What we’re doing is completely novel,” Davoren says. “We’re former NCAA consultant – and Dr. Stephen Hebard. led by Prevention Strategies’ experts Dr. Annie Kearns Davoren – a former evangelical Christian group, wonder if there’s a way to avoid harming the unarmed civilians.

Violence is par-for-the-course in Call of Duty. But these players, who are part of an evangelical Christian group, wonder if there’s a way to avoid harming the unarmed civilians. “We just can’t understand morally why someone would do it.”

He calls evil in video games ludic evil – a phrase he developed using the Latin word for play.

Grieve, an ethnographer by training, who specializes in religion and digital culture, uses multiple human-centered methods to explore how people perceive and respond to ludic evil.

For example, he will concentrate on one scene from a video game and play it multiple times himself. This methodology, which Grieve calls close play, is similar to a literary scholar’s close reading of a text.

He also watches through the eyes of other players. “I’m looking at other people to see what they do,” he says. “Their decisions are more interesting to me than what I think is right or wrong.”

So far Grieve has three books and 37 publications related to gaming. In 2021, he and UNCG’s Dr. John Borchert will release a “Religion and Video Games: An Introduction” textbook with prestigious publisher Routledge.

“Studying video gaming and the problem of evil fosters media literacy and allows us to make ethical choices in this brave new digital world,” he says.

Ethical choices such as the one presented to the evangelical Christian group playing Call of Duty. Grieve follows the conversation thread as the group debates their options.

“They decide to turn their backs to all the violence and not engage with it,” he says.

The players get through the airport and end up in the same spot they would have if they had chosen the violent route. And, Grieve says, they do so with their values intact – at least for this stage of the game.

Sometimes Grieve’s 15 years of research on evil leads him to an unexpected place: hope.

“Maximizing public health impact is my priority,” he says. “Our goal is to bring the best evidence to the table and make recommendations for interventions and education that can help gamers.

“One way to do that is to translate our findings into behavioral interventions and education that can help gamers.”

“Collegiate esports athletes compete at a very high level that requires hours of physical, mental, and game-specific skills training,” Hebard says.

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“Conducting research with Professor Grieve was something I never expected, but I would not trade it for anything else,” Rosenberg says. “For me, it solidified what I want to do in my future career. I plan to go into user experience research, hopefully within the gaming industry.”

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UNCG has joined the collegiate esports movement with a $2.4 million state-of-the-art facility. But gamers aren’t the only ones stepping into the arena.

ESPORTS ATHLETE HEALTH

Public health education professor David Wyrick launched the UNCG Center for Athlete Wellness for research on the physical and mental health of athletes of all ages.

Through the center, his spinoff company Prevention Strategies, LLC, and partnerships with major players in the industry – including the NCAA and FBI – Dr. Wyrick and his team take their findings into the classroom and onto the court.

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Sometimes Grieve’s 15 years of research on evil leads him to an unexpected place: hope.

“A lot of times video games are just ignored or they’re dismissed as frivolous entertainment, but a lot of them have deep ethical choices that the players have to make,” says Grieve, who is director of UNCG’s Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming, and a founding member of the International Academy for the Study of Gaming and Religion.

He defines evil as actions that most people would consider outside of ethical norms. “We just can’t understand morally why someone would do it.”

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“Keep your head on a swivel.”
“Flip the switch.”

These are just some of the catchphrases David Miller heard regularly during his seven years in the Marine Corps. For good reason. Traits like being highly tuned in to your environment, known as situational awareness, can promote safety and survival during combat.

But what happens when this mindset is carried into everyday life?

The question changed Miller’s trajectory as an undergraduate at UNCG. Miller, like many veterans, says he had multiple “rough years” after being medically discharged from the Marine Corps. But in psychology laboratories at UNCG, he found a way to reclaim the part of his identity that thrived on supporting his comrades-in-arms.

“We lose a lot of our service members to suicide every day, and one of those things that drives me is trying to bring that number down—I want to be a light on people’s darkest days,” he says.

As an undergrad, Miller began working in Dr. Blair Wisco’s research lab. “I knew I needed research experience to become a clinical psychologist,” he says. “But I thought I would hate it—the math, the statistics.”

But it wasn’t what he expected. “Listening to people just need out about psychology the same way I did was awesome.” Wisco’s focus on post-traumatic stress disorder resonated with Miller.

During lab discussions, Miller realized some behaviors associated with PTSD were commonplace in military training. “What if a person found these things really useful for 4 to 20 years?” he asked. How might this learned behavior then trickle into a veteran’s civilian life?

His colleagues didn’t have an answer, and, just like that Miller was bitten by the research bug.

“Helping countless veterans through research and contributing something new to an entire body of thought—I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity.”

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Psychology professor and director of clinical training Kari Eddington became Miller’s mentor. In her laboratory, he explored how adaptive behaviors in the military can become maladaptive with changes in context and intensity.

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“I think the most rewarding thing was helping countless veterans through research and contributing something new to an entire body of thought—I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity.”

The smaller, more personal and teaching-oriented laboratory setting was a “game changer.”

Those crucial experiences at UNCG prepared Miller for his next MARC-U-STAR program opportunity: a summer research internship in Duke’s Traumatic Stress and Health Research Lab.

“Miller excelled in the role—which was so much so that he received and accepted a job offer to work as a project manager in the same lab after graduating. He plans to continue cultivating his research skills in this position while applying to graduate programs in clinical psychology. He feels well prepared for this next step.”

“What a lot of people have only done for six or a year when they graduate. I was able to do for three years. And the confidence from that is just incredible.”

By Rachel Damiani
learn more at psy.uncg.edu

COMMUNITY OF GAMERS

From freshmen to tenured faculty, UNCG gamers bond over shared interests, exchange ideas, and bring scholarship to the broader community. Thanks to the new Network for the Cultural Study of Video Gaming.

Associate director Dr. John Borchert says the network, known as the NCSV, was founded in 2021 with the goals of fostering research, education, and outreach.

“What’s really innovative about what we’re doing is the integration of education and research,” Borchert says. “This gives students and faculty a well-rounded approach to game cultures and esports.”

Within the classroom, students and faculty are delving into curricula that connect gaming to well-established fields, from sports broadcasting to digital animation.

In the network’s first year, faculty have developed 9 new courses. Examples include Playing Games and the Ancient World, Environmental Justice in Video Games and Literature, and Game Over: Video Gaming and Death.

“These courses offer a new avenue for student interest and for faculty exploration of new horizons in their research agendas,” Borchert says.

The network is building on this momentum by launching the NCSV Summer Camp for 9 to 14 year olds.

Miller is a founding member of the network and has been on a NCSV Committee for 3 years, working to bring the Summer Camp to life.

To find out more about the network, visit esports.uncg.edu.

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A NEW WAY TO SERVE

The military-affiliated services office is a second home for many veterans during their time at UNCG. It was also a place to find participants for Miller’s undergar research.

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mental health C Counselors, psychologists, and other mental health professionals work hard to make sure their patients feel safe and supported. But it can be challenging to maintain a sense of well-being when you’re dealing with so much stress.

“Mental Health: What’s the matter?”

This is a question that many people ask themselves when they’re feeling down or struggling to cope. It can be easy to get overwhelmed by the challenges of everyday life. But there are ways to overcome these obstacles and find your way back to feeling good.

“Research at Play” is a feature that highlights the work of researchers at UNCG. These stories showcase the diverse range of topics being studied on campus, from video games and esports to military mental health.

“We’re just getting started,” says Wyrick, who — in addition to researching esports athlete health — serves as director of Innovate UNCG. “Esports is the most exciting thing I’ve seen in my career to help push translational research and innovation forward.”

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WELCOME

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“You have a right to be here.”

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