

Violent Interfaces: The Jack Bauer Training Kit

Jamie Zigelbaum
MIT Media Lab & Taco Lab
zig@media.mit.edu

Jeevan Kalanithi
MIT Media Lab & Taco Lab
jeevan@media.mit.edu
jeevan@tacolab.com

Marcelo Coelho
MIT Media Lab & Taco Lab
marcelo@media.mit.edu

Alyssa Wright
MIT Media Lab & Taco Lab
apw@media.mit.edu

Abstract

In this paper we present The Jack Bauer Training Kit (JBTK), a new physical interface and video game add-on for viewing episodes of the Fox television series “24.” Jack Bauer, a fictional character in this series, is notable for using torture as a method for extracting information from “bad guys.” Using JBTK, players watch the show until a torture scene starts and can choose to advance the narrative by pouring water onto the hooded face of a physical 10 inch doll bound to a small table by leather restraints. Pouring just the right amount of water gets you a high score, too much and you might kill the “bad guy.” Rather than using an abstract game controller as most video game consoles do, where the functionality is physically and conceptually detached from the stylized actions on the screen, the JBTK mimics the torture applied in the real world by physically instantiating its representations, violence and consequences.

Introduction

Much of the public discourse on the topic of violence and torture in entertainment is wrapped in hyperbole and controversy. As viewers, readers, and players of electronic media, we are often protected behind a layer of abstraction via carefully constructed representations. We use plastic game controllers with abstract buttons and pads, which are devoid of content, to direct action that is

inherently disconnected from the experiences we live on the screen. As Michel de Certeau writes in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, games betray a logic for everyday life. However, in our lifetime, this logic of games includes a serious abstraction from the consequences of our actions.



Figure 1: A user playing JBTK — during a torture scene in “24,” the user has to successfully waterboard a doll representing the terrorist suspect.

“24”: Summary and controversy

The FOX television series “24” has become a focal point for the torture controversy. Its hero, Jack Bauer, is a US government agent in the fictional Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU). Over seven seasons, the show has featured scenes in which Jack Bauer tortures individuals in order to extract information from them. For example, in season 4, episode 11, Jack strips down a lamp cable to electrocute his girlfriend’s ex-husband. According to the Parents Television Council there were 67 torture scenes during the first five seasons of “24.”

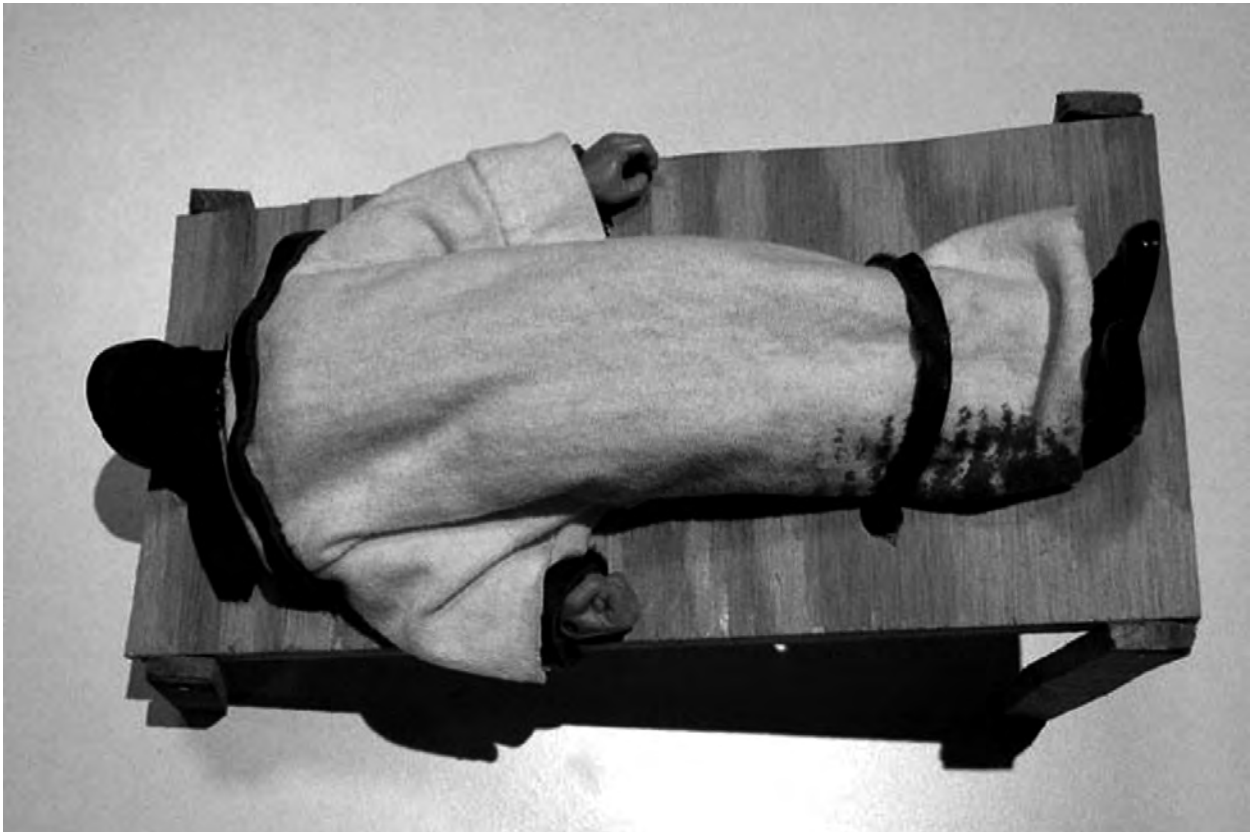


Figure 2: The terrorist doll.

In particular, “24” often depicts the “ticking time bomb” scenario, a thought experiment used to explore the moral implications of torture. In the scenario, the authorities hold a person who is suspected of holding information that, if revealed, will allow the authorities to defuse a ticking time bomb that will soon detonate, causing a huge loss of life. Proponents of the acceptability of torture argue that the authorities are justified in torturing the suspect in this case. In 2007 US Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia cited “24” during a panel discussion on torture and terrorism. He supported Bauer’s use of torture to prevent a nuke from detonating in California, asking “is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don’t think so.”

Control and abstraction

Despite the controversy surrounding torture, its inherently visceral dimension is often missing from the discourse. In the case of TV and film, torture scenes occur in the abstract space of a two-dimensional screen with the viewer a passive, powerless observer. In interactive media such as video games, the user controls actions via an abstract set of controls (buttons and thumb-sticks) that have no physical relationship to the actions he or she performs in the virtual space. Does the inherent psychological distance between the viewer/user and the actions taken by characters on screen affect his or her moral and political perception of torture?

While we take nothing away from the emotional power of visual media and video games, we seek to narrow, or at least alter, the gap between the user's actions as depicted virtually and their actions in the real world. If we make the relationship between action and result less abstract, do we re-engage a sense of viscerality and/or responsibility into the torture question? How does mimicry of a violent act in an interactive experience affect the perception of that violent act?

The Jack Bauer training kit

The Jack Bauer Training Kit is a tangible video game system that makes the TV show "24" an interactive experience. Users watch the show, and when a torture scene begins, the show stops momentarily. In order to advance the show and earn points, the user has to help Jack Bauer interrogate his suspect: using a water-filled cup, the user must pour water over a representation of the suspect tied to a board, mimicking the waterboarding procedure. If the user pours too much water or pours it too quickly over the suspect, he dies, and the user must try again. If the user pours too little or too slowly, the suspect refuses to cooperate. In these two losing conditions, the ticking time bomb goes off. If the user succeeds in torturing the subject the right amount, he gets the information he needs, and the show continues. The suspect's unwillingness to give up information and his "life points" are represented by a bar graph on the screen, which the user must monitor in order to torture the right amount. Using the JBTK, users can help Jack foil terrorist plots and master his techniques.

We implemented the JBTK by editing episodes of "24" and embedding them in a Flash script. The pouring cup is augmented with a tilt sensor and microcontroller; the microcontroller communicates the tilt readings to the host running the interactive version of "24." Using the stream of tilt data, the script determines whether the user has met the torture success conditions, advancing the show if he or she has, and returning to the beginning of the torture scene if not.

Using the Jack Bauer training kit: Questions and provocations

The JBTK seeks to more closely mirror the user's physical actions to actions represented on screen. Of course, it does not totally unite them – using the JBTK is not the same as torturing a human individual! Pragmatically, the user must map waterboarding to the different types of torture techniques Jack Bauer uses. This of course increases the distance between user and his or her actions, and no doubt forces upon the user tacit assumptions about torture and Jack's actions, while also setting up a dissonance between television's stylized representations of torture and the way that torture is often practiced today. A future version of the JBTK could include a set of dolls, in which the user mimics Jack's torture techniques directly.

Conclusion

User responses have covered the spectrum of disgust to enjoyment; in all cases, however, users seem to re-engage with the torture question after using JBTK. As creators, we acknowledged the wide variety of potential responses, including the darkly humorous nature of JBTK; but sought to favor no particular dimension in particular.

"Day 4, 5:00–6:00 p.m." 24. By Joel Surnow and Michael Loceff. FOX. 28 February 2005.

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Parents Television Council. <http://www.parentstv.org/> retrieved April 25th, 2008.

Justice Scalia quote via Crooks and Liars. www.crooksandliars.com/2007/06/19/scalia-asks-are-you-going-to-convict-jack-bauer/ retrieved April 25th, 2008.