as though the WWE had realized the limit to which they could pretend one of their biggest celebrities never existed, Benoit’s partial reinstatement came with its qualifications. A warning was added to the shows on the WWE Network that contain his matches, along with others containing explicit language or graphic content (Figure 2).<sup>31</sup> It was only a partial forfeiture, though; in the warning, the WWE seemed to express the attitude that wrestling personas are definitively separate from the ‘actors portraying them.’ This suggests a kind of moral compromise was made on the part of the WWE in order to appease viewers’ appetite for restricted content, but at the dangerous expense of

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<sup>30</sup> Heuer, Otto “Hack Man,” and Chris Benoit. “Hack-Man Chris Benoit Interview.” Hack-Man. August 18, 2004. <http://www.hack-man.com/Wrestling/Interviews/200407xx-benoit.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Tortilo, Stephen. “I Was Chris Benoit: Playing a Video Game as a Real-Life Murderer.” Kotaku. December 12, 2014. <https://kotaku.com/i-was-chris-benoit-playing-a-video-game-as-a-real-life-1669955314>.

drawing a hard distinction between depictions and ‘real life,’ specifically Chris Benoit’s legacy in each.

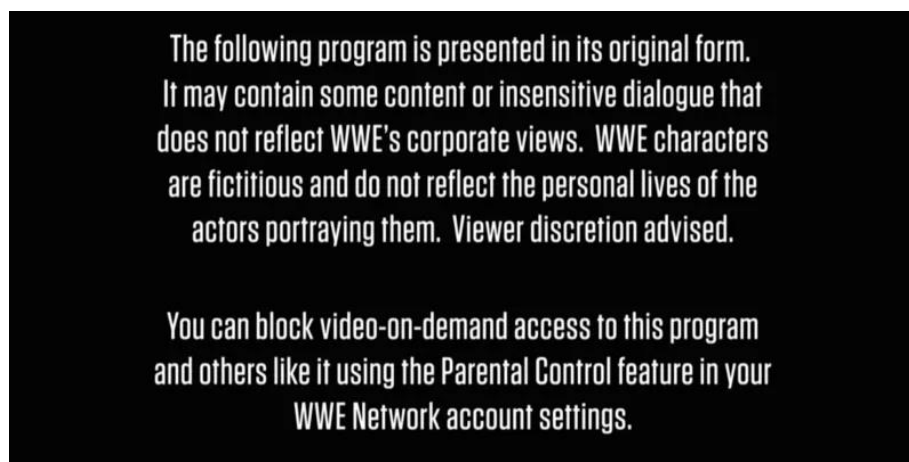


Figure 2. WWE Network content warning  
(World Wrestling Entertainment, Inc., *WWE Network*)

The issue resurfaced later in 2014 with the introduction of a character customization feature in the new *WWE 2K15* video game. Players could create their own wrestling characters, down to the facial features and costumes, and upload them online for others to download and play as. The “Community Creations” server was immediately flooded with facsimile Chris Benoit’s – his likeness absent from the *WWE* video game series since 2007, there was a throng of dedicated fans and violence-fetishizing gamers who had been waiting for this for years.

The Chris Benoit avatars were all immediately deleted upon upload. *2K15* players berated the game developers on Twitter. One user tweeted at a 2K Games community representative, Marcus Stephenson, “I don’t understand why it’s a problem. This is a video game. So if someone upload [*sic*] ‘Ted Bundy’ they’ll get banned?”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> @TResponsibility. Twitter Post. December 5, 2014, 12:33 p.m.



“not banned, but deleted. Yes,” Stephenson replied, “Because it's on a public server where others are able to download.”<sup>33</sup> A few weeks after the game’s release, users who uploaded offending content were not only having their characters deleted; their accounts were now getting banned entirely (Figure 3).

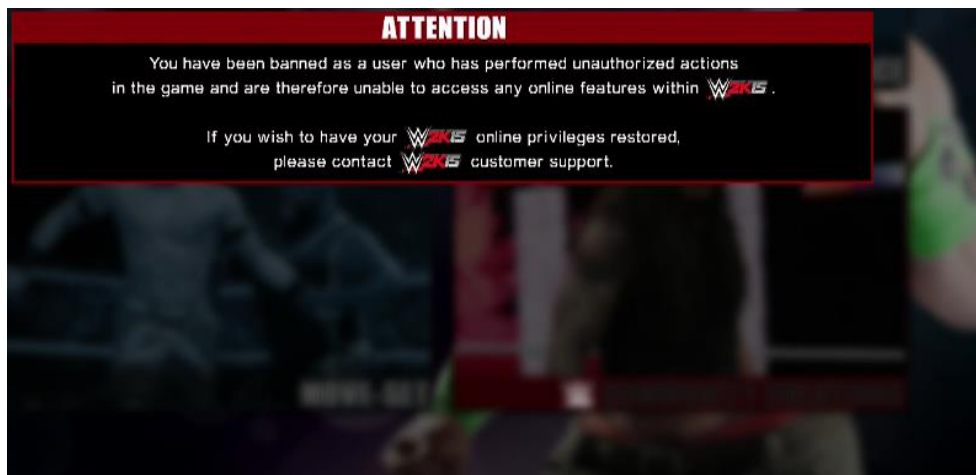


Figure 3. Partial screen capture of a message one user received after uploading a Benoit character on the *WWE 2K15* server (2K Sports, *WWE 2K15*, via Stephen Totilo, *I Was Chris Benoit*)

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<https://twitter.com/TResponsibility/status/540937024296202241>.

<sup>33</sup> @stephensonmc. Twitter Post. December 5, 2014, 12:34 p.m.  
<https://twitter.com/stephensonmc/status/540937252059480064>.

## **The Synthesis**

The corollary to the recurring masculine internalization of the significance of strength is a fear of relinquishing control. The fear manifested in Chris' ultimate inability to unconditionally love his family. The responsibility of unconditionally loving could have threatened him with a loss of control – over his future, his career, his legacy. Threats to our life can be both literal and perceived; Chris' rationale may have been that he believed he was saving his own life and reputation. Stories of men killing their families out of a fear of a suffocation of control are grimly familiar to us. Uranus, the progenitor of the Greek mythological Titans, devoured five of his children, anticipating a prophecy that they would overthrow him one day; and Heracles underwent an outright loss of control and murdered his children by Megara. But the contemporary manifestation that we get on the news every six months usually ends in suicide, and is spurred on by financial crises, or mounting guilt over an affair. And it's a markedly gendered phenomenon: 70 of the 88 documented family killings with six or more victims that have taken place in the United States were committed by men, and over two-thirds of homicides of intimate partners are committed by men.<sup>34</sup> Masculine psychology becomes re-inscribed with the violent tendencies that have defined its place in society for thousands of years.

The WWE's character-assassination-by-deletion of Benoit was motivated by a fear of the loss of control over his, and their, image. The association with a known murderer, especially one who was so beloved for his no-gimmicks, down-to-earth

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<sup>34</sup> James Alan Fox and Emma E. Fridel. *Violence and Gender*. Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. Publishers. June 2017. <http://doi.org/10.1089/vio.2017.0016>.

persona, posed a threat to business and pro wrestling's foothold in American culture. Ironically, in their attempts to minimize public exposure to Benoit, the WWE only further elevated his icon status; the suppression of his image made him a legend in yet another right. But the WWE's damage control tactics raise demanding questions of censorship and how to handle the preservation of violent histories. Mythologizing Benoit differs from our perpetual fascination with Vlad Dracul III in his incarnation as Dracula – for one, the contemporary context renders a relatively small difference in our conception of our world and Benoit's in 2007, while the distance we feel from the events of the 15th century allow us to speak about them with dulled sensitivity. And whereas it was Vlad Dracul III's ostensible governmental duty to launch a crusade throughout much of Eastern Europe, the business of professional wrestling is illusory violence and persona. No one is supposed to get hurt and the heroes are infallible.

I was captivated by the real-world fracture in the illusion. I set out to create a performance that explored the inherent violence of masculinity and celebrity, and how incompatibility with the act of 'unconditional love' pierces the performative surface of an entertainer's life. I began with a small solo performance piece I showed my sophomore year, of which I am partly glad no documentation exists. I sat on the Chris Benoit material for a while, waiting for an opportunity to work on a research-heavy piece based on him; Senior Project seemed like my chance. I found out about the *WWE 2K15* custom character debacle around the time that SPROJ preparation had begun, and had already been spending a lot of time playing video games and reading about toxic-masculinity-sympathetic conspiracy theories, so these themes took on significant thematic roles in my project.

Initially, I set out to write, direct, and maybe design a production. The idea of a devised project appealed to me, but was too dependent on compatibility between ensemble members for me to feel I could rely on it to produce anything of real substance. I had been exploring clothing design as an artistic medium lately, having had a passion for it for a long time that I sort of lost touch with by not going to fashion school, and the extravagance of the professional wrestling costume beckoned to me as an opportunity for visual character exposition. In truth, I had felt disillusioned with the medium of live performance, and especially ‘theatre,’ for the past two years; the world of the visual arts seemed to promise more egalitarianism of opportunity. I felt I needed to make a ‘visual’ piece that physically ‘existed’ to really feel a connection to it. The fall of 2017, I was an Assistant Stage Manager for the residency of *NERVOUS/SYSTEM* by Andrew Schneider at the Fisher Center. It was a relatively thankless experience, but I did get a sense of vitality from it; there was a consistent, flowing energy in the ceaseless transitions from one of forty-something scenes to the next. Conceptually, the piece was not appealing to me, but I was taken with how the aesthetics of the stage almost mimicked film. I took that from them and wrote a morsel of a script with around ten very short scenes – some were more like tableaux. In them, I detailed scenes from the life of a pro wrestler, who is manipulated in simultaneous conspiracies by a sinister doctor, a rival wrestler, and cosmic video gamers into killing his wife, son, and himself. The wrestler went on to become ‘Spence Blender,’ and the video gamer characters dropped.

I recruited my friend Lin, one of the most organizationally-minded people I know, to join me as Production Assistant. I held auditions for “A Senior Project About Wrestling, Conspiracy, and Gayness.” Gayness held a more prominent role in early

conceptions of the production, which involved the creation of a sort of ‘fantasy wrestling league,’ but was eventually pushed aside to make room for a more complicated narrative. I didn’t set out to make a narrative piece, but the volume of detail to be examined in the real-life story was enticing to me. In the beginning, my script was derived from patched-together interviews, historical accounts, personal tributes, and canonical wrestling moments – this material was woven in as dialogue or design details, though few direct quotations ended up being used in the final version of the script. One source that was incorporated in all iterations of the project was a series of posts that Megan Benoit, Chris’ daughter by a previous wife, had made on the forums of the website *Grieving.com*; in them, she mourns her father’s sudden death and voices her doubts that he was really responsible for the murders.<sup>35</sup> The first-hand accounts of Chris as a loving father, as someone who you could never imagine doing anything like this, are almost convincing in their appeal to pathos; however, forensic evidence has to trump personal misgivings.

Auditions saw slim turnout and also complicated my ‘gay fantasy wrestling league’ concept, but we ended up casting six of the eight people who did audition. The cast was made up of Nat Currey, Leor Miller, Paul Nicholson, Avis Zane, and Perry Zhang. Nat is a sophomore who auditioned with a mournful cover of a song from *Hospice* by The Antlers and was cast as Blaine Blender, Spence’s young son. Leor is a senior photo major, musician, and good friend, she was cast as Vicky “Vicious Mistress” Blender, Spence’s wife and Blaine’s mother. Paul is a junior who had reached out about the project due to a shared interest in wrestling, he was cast as Diesel Igneous, a tactical-

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<sup>35</sup> Benoit, Megan. "Grieving.com Forums." *Grieving.com*. February 16, 2013. <https://forums.grieving.com/index.php?/profile/300680-megan-benoit/>.

gear-clad, cybernetically-enhanced rival wrestler. Avis is a sophomore who I had met briefly through my job and invited to audition, she was cast as fellow wrestler and Diesel's wife, Max "Meteor Flare" Igneous, along with her doppelganger, the nefarious Doctor Crawford. Perry is a freshman, and was a surprise candidate who I encouraged to audition as he walked by the studio doors because he was one of the most strikingly dressed people I had ever seen; he was cast as Buhle Copeland, the BLAST Wrestling League CEO and emcee.

I was holding out hope for a huge, intimidatingly muscular guy to audition to cast in the role of Spence, but it became apparent to me that this was unrealistic. I considered my familiarity with the script, research, and performance an asset to my viability as a cast member and cast myself as Spence. I had never directed as well as performed in something this involved, and it posed a huge challenge of attentiveness and division of responsibility. I was extremely fortunate to have someone whose input I trusted like Lin helping me throughout the process – they proved invaluable to me as an outside eye.

I wanted to make a multimedia performance, evoking the style of live television entertainment and the digitally-densified approaches of Richard Foreman and Nam June Paik. I imagined projections, televisions, live musical performances – I would have wanted a laser light show, if I could have one. Lin was assigned on-stage live-feed camera duty for several scenes. Investigating the circumscription of the real and performed violence of the professional wrestling celebrity and the conspiracy theories surrounding the Benois' deaths demanded a multimodal approach I described once as "hypersensory." The core of my conceptual structure was a complete fracture, on the level of the family unit, the individual identity, the performed identity, and the public

identity, and of objectivity itself. The conspiracy theories are so varied because the circumstances will always remain unknown. The frenetic energy with which the news media and internet entertainment outlets document events and gossip was one I wanted to embrace – in my view, why battle my way up the stream of our constantly digitally-divided attention when I can work with it? I wanted anything but my project, as a process or a viewing experience, to be an opportunity for relaxation and complacency – I adopted overconsumption as a mantra. The density of the material commanded it. The complexity of the universe of professional wrestling, with its diverting storylines and infinitesimal characters, is compounded by the subjectivity of appearance. Sometimes the violence is staged, and sometimes it's real – but it's all performance. I wanted to know – what happens when a business of performed violence has to reconcile with an actual act of violence that occurred outside of the ring?

The script expanded to twenty-seven pages at one point, with one scene per page. Some were reinterpretations of the events of actual pro wrestling events; more were along the lines of Spence and Vicky taking Blaine to the doctor, or Diesel contemplating the circumstances of the Blenders' deaths. The storylines of celebrity gossip, conspiracy theories, and professional wrestling drama are chopped up and rearranged; different sources' accounts make people in two places at once, dead before they are alive. I sought to imitate that flattened, cut-and-paste timeline of events. The project, at this point still untitled, would begin with a filmed deposition of sorts delivered by Diesel concerning Spence's death and his family's murders, we would then jump between an excerpt of a match between the two of them that happened a long time ago, and continue hopping

back and forth until the arcs of a total of four conspiracy theories involving Spence, Vicky, Blaine, Diesel, Buhle, and the Doctor unfolded.

The realization of the importance of working with what I knew pulled me back to something that made sense. The logistics of multiple digital components were complicating the on-stage action and transitions. We did away with all the parts that were to be pre-filmed, rewriting some to be performed live. The costumes were also coming along slowly and painfully, so rather than make them a focal element of the performance; I dropped the structure of the ‘runway show’ that I had imposed on a few scenes.<sup>36</sup> Lin adopted a more formal role as a member of the cast as the ‘TECHMAN’ as their on-stage time increased.

Come March and April, the script was reduced from twenty seven to seventeen brief scenes. These were arranged and re-arranged in different chronological configurations, some running straight through them as though in condensed, real time; others blended each scene-event in the show completely randomly. Our final arrangement ultimately ended up somewhere on the ‘real time’ end of the spectrum, for the sake of plot comprehension. I think my familiarity with straightforward narrative propelled this, for better or for worse.<sup>37</sup> I instead focused my manipulation of time perception on creating a structure of rapid, repetitious sequences of scenes and scenic design, stratified as though viewed through a temporal prism. It’s a familiar structure to us in – it jumps around like cable television, ‘news slideshows’ from BuzzFeed and TMZ, or when your internet connection doesn’t load a video properly. Flashes of genre and storyline refract

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<sup>36</sup> Particularly inspired by the early work of Belgian fashion designer Walter van Beirendonck.

<sup>37</sup> The idea of a wholly disorienting, non-narrative performance tantalized me, but my lack of experience in that realm along with some unfamiliarity between cast members as an ensemble made me opt for what I had more exposure to.



in discordant medleys of recognizable commercials and tropes. I split scenes into parts and put other parts of the story with different settings in between them. The pattern of interruption and repetition was integral in constructing an audience perspective of displacement and discomfort-in-uncanniness.

‘Working with what I knew’ had expanded beyond logistic management and into the aesthetics of the show. The ‘runoff’ of the internet, pedestrian entertainment gossip articles and conspiratorial blog posts, was interwoven with other invocations of the banal. The glamour and slickness of typical professional wrestling costumes was traded for rough-hewn, improvisatory garments made from repurposed used clothing, sports equipment, and military gear. I wasn’t going for unnatural manufacturedness. Instead, I envisioned a Brechtian, completely transparent live performance experience, where none of the performers or aesthetic design choices were operating under the condition that they were a part of anything but that: a performance. I started treating it like sports practice, or at least my imagination of how a sports practice would go. I encouraged my cast not to hide backstage between scenes, but remain on the ‘sidelines’ of the theatre during their whole time offstage and prepare for the following scenes, crossing straight in front of a light source, if they had to; or watch scenes they didn’t appear in and eat popcorn. I wanted to give the audience the feeling that they got together to check out this underground wrestling club that I run in my basement, and whether they were there or not, we would be there, performing.

I became invested in the concept of ‘theatre that anyone could do;’ in a half-invocation of Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, I took the idea of ‘using what I already knew’

and broadened it to ‘using what I had.’<sup>38</sup> My lighting setup consisted entirely of lamps, bulbs, and flashlights from my home, owned by myself or my photographer housemates. The rig was all in one location, operated on the ground next to a downstage row of audience seating by various cast members, with the flashlight deployed as a mobile spotlight. My reasoning laid in that programming stage lights for an entire dramatic performance is a completely foreign process to me and most people I know, but anyone can go over to a lamp, flip a switch, and turn it on. The show’s central lighting source, alternating between complete blackout, nearly-blinding floodlights and a dim orange work lamp, diffused an aesthetic of industrialism and an almost hellish dreaminess. The goal of the manipulation of lighting conditions was giving a conspiratorial, overexposed bent to my imaginations of the spheres of domesticity and public spectacle.

My music-making experience was limited, so while the concept of inter-scene, live, original musical performances appealed to me, and thematically lent itself to the ‘variety-show’ nature of wrestling entertainment programs, it diminished in priority. I still opted for a soundtrack-heavy performance, microphoning actors and selecting intense, tension-heightening ‘battle music’ to replicate the experience of a live arena event.<sup>39</sup> Music played possibly a more integral role in my process and inspiration; writing dialogue for the BLAST Wrestling League personas, I found myself imitating the bleak, trenchantly metaphorical, long-winded narrative style of rappers like billy woods. billy is an excellent writer and one of the harbingers of rap’s ascendance to mainstream literary

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<sup>38</sup> Not that all materials used in this production were already on-hand or acquired for free - but the support of several parties, including the Theatre Artists Guild (see Acknowledgements page), made much of the set design and costuming possible.

<sup>39</sup> Music by Laraaji, LA Timpa, patten, Skrillex, and Yves Tumor was used in the performance, along with brief original compositions.

and artistic legitimacy. In his song *Superpredator* on the album *Known Unknowns*, which almost had appeared in my project if for no other reason than its thematic relevance, he says, “He killed what he loved, so he had to die [...] Chekhov put Jay’s TEC on Nas’ dresser, suppressor on the heckler, pray secular; lay em down like Mecca: Superpredator. Layer gun sounds for texture; if it ain’t broke, cut the record, burnt toast, cold breakfast, one entry, no exit.”<sup>40</sup>

billy has a knack for getting inside the heads of those who society has classified as the most dangerous or unsavory individuals, especially ones plagued with toxically-masculine self-aggrandizement. In *Superpredator*,<sup>41</sup> he describes the self-image of the titular character. A self-described superpredator, the speaker boasts about uncontestedly merciless acts of violence, despite having a lack of agency in every other avenue of his life – his toast is burnt, his breakfast is cold, he has one entry, but no exit. He’s trapped in a purgatory of his own making, not realized that having “killed what he loved,” he had no other choice but to die. Destructive impulses can be forgiven to a point, but the Superpredator doesn’t recognize the limit. He disregards the subjectivity of human life, sides with the absolution of control, and considers it merely “[layering] gun sounds for texture.” But he seems destined for it – the invocation of Chekhov’s gun and Jay-Z and Nas’ legendary East Coast rap beef, in which Jay-Z claimed he showed Nas his first TEC,<sup>42,43</sup> or semi-automatic weapon, makes his fate seem as unavoidable as either

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<sup>40</sup> “Superpredator.” On *Known Unknowns*. billy woods. 2017, audio recording.

<sup>41</sup> The title ‘Superpredator’ is a wry allusion to the incendiary use of the phrase by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton in a speech 1996 to refer to gang members.

<sup>42</sup> On his 2001 album *The Blueprint*, Jay-Z raps, “I showed you your first TEC on tour with Large Professor, then I heard your album about your TEC on the dresser. So yeah, I sampled your voice, you was usin’ it wrong; you made it a hot line, I made it a hot song.”

<sup>43</sup> “Takeover.” On *The Blueprint*. Performed by Jay-Z. September 2001, audio recording.

rappers' eventual stardom. This is where I derived the inspiration for the title – an “N.P.C.,” or non-playable character, is a character in a game who cannot be controlled by a player, whose behavior is entirely algorithmically determined.

Maybe some people are just evil. What control it was that Chris Benoit sought to exercise via the control of Nancy and Daniel's lives is unclear, and will probably remain unknown to us forever. With this project, I didn't set out to expose the truth about the events of June 2007 – I wanted to capture the entanglement of myth, performance, and real-world actions. I was wary of giving Chris Benoit ‘screen time.’ I didn't want to make him an idol. The inhabitation of the mind space of violently toxic masculinity was personally challenging to me. Spence Blender's story is not that of Chris Benoit's. Spence has his own problems, some of which parallel Chris'.

The staging of a completely surprising, out-of-character act of violence was one obstacle to a faithful representation of an aspect of Chris' story – characterizing someone as ‘the kind of person who would never do something like that’ only to have them turn around and ‘do that’ in the last act of the play is reasonably confusing to an audience. In real life, we get plenty of time to excavate that wholesome image and figure out what happened, but in the performance, I had 25 minutes to make myself clear. It ended up making the most dramatic sense to make Spence unilaterally abusive, instead of trying to make it seem out of character for him to be so. But I can't help the feeling that this underplays the quiet threat of violent masculine psychologies – it's not always obvious, and often it's still not even after it's too late.



**Appendix - The Script**

*a New & Powerful Conspiracy*

updated 4/6/2019

Sam Harmann

**CHARACTERS**

“SPENCE” (*SPENCE BLENDER*)

“VICKY” (*VICKY ‘VICIOUS MISTRESS’ BLENDER*)

“BLAINE” (*BLAINE BLENDER*)

“DOCTOR” (*DOCTOR CRAWFORD*)

“DIESEL” (*DIESEL IGNEOUS*)

“MAX ‘METEOR’” (*MAX ‘METEOR FLARE’ IGNEOUS*)

“BUHLE” (*BUHLE COPELAND*)

“GAMER 1/PERRY”

“GAMER 2/NAT”

**CAST**

Sam Harmann - SPENCE

Leor Miller - VICKY

Avis Zane - DOCTOR, MAX ‘METEOR’

Paul Nicholson - DIESEL

Perry Zhang - BUHLE, GAMER 1

Nat Currey - BLAINE, GAMER 2

Lin Barnett - TECHMAN

## VIDEO GAMERS

- *LIN in USR corner w/ flashlight aimed at NAT & PERRY, also USR in the Gamer Lair.*

*PERRY & NAT have just started playing BLAST: OBLITERATION 3D (video game video on projection screen upstage). PLAYER SWITCH happening downstage in darkness between SPENCE > VICKY > DIESEL > MAX. Dramatic, crescendoing action video game music throughout. The GAMERS start playing more intensely. They're panting and physically exerting themselves at this point. When it seems it can't go any faster, AVIS recorded as the Video Game Voice says -*

- *and LIN turns off flashlight -*

*(AVIS): BLAST: OBLITERATION 3D.*

- *WRESTLING MATCH #1 Transition:*
  - *PERRY changes into BUHLE jacket, crosses to center of wrestling ring.*
  - *LIN moves camera to outside USR corner of the ring.*
  - *AVIS or LEOR turns on work light facing wrestling ring.*

## WRESTLING MATCH #1

- *AVIS or LEOR turns on work light facing wrestling ring.*

*The start of a distant past wrestling match. BUHLE COPELAND hosts.*

*Very loud music, DIESEL Entrance choreography from USR.*

*SPENCE Entrance choreography from USL.*

*SPENCE and BUHLE greet each other like old friends.*

BUHLE: Diesel Igneous, Spence Blender, right here, head-to-head, toe-to-toe! Two undeniable warriors, two deadly sworn enemies, but only one can be champion; only one can claim the belt and join the ranks of the pantheon! Who will it be?!

*SPENCE smashes DIESEL's head and he collapses:.*

- *SPENCE VICKY BLAINE BACKSTORY Transition:*
  - *AVIS turns off work light.*
  - *SAM takes off gloves and brings chair.*
  - *NAT brings action figures DS.*
  - *LEOR brings chair DS.*
  - *AVIS turns on the bulb.*



## SPENCE VICKY BLAINE BACKSTORY

- *AVIS turns on the bulb.*

*The living room. SPENCE and VICKY sitting and BLAINE plays with toy wrestlers on the floor, talking to himself.*

SPENCE: You want a kid who's been coddled into believing he can do whatever he wants? You want to keep him from accomplishing anything real?

VICKY: You and I both know we don't need to be worried about what he will accomplish. That's what I'm saying. Listen to him.

BLAINE: You're going to be ground into the dirt and inseparable from the rocks and silt and five, ten years from now, I will have forgotten completely about you! Your reign of terror over my psyche will end totally anticlimactically, but the quiet inside of my head following your demise will be such a foreign sensation it will be deafening to me!

*SPENCE and VICKY look dumbfounded.*

BLAINE: *(To SPENCE and VICKY)* When will I be able to learn some wrestling moves? I want to get Al Ranger to tap out like Dad did!

SPENCE: Well... I was a lot older than you when I started learning. I was, like, twelve. And..

BLAINE: And what?

*(Silence.)*

SPENCE: *(pulling snakes out of shirt.)*

Fuck!

Fuck!

Fuck this! I've had enough!

I'm not in this for the acting!

VICKY: *(shrieking and sheltering BLAINE)* Spence! Aaahh! Ahhh! Aaahh!

- *DOCTORS OFFICE Transition:*
  - *AVIS turns off the bulb.*
  - *PAUL and PERRY bring on table.*
  - *SAM & LEOR move chairs to DOCTOR's OFFICE positions.*
  - *AVIS brings on syringes.*
  - *NAT keeps one action figure.*
  - *LIN turns work light on facing the audience.*

**DOCTOR'S OFFICE**

- *LIN turns on the work light facing the audience.*

*Doctor's Office with VICKY, SPENCE, BLAINE, and the DOCTOR.*

*VICKY sits reading a pamphlet. SPENCE gets BLAINE up on the table. The DOCTOR does check-up stuff with a flashlight.*

SPENCE: Come on, Get on up.

BLAINE: Do you think we can please get pancakes after this?

SPENCE: Maybe we can get pancakes after if you do good work.

BLAINE: I don't want to go to the same pancake place as normal though.

VICKY: And don't scream too much.

SPENCE: What pancake place are you talking about, buddy?

VICKY: The IHOP on Watson by the Ross Dress For Less? You know the one.

BLAINE: I can't help it if I scream too much! I don't want to keep doing these, I want to stop them completely!

DOCTOR: You're a pancake fan, huh?

BLAINE: What?

DOCTOR: You are a pancake fan, huh?

*(The DOCTOR administers the shot without BLAINE noticing.)*

SPENCE: Answer the Doctor.

BLAINE: Yeah, I guess I appreciate a good pancake, and if pressed could say that I am a pancake fan.

*BLAINE notices the shot and screams.*

SPENCE: I said if you do good work! If you do GOOD WORK!

I'm still your hero. I would have ran out to the ring - I came back and found you - "Got his hands off you." I held a gun to my head so I could be with you again.

But I saw a photo of you and heard you say to me, 'yesterday is over. The only thing that we have that is real and is true is right now. Live it.'

- *DOCTOR AND BUHLE CONSPIRE Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off work light*
  - *SAM & LEOR exit and move table to Conspiracy Table position.*
  - *AVIS brings syringe box and chair DS.*
  - *PERRY puts on BUHLE Jacket and goes to US chair.*
  - *LIN turns on orange lamp.*

**DOCTOR AND BUHLE CONSPIRE**

- *LIN turns on orange lamp.*

*Dim lights at the Conspiracy Table, the DOCTOR and BUHLE are there.*

BUHLE: I don't know if he's throwing the matches, if he's getting carried away, or what. Montgomery told me that this guy can be kind of a loose cannon, but this level of un-reliability is disgraceful. The man cannot be controlled whatsoever.

DOCTOR: So Spence is becoming a problem.

BUHLE: Can you take care of him?

DOCTOR: *(opening the box of syringes)* Is this admissible?

- *DOCTOR's OFFICE (SPENCE) transition:*
  - *LIN turns off orange lamp.*
  - *AVIS & PERRY move table.*
  - *PERRY moves 1 chair to DOCTOR's OFFICE .*
  - *SAM moves other chair and gets one syringe.*
  - *AVIS keeps box of syringes.*
  - *LIN turns on work light toward audience.*

**DOCTOR'S OFFICE (SPENCE)**

- *LIN turns on work light toward audience.*

*The DOCTOR and SPENCE at the DOCTOR's office. The DOCTOR has a box of syringes and SPENCE is examining one.*

SPENCE: So? This really works like this?

DOCTOR: Yes. We're not supposed to tell anyone about it. We're honestly surprised you all haven't caught onto it yet.

SPENCE: Crazy. Hey. I really appreciate this. I mean, the pressure, sometimes, it makes you go crazy. I'm talking about people anticipating you being a certain way. There's a lot of reasons to want to fit into the mold. You can say it. That I'm falling for the peer pressure right now.

DOCTOR: I think I know what you mean.

SPENCE: I think that you do too. *(pulling snakes out of shirt)* You know what it's like to want to retreat, too. Admit your own defeat - *(doing M.C.D.s)* Totally implode your source code and corrode your own legacy. Some exploded batteries in a fucked up video game remote.

*(Taking the box.)*

Thanks.

*(He leaves.)*

- *VICKY AND BUHLE CONSPIRE Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off work light.*
  - *SAM & AVIS rotate table.*
  - *PERRY and LEOR move chairs and sit.*
  - *SAM throws LEOR a snake.*
  - *LIN turns on the orange lamp.*

**VICKY AND BUHLE CONSPIRE**

- *LIN turns on orange lamp.*

*Dim lights at the Conspiracy Table. VICKY and BUHLE are there.*

BUHLE: So Spence is becoming a problem.

VICKY: *(with rubber snake)* Is this admissible?

- *MIND CONTROL DRUGS Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off the orange lamp, goes US w/ flashlight*
  - *SAM and AVIS move table back.*
  - *SAM gets microphone and goes to center wrestling ring.*
  - *EVERYONE makes V-formation around SAM.*
  - *LIN turns on flashlight from behind.*

### **SPENCE'S SONG (MIND CONTROL DRUGS)**

- *LIN turns on flashlight from behind.*

*Player Switch in the wrestling ring onto SPENCE about to do the injection. Other PLAYERS surround him, forming a partial human cage.*

SPENCE:

For caring about how the general public thinks of me.

I'm compromising.

I don't need to face the reaction.

I'm about to take mind control drugs,

I don't know it yet - What's going to happen

Was already written in blood...

I might fuck around on Heracles and try to murder my son.

Our Honda Odyssey in Space from 2001

that I was going to give him before we had to blast off to escape from the flood  
is now useless without a male heir to inherit it and the push bumper on the front.

Cop Dad gave it to us with my needle and blood phobias.

I thought i couldn't imagine doing anything like this ever,

but i'm already paranoid, thinking that my house has been bugged and shit.

I guess what's getting done is done and there's nothing I can do about it.

I should be scared out of this but the fucking muscles are supposed to be the biggest part  
of it.

Kind of sick, like, Spartan shit, isn't it?

The red mist scored by the sound of millions of roaring idiots

watching TV in their mom's house who will never actually be a part of this?

It's really weird, it's a weirdly real feeling

knowing that my premium rideshare service to hell is nearly here,

That there are some wounds that healing just can't heal,

Like how being cursed at birth with manhood can make you realize that

You don't love people, you just love the way that certain ones made you feel.

- *FILMING PROMO Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off flashlight and starts camera for promo.*
  - *PERRY, PAUL, AVIS, and LEOR go to prep sides of ring for MATCH #2.*
  - *SAM goes to US area of ring.*
  - *NAT turns on 1 work light.*

**FILMING PROMO**

- *NAT turns on 1 work light.*

*SPENCE being filmed by LIN against backdrop of projection screen.*

*Loud music.*

*(Filming)*

SPENCE: Monday night... My wife and my children will not be watching BLAST.

Because I am gonna do something that is unthinkable.

I'm gonna leave you with my anger.

Sleep well.

*(Cut filming.)*

*SPENCE calls BLAINE while procuring a syringe and doing a Mind Control Drug injection.*

SPENCE: Hey, buddy, how's it going? Are you having fun with Megan?

DIESEL: Hey, get off the phone!

BUHLE: Hey! Get off the fucking phone!

*A match is about to start.*

- *WRESTLING MATCH #2 Transition:*
  - *NAT turns on 2nd work light.*

## WRESTLING MATCH #2

- *NAT turns on 2nd work light.*

*The match begins. PLAYER SWITCH DS between SPENCE > VICKY > DIESEL > MAX.*

BUHLE: You wanted excitement and blood sport? Spectacle? Loud noises? Hectic, amateurish brawling? All in the name of a form of live entertainment that most people on God's earth find appalling? It's here and it's not going anywhere! -- it's *BLAST: OBLITERATION!*

*SPENCE/VICKY & DIESEL/MAX Entrance Choreography.*

It's the monarchs of the Blender Dynasty, SPENCE and VICKY, challenging the Fearsome Twosome, the reigning BLAST Tag Team Champions, DIESEL and MAX 'METEOR FLARE' IGNEOUS!

*DIESEL and MAX enter and rush SPENCE and VICKY.*

MAX 'METEOR!' Goddamn!

VICKY: SPENCE! BARBARIAN BATTERING RAM!

*SPENCE battering-rams DIESEL and MAX apart with VICKY. They spin back and punch SPENCE and VICKY back SL.*

BUHLE: The recoil on that one!

*MAX slams SPENCE's head into the ground and he collapses.*

BUHLE: Oh! MAX 'METEOR's "JUMP JET ACCELERATION!"

*BUHLE intervenes, but isn't sympathetic. Hazy music swelling in and out. Yells some crazy cult-revival stuff at SPENCE while he's on the ground: You fell prey to the noise.. always a possibility that must be taken seriously.. Nobody wants to listen about what they can't do. But I don't see you putting the work in. You think your life is unfair? We all made it from nothing.*

- *NAT turns off work light, LIN turns on flashlight.*

*SPENCE goes unconscious.*

BLAINE: *(from the lamp DS)* You are still my hero!

- *VIDEO GAME DREAM SEQUENCE Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off flashlight.*
  - *PERRY exits, LEOR, PAUL, AVIS, & NAT go DSR to get ready for player switch.*
  - *SAM stays on ground US.*
  - *PERRY turns on work light.*



## VIDEO GAME DREAM SEQUENCE

*SPENCE on the ground in the wrestling ring. He gets a phone call from someone channeling psychic powers (AVIS in the video game voice).*

- *PERRY turns on work light.*

(AVIS): Spence. What happened tonight was already written. You fell prey to the noise. We all knew it was going to happen. When you fell out of control is unclear right now. But you must have been before, to get here. And to have that life that you have. But the writers came in at some point and decided some reality TV was what people needed right now. So what happened tonight was, actually, already written.

SPENCE: *(Is a bunch of SPENCEs.)* I gotta get it again.

(AVIS): You need to start again.

- *PERRY turns off work light.*

*(SPENCE crosses from the center of the wrestling ring to the DS playing area in the dark.)*

- *LIN turns on flashlight aimed DSC.*

You need to make another selection.

*(Lights out on SPENCE. Player Switch to VICKY. Lights on.)*

That likeness has been blacklisted.

*(Lights out on VICKY. Player Switch back to SPENCE. Lights on.)*

You need to make another selection.

*(Lights out on SPENCE. Player Switch to DIESEL. Lights on.)*

That likeness has been blacklisted.

*(Lights out on DIESEL. Player Switch back to SPENCE. Lights on.)*

You need to make another selection.

*(Lights out on SPENCE. Player Switch to MAX. Lights on.)*

That likeness has been blacklisted.

*(Lights out on MAX. Player Switch back to SPENCE. Lights on.)*

You need to make another selection.

That likeness has been blacklisted from *BLAST: ONLINE* servers.

Your account has been suspended for successive attempts to access a blacklisted likeness.

For questions contact -

- *DIESEL'S SONG Transition:*
  - *EVERYONE but PAUL goes off-upstage.*
  - *LIN follows PAUL with flashlight.*
  - *PAUL goes to center of wrestling ring and paces.*

**DIESEL'S SONG**

*DIESEL in the ring.*

- *LIN turns on flashlight aimed at PAUL.*

DIESEL: It's not fun; I have zero fucking passion for this.

I'm fucking concussed, I'm fucking hurt,  
and all you care about is what segment I'm in and  
how soon I can get my fucking gear on and  
how soon I can pee in this fucking cup and  
I don't want to fucking do it anymore.

I'm tired of picking up pieces for my costume at the vacuum repair store.

I was told that there'd be more than this -

*DIESEL's MUSIC plays.*

But the slams received from Spence over the years have

left my back distorted,

left my limbs contorted,

left me looking like the subject of a fucking Francis Bacon portrait.

Now it feels like all I can do is sit and watch in horror

as my consciousness subliminally absorbs it.

Spence's story might be *written* in blood, but I don't hate him for it,

I just perform in it.

I hate the fact that *my* story had to be *paid for* in it.

- *WRESTLING MATCH #3 Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off flashlight.*

### WRESTLING MATCH #3

*In the wrestling ring. A disheveled-looking BUHLE delivers an uneasy opening monologue, accompanied by DIESEL. Both stand over SPENCE on the ground.*

BUHLE: Diesel Igneous... is here...

and ... Spence Blender ... is here...

He's not looking too good... you okay, Spence?

Get this going... they're strong, they're fast...

And underneath it all there's a bubbling boiling flood cracking through the confines of command and mastery...

He (*gesturing to SPENCE*)... does this for his family!

It's nice, right?

It's very noble!

Now, Diesel and I have had our differences... I think you could say that.

But... with Major Morals over here...

Well...

We've found some common ground.

Mr. Igneous... Spence... let's get this show on the road.

*DIESEL and BUHLE beat the shit out of SPENCE.*

- *BLAINE HAS A PREMONITION Transition:*
  - *SAM turns off projector.*
  - *NAT goes to the center of the ring with a flashlight.*
    - *Places 2 snakes DSR*
    - *Turns on flashlight*

**BLAINE HAS A PREMONITION**

- *NAT turns on the flashlight.*

*BLAINE in the wrestling ring with a flashlight. He does his injection. He looks around with the flashlight and sees two snakes. He strangles them and smashes them into the ground.*

VICKY: Blaine! Honey! What are you doing? Let's get back to bed.

- *F.U.V.G.K.D. Transition:*
  - *NAT turns off the flashlight.*
  - *PAUL, PERRY, AVIS, and NAT go to the center of the ring.*
    - *PAUL brings a body bag to put in front of him.*
    - *PERRY brings a video game controller.*
    - *AVIS brings a syringe.*
    - *NAT brings DIESEL's Pole.*
  - *LEOR goes DSR*
    - *Places 1 body bag DSC for SAM and lays in the other one DSR.*
  - *LIN turns on the orange lamp.*

## **FUCKED UP VIDEO GAME KILLING DREAM**

- *LIN turns on the orange lamp.*

*BUHLE stands with the video game controller plugged into DIESEL sitting, flanked by BLAINE and the DOCTOR. SPENCE enters and the DOCTOR administers him a Mind Control Drug injection. BUHLE hands him the controller.*

*The DOCTOR and BUHLE put their hands on SPENCE's shoulders.*

*DIESEL is controlled by SPENCE like a robot dog on a leash to climb into a body bag and zip it up. BLAINE holds one of DIESEL's tubes in an opening in the bag for him to breathe through while BUHLE holds a microphone to the other end.*

*DIESEL convulses inside of the bag for a short time while SPENCE stands over him. The convulsing turns to stillness and heavy breathing, which quiets to even, natural breath, like a reverse death. We transition into **WRESTLING MATCH #4**.*

- *WRESTLING MATCH #4 Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off the orange lamp.*
  - *NAT unzips PAUL and brings his body bag DSL.*
    - *NAT lays in the body bag.*
    - *PAUL exits SR, bringing his Pole.*
  - *SAM puts video game controller cable under NAT's bag.*
    - *SAM exits SR.*
  - *AVIS goes USR onto the stair scaffolding.*
  - *PERRY exits and brings microphone off SR.*
  - *LIN turns flashlight on AVIS on the stairs.*

#### WRESTLING MATCH #4

- *LIN turns flashlight on AVIS on the stairs.*

*AVIS reappears in flashlight as the DOCTOR upstage of the ring.*

*Scored with DIESEL's breathing from the **FUCKED UP VIDEO GAME KILLING DREAM.***

DOCTOR: Spence. You tried to cheat the system.

If the question was,

Whether you, or any man in your position, could love others

As much as you love to control...

We would have gotten a clear outcome.

But, that's not an element of our research interests,

We save that for the sociologists and philosophers.

*SPENCE turns on the orange lamp and takes off his shoes. Light reveals three more body bags in the downstage playing area. BLAINE is in one on SR and VICKY is in one on SL.*

Was it worth it, Spence?

I hope so, because, unfortunately, our research has to end here.

Next time you should wake up and try actually living in your body.

*SPENCE zips up BLAINE and VICKY in their bags and yanks out their video game controller cables, finally getting in the center one. PERRY turns off the orange lamp, leaving only the flashlight on the DOCTOR, who crosses downstage to SPENCE in his bag. She zips it up and yanks out the third video game controller.*

- *BLAST REACTS Transition:*
  - *LIN turns off the flashlight on AVIS.*

**BLAST REACTS/DIESEL MONOLOGUE**

*Lights up on DIESEL stoically adjusting his gear in the middle of the ring with the DOCTOR and BUHLE standing beside him.*

BUHLE: I just... can't believe he's gone...

DIESEL: Do I hate him? No. It's a job.

I don't think about him outside of work.

I can't even remember what his face looks like without it right in front of me.

I would really rather not. Talk about my family.

BUHLE: Are you making him? You can't make him talk about his family.

DIESEL: I would really rather tell you about something that I saw earlier today. This investigation, about this cop who broke into this guy's apartment and shot him and his girlfriend in their bed while they were asleep. Like... two weeks ago. So there is your concept of privacy.

BUHLE: Minding your own business.

DIESEL: Spence wrestled the title of Grand Wrestling Master away from me in 2002. It was humiliating, honestly. I left the ring and got straight in my car. I drove around for what felt like days. But nighttime the whole time. I let traffic lights push me along. I was not going anywhere so it didn't feel like it mattered how quickly they turned green. I remember feeling relief when I would arrive at an intersection that was no-right-turn-on-red. The situation was out of my hands. No one was waiting for me to do anything. I just had to follow instructions.

DOCTOR: Do you think that is how Spence felt?

DIESEL: When? Like when he killed them?

I don't know. I have not really thought about it.

Psychoanalysis is above my pay grade.

**Scene List**

1. VIDEO GAMERS
2. WRESTLING MATCH #1
3. SPENCE VICKY BLAINE BACKSTORY
4. DOCTOR'S OFFICE
5. DOCTOR AND BUHLE CONSPIRE
6. DOCTOR'S OFFICE (SPENCE)
7. VICKY & BUHLE CONSPIRE
8. SPENCE DOING INJECTION/M.C.D.s
9. FILMING PROMO
10. WRESTLING MATCH #2
11. VIDEO GAME DREAM SEQUENCE
12. DIESEL'S SONG
13. WRESTLING MATCH #3
14. BLAINE HAS A PREMONITION
15. F.U.V.G.K.D.
16. WRESTLING MATCH #4 (DEATHS)
17. BLAST REACTS



**Deleted Scenes****DIESEL AT THE BAR AFTER LOSING**

*Right after WRESTLING MATCH #1, DIESEL is sitting at a bar alone after losing.*

*PERRY cleans glasses behind the bar.*

*The match is on TV.*

*SPENCE walks in.*

**CHILDHOOD FLASHFURTHERBACK**

*Living room, SPENCE playing with action figures. DIESEL and VICKY are his parents.*

DOCTOR: *(to the parents)* Thank you. I appreciate it. I'll just be a minute.

*(goes to SPENCE)* Hi Spence. Do you remember me? That's alright, I haven't seen you since you were much younger. My name is Doctor Crawford. Let me ask you something. Do you still like video games?

*They have a short fight over SPENCE's action figure.*

**DIESEL CONSPIRES WITH THE GAMERS**

*DIESEL in the VIDEO GAMERS' lair. He approaches them with a picture of SPENCE.*

DIESEL: Can you control him?

PERRY: People have made facsimiles online.

DIESEL: I want it plugged directly into him. He's becoming a problem.

NAT: The resemblances to actual persons, living or dead, are only so close.

PERRY: But everyone's differences in taste necessitate thousands.

NAT: There are ones of everyone.

DIESEL: You could try it with mine.

PERRY: *(to NAT)* Can you exit this?

Now go to that bottom one.

NAT: *(to DIESEL)* You ready?

*DIESEL affirms, PERRY plugs a controller into him, he does the mind-control head roll, and spontaneously collapses, then is resurrected Frankenstein-style.*

**SPENCE AND VICKY TRAINING 1**

*SPENCE punching pads on VICKY's hands with boxing gloves.*

VICKY: And I was just, like... a lot of people have that problem.

SPENCE: Uh-huh.

VICKY: And then, he says to me, 'that doesn't mean I should let it get in *my* way.'

Can you believe that?

**SPENCE AND VICKY TRAINING 2**

*VICKY sitting over SPENCE on the ground, furiously punching pads on his hands w/ gloves.*

VICKY: 'THAT... DOESN'T... MEAN... I... SHOULD LET IT... GET... IN MY WAY?!'

**FUCKING LEADER**

*PERFORMERS enter with phones in pockets and circle around VICKY center stage, who sits on the floor and whips her hair around in a 'mind-control head roll.' PERFORMERS shine the flashlights on their phones at her. Quiet 'FUCKING LEADER' audio plays over music:*

“No no no i’m talking about what’s on the internet pal -

It’s faggots like you who think you’re gonna fuckin follow me around...no no no...no no no, like for example, i’m gonna fuckin pu- you know - say exactly what i say right here right on camera including uh-- faggots like Ellen De Fucking Degenerate, cuz these are fuckin faggot pieces of shit who like to lie about what they do and talk about how fuckin honorable they are, right? And then they have to giggle to themselves like little idiots to make themselves feel better because the rest of these fuckin idiots wanted free fuckin shit..right? And then - oh - i got a problem with their leftist bullshit, but for some reason i can’t think what i wanna think right? But the faggots get to live their life as they choose to because they’re so fuckin liberal... cuz just like this asshole said, i don’t wanna fuckin be here! So.. why is it that a bunch of faggots think i’m here to serve them? And this is exactly what i’d say on fuckin camera, and you can put it on the internet, because here’s my name, my first name’s (- - -) last name’s (- - -) and i’m the fuckin person who you’ve been fuckin spying on for your fuckin entertainment for the last four and a half fucking years. And guess what? I’m here to fuck your life up if you are actually so fuckin mentally ill..... and DERANGED...you think i am your fucking leader.”

*VICKY breaks out of her trance and exits SL.*

*EVERYONE turns off their phone flashlights.*

**1997 (VICKY & MAX 'METEOR' BACKSTORY)**

*VICKY and DIESEL together at home watching TV.*

BUHLE: *(voiced over)* That's it! VICKY 'VICIOUS MISTRESS' and MAX 'METEOR FLARE' are the tag team champions of 1997!! I don't know about you, but I can see no one even coming close to touching them in the near future! The momentum here is like electricity in your mouth!

*VICKY embraces DIESEL.*

**DOCTOR GAMES W THE GAMERS**

*The DOCTOR in the VIDEO GAMERS' lair.*

NAT: *(to the DOCTOR)* You ready?



**EVERYONE IS SO TIRED**

*PERFORMERS drag themselves across the wrestling ring with their arms from DS to US:*

→ *PERRY > AVIS > PAUL > SAM > NAT > LEOR > LIN*

*ALL: (dragging selves across) I'm so tired... I'm so tired...*

**Production Photos**

*Photos by Jordon Soper.*







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# N. E. W. & P. O. W. E. R. F. U. L. C. O. N. S. P. I. R. A. C. Y.

Sam Harmann's senior project  
in theatre & performance  
the old gym at Bard College  
April 12/13/14, 2019



■ ■ ■ ■ ■  
**Lin Barnett is the  
Techman.**

**Nat Currey is  
Blaine Blender &  
Gamer #1.**

**Sam Harmann is  
Spence Blender.**

**Leor Miller is  
Vloky "Violous  
Mistress" Blender.**

**Paul Nicholson is  
Diesel Igneous.**

**Avis Zane is Max  
"Meteor Flare"  
Igneous &**

**the Doctor.**

**Perry Zhang is  
Buhle Copeland &  
Gamer #2.**



Writing, direction, and design by Sam Harmann with assistance from Lin Barnett. Music by LA Timpa, Leor Miller, patten, Sam Harmann, Skrillex, and Yves Tumor. Set construction assistance by Ori Carlin. Sound run by Elise Alexander. Photographs by Jordon Soper.

A New & Powerful  
 Conspiracy is what  
 I would call a recurring  
 fear of being stripped of  
 power. It's given us a  
 tradition of stories about  
 heroes with 'uncontainable'  
 masculine power that  
 ultimately translates into  
 violence inflicted on their  
 families. They're founded  
 in the lives and actions of  
 real-life men. There's an  
 incapacity to love that  
 sows hatred for the outside  
 and for those within. This  
 project was inspired by the  
 life and death of Chris  
 Benoit, a professional  
 wrestler who murdered his  
 wife, Nancy, and son,  
 Daniel, in 2007; the game  
 Quake III for Sega  
 Dreamcast; the junk drawer  
 in my desk; Greek  
 infanticide myths; not  
 knowing much about  
 wrestling; and the  
 'Business & Industrial'  
 category on ebay.

Thanks to  
 the cast, Lin Barnett,  
 Elise Alexander, Ori  
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 family, my mom, my  
 dad, my grandma,  
 Langston Barrett,  
 Phoebe Hiltmann and  
 the Surrealist Training  
 Circus, the Bard  
 Theatre Artists Guild,  
 the Old Gym, Jack  
 Ferver and the Theatre  
 and Performance  
 faculty.



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