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The Hero Industry: Spectacular Pacification in the Era of Media Interactivity

Braden Timss
Western Washington University, Braden.Timss@wwu.edu

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INTRODUCTION: THE SPECTACLE, SITUATIONS, AND THE VIRTUAL CITIZEN–SOLDIER

In Ben Fountain's 2012 novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, the titular US soldier and the Bravo squad become canonized Iraq War heroes when their rescue attempt is captured on digital video. In recognition of their bravery, their tour of duty is halted for an American media stint that culminates in their participation during the 2004 Dallas Cowboys Thanksgiving halftime show. This celebratory return allows the proud American public to interact with the heroes from the video, subsumed, however they may be, by the militarized media spectacle and abstracted into icons of precious, simplified meaning. **Commodities** like War Hero Billy Lynn are a necessary product when images of postmodern warfare do not bring a nation's culture any grounding, pacifying sense of meaning. Better than a mere screen, Billy is alive; he can be touched. Endowed with the experiential knowledge of soldier subjectivity, he becomes a ready vessel brought close for an American public to inhabit . . .

Entangled in the complex interplay between war, mass media, and capitalism, the process of American hero commodification undergone by figures like Billy Lynn can be demystified with consideration for Guy Debord's theory of *the spectacle*. Developed in the 1960s, the spectacle describes the worldview necessarily produced by capitalism: a transformation of social values into general equivalence with the values of the economy and the emergence of a new social reality subsumed by symbolic commodity logics (Society of the Spectacle sec. 4-6, 40). Moreover, Debord argues that the spectacle has become "the main production of

present-day society"—when the "satisfaction of [basic] human need" is replaced by the capitalist "necessity for boundless economic development," capitalism must (re)produce the spectacle which "[fabricates]" the "pseudo-needs," desires, and subjective positions required for the system's maintenance and expansion (Society of the Spectacle sec. 15, 51). The spectacle is, in effect, total ideological subjugation through cultural hijacking, as social institutions, mass-media, modes of organization, and recreation become the very image, means, and ends of capitalist economics. Furthermore, in the twenty-first-century context, overlapping relations between capitalist globalization, global warfare, and information technology have produced a hybrid militarized-capitalist spectacle in which "culture" becomes the new "means, location, and object of warfare" (Mirzoeff 1737).

As visual theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff observes, the ongoing assimilation of the non-Western world by a globalized capitalist economy remains largely an imperialist project wherein "modern technologies of information and war" instrumentalize the concept of **counterinsurgency**, a revolutionary strategy of waging an "explicitly cultural war, to be fought in the United States as much as it is [overseas]" (1737-8). Aiming to reproduce "[its own regime] in thought and deed," this war culture, in essence, legitimizes global capitalism's imperialist campaign overseas by pacifying citizens with "progressive applications of techniques [that manufacture consent] under the imperative 'culture must be defended,'" (Mirzoeff, 1738). Just as Debord theorized that the spectacle produces incessant economic growth by making capitalism the simultaneous justification for and goal of social existence, the goal of modern military

intervention likewise lies in "manipulating the interests," or pseudo-needs of social groups in order "to render a culture in [the self-perpetuating] image [of war]" (qtd. in Mirzoeff, 1738).

Preliminary traces of this military intervention of culture litter battlefields, movie theatres, and living rooms with material artifacts. Army combat training simulators sold as commercial video games and unmanned drones piloted with PlayStation 2 controllers attest to the existence of a veritable **military-entertainment complex** with

COMMODITY:

For economists, commodities are manufactured objects with an equivalent value, namely commercial products to be sold. In Debord's Marxist critique, however, capitalism reorganizes personal consumption to conform to the commercial principles of market exchange; commodity fetishism transforms a cultural commodity into a product with an economic life of its own that is independent of the volition of the commodity's producer. Guy Debord argues that, in modern society, intimacies of intersubjectivity and personal self–relation are commodified into discrete experiences that can be bought and sold and every human relation becomes viewable as a (potential) business transaction.

COUNTERINSURGENCY:

Codified into a field manual by retired US Army general David Patraeus, this military tactic seizes the manipulation and production of culture as a means to preempt the rise of insurgent forces in occupied foreign regions or in the homeland. It has transformation the way wars are fought in the early twenty–first century.

MILITARY–ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX:

A continuation of the logic of the cold war's military–industrial complex, this term describes how the US Military, defense technology, and entertainment sectors have formed a material, collaborative network wherein each can benefit from the research, commercial successes, and sociopolitical influence of the other.

SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL(SI):

A group of avant–garde artists and political theorists active in Paris from 1957–1972 who are famous for their contributions to anti–capitalist theories such as Unitary Urbanism, Situations, and Derive. SI considered architecture, especially that of cities, as a major factor in both the oppression or liberation of people under capitalism.

AMBIANCES:

As deployed under a Situationist context, ambiances are the sum effect of various environmental factors that can be appreciated as the kind of mood certain architectural features and structured activities influence people to adopt. Basic examples include the Gothic cathedral that inspires gloominess or the office cubicle that affirms focus and isolation.

an acculturating influence (Lenoir; Stahl,112 & 116). In the consumption of artifacts like military-themed video games or films, the military-entertainment spectacle manipulates the subjective position of the citizenship *into the image* of the soldier embedded within the ranks of a culture of war. Roger Stahl calls this phenomenon the *virtual citizen-soldier*, a "symptom of the recoding of the social field" by counterinsurgency "with military values and ideals," which assures the apolitical function of the soldier subsumes and impinges on the democratic role of the citizen (125).

In such ways, the overwhelming, enveloping media environment of the twenty-first century—enabled by audio-visual, information, and simulation technologies—virtually surrounds, penetrates, and defines the social field and subjective positioning more than ever before. And yet, simultaneously, the level of spectator interactivity and involvement in the emerging media landscape arguably increases (albeit in a limited capacity) the vulnerability of hegemonic top-down social control. It has always been false to portray spectators simply as overdetermined consumerist receivers without any form of exchanging interactivity, social agency, or creative industry. As recent phenomenological and post-structuralist theory asserts, the always-already active spectator can potentially manipulate, subvert, and construct—or/even play with, as it were—the social world which produced them and which, through their collective everyday actions, is reproduced and, thus, might be reproduced differently. For Debord and the **Situationist International** (SI), the exploitation of the vulnerable sociocultural mechanisms enabling the spectacle is precisely the goal of their revolutionary theory of *the situation*: a mobilization of social life against capitalism in "the creation of new forms and the *détournement* [hijacking] of previous versions of architecture, urbanism, poetry and cinema" (12). Play is a revolutionary act that can disrupt spectacular "passions, compensations and habits" of capitalist culture. The creative construction of new channels, architecture, **ambiances**, and images can "condition new behaviors" or desires and "provoke [people's] capacity to revolution-

ize their own lives" (SI, 11 & 15). Every day, we—twenty-first century people who live our lives within capitalism—create and are recreated as images in the living that we do.

But how do we break from the capitalist repetition of a permanent culture of war and provoke a more exciting way of life? The revolutionary impulse is to answer this question by imagining and inventing more interesting environments, games, and images. Described by new media theorist Richard Grusin as "the first and last live media event" (21), the September 11th terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center (a monument to globalized capital) exemplified a situationist opening, a potentiality for American self-recognition regarding worldwide imperialism and a support for the SI notion that "something that changes the way of seeing the streets is more important than something that changes the way of seeing paintings" (SI, 16). The enduring efficacy of the disaster is its media visibility; it showed, in the clearest resolution of the era, that the spectacular image—too often understood as distant and untouchable in the twentieth century—can be interacted with, breached, and transgressed in the new millennium. While Richard Grusin suggests that "9/11 [marked] an end to (or at least a repression or sublimation of) the US cultural desire for immediacy" (21), I contend that American anxieties at the start of the twenty-first century have actually inspired an upheaval in what is expected and desired by audiences: a postmodern self-awareness and an impulse for interactive and experiential knowledge despite the pacifying modernist narratives maintained by the spectacle. At the same time, 9/11 proves that the spectacle is capable of reincorporating even the most poisonous of images. As the attacks became the

prime justification for the United States' Global War on Terror, a spectacular image of the civilian-as-hero-of-war was manufactured to cover the wound and to "recapture a [particular] sense of purpose and meaning" related to American superiority, domination, and saviorhood (Hammond 11). Contextualized by the new asymmetry of twenty-first century warfare in opposition to wars past, this quick manufacturing betrays the fact that wars against abstract concepts like Terror necessarily forgo the knowledge of a particular enemy as a concession to know the hero with certainty. As such, the indefatigable spirit of the country's citizens and soldiers—ready to die, in the name of Liberty, at home or overseas—emerged righteously, always and already victorious, as the unified image of an invulnerable patriot: the American hero.

The following essay analyzes the commodified hero image and the production of virtual citizen-soldier subjectivity within the military-entertainment spectacle, focusing particularly on the rising genre of films based on the lives of civilian and military heroes as well as the third- and first-person military action video games. Following situationist thought, I explore the "behaviors" produced by these virtual "environments of life" in order to theorize a transgressive space of possibility within which film and video games can produce revolutionary experiences, desires, and subjectivities that negate the prevailing capitalist worldview and its related, all-pervasive culture of war. In highlighting these elements of the interactive spectacle, I wish not to suggest that we are trapped, but that we are closer than ever to the spectacular limit now that it stands within the reach of our playful touch.

THE REAL IS FAKE: HERO OBJECTS IN *BILLY LYNN, AMERICAN SNIPER*, AND *THE 15:17 TO PARIS*

Films about contemporary war and its heroes are largely concerned with the subjectivity and knowledge that combat instills within its participants. This intimate combat subjectivity is the authority of knowledge that sees and frames the chaos of battle—or, in Mirzoeff's terminology, the knowledge endowed by a soldier's subjectivity is their *visuality* (1741). As cultural products of the military-entertainment spectacle, films such as Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) serve post-9/11 American anxieties with an uncomplicated, though often sympathetically traumatized, hero figure whose professional and personal lives are framed and made intelligible by their militarized visuality. The trailer for American Sniper (Warner Bros. Pictures) intercuts scenes of childbirth with the framing of an Iraqi child in crosshairs, promising audiences a glimpse through the subjectivity of Chris Kyle, the "Most Lethal Sniper in US History," to reconcile these irreconcilable events. Here, the military-entertainment spectacle attempts to quell anxieties about real life, either on a screen or during disaster, when it most appears like war. In contemporary war films, the rigid characterization of soldiers parallels the function of the military-entertainment complex; as war-media scholar Alex Vernon notes, "such films replicate the transformation of people into [single-function soldiers], into consumable objects" (390).

Referenced in this essay's opening paragraph, Fountain's book, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, articulates the experience of this commodification from the position of the hero object. The fictionalized soldier Billy Lynn experiences the alienation which abstracts the real Chris Kyle from Eastwood's American Sniper, or the real Marcus Luttrell from Berg's *Lone Survivor* (2013). Other characters describe the experience of watching Billy's attempted rescue on video through American political, mythological, and cinematic analogies; the video is as stirring as watching 9/11 on TV (Fountain 48), like feeling the pride of the Alamo (123), and akin to witnessing John Wayne in action (214). In the chapter "Money Makes Us Real," Dallas Cowboy team manager, Norm Oglesby, recognizes the symbolism in the images of Billy's heroic actions and wants to make a movie out of it to inspire the masses: "They forget some things are actually worth fighting for . . . our country *needs* this movie, needs it badly" (309, 311). But Billy and the Bravos are already abstracted without the aid of a Hollywood film: Experiencing the soldiers through the liveness of the video or directly in person during their media tour is greater than anything a Hollywood film could fake. The real looks fake enough, and, Billy paradoxically admits, "nothing looks so real as a fake" (325).

Where are we? It is "15 August 2015" and we are on a train headed from Amsterdam to Paris. Three Americans have just become heroes by stopping a nameless gunman from killing everyone onboard. Who are the heroes? Alek Skarlatos, Anthony Sadler, and Spencer Stone. Who is the villain? We don't know. Clint Eastwood is directing. We are in, perhaps, the furthest limit of the military-entertainment spectacle's project of side-stepping the twenty-first century interactive impulse: *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), directed by Clint Eastwood, starring the real Alek Skarlatos, Anthony Sadler, and Spencer Stone. The unreality of the

film is encapsulated by its star, Spencer Stone, as he says in an interview for USA Today, "[T]he same amount of blood, same injuries … It was felt like that was reality, not fiction" (qtd. in Alexander). Based on the non-fiction book of the same name, Eastwood's film creates a non-chronological depiction of the real 15 August 2015 event alongside a story of its real-life heroes growing up together, forging a path through destiny toward the fated day on the train. Fate is one of the film's few thematic through-lines, but the question remains: Who or what designs or produces this fate? God is, of course, suggested, but so are the laws of physics when Spencer philosophizes "an object in motion stays in motion" (Eastwood, 01:05:33). In any case, for Alek Skarlatos and Spencer Stone, fate involved enlistment in the armed forces prior to their heroic objectification in film. In accord with my analysis of Fountain's novel and the military-entertainment spectacle, I posit that the immaterial force Clint Eastwood, screenwriter Dorothy Blyskal, and heroic ordinary-person Spencer Stone refer to is spectacular culture.

The 15:17 to Paris marks the furthest limit reachable by the modernist spectacle in its project of satisfying the audience's desire for heroic subjectivity and quasi-interactivity. The commodification of Stone, Sadler, and Skarlatos represents the military-entertainment spectacle's hegemonic claim to structuring the appearance of reality, but this inclusion of the real heroes within the film is not, in turn, a real transgression against the **hyperreal** spectacle. While the spectacle appears to open up for these three virtual citizen-soldiers, merely partaking in the productive apparatus or "acting the part" does not necessarily "mean

that the citizen plays a more 'participatory' role in the democratic sense" (Stahl, 115). Like Billy Lynn and the Bravos when they participated in the 2004 Dallas Cowboy Thanksgiving halftime event, the heroes of *The 15:17 to Paris* are merely conscripts for the perpetuation of a spectacular effect of hero objectification.

Still, the specific effect remains crucial. Josephine Livingston writes for The New Republic about the experience of witnessing the real heroes cast in their roles, reporting that "they are all handsome but appalling actors … [They are] so surreal that [*The 15:17 to Paris* is] worth watching" (Livingston). The film's surreal qualities did not serve to critique the core values of American traditionalism nor hamper the movie's commercial success (Box Office Mojo). While strange, Eastwood's film cannot function as an anti-spectacular critique because it is a type of strange that remains unthreatening to spectacular capitalist hegemony and the imperial image of the American military hero. To Debord, the commodification of **surrealism** after World War

HYPERREAL (AND REAL):

These terms are used with respect to French post–structuralist philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who believed that it was impossible for any rational model of reality to contain anything more than a representation, and thus a false image, of reality. These models of reality, which do not possess an origin or base in reality, inform a shared social reality which he refers to as hyperreal.

SURREALISM:

An early twentieth–century avant–garde art movement that lies within the lineage of the Situationist International, the Surrealists sought an anti–bourgeois, anti–traditionalist mode of expression through the harnessing of Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious mind.

II was a preemptive attempt to discredit future revolutionary methods of art as "[reruns] of a defeat which according to [the bourgeoise] is definitive and can no longer be brought back into question by anyone" (6). So it follows that, if in films like *The 15:17 to Paris*, the surreal becomes quaint, and the real looks fake, then the revolutionary impulse to "seize [mass culture] in order to negate it" (Debord 11) might require the construction of ambiances of ridiculous and total artificiality.

ANG LEE'S FUCKING CRIME AGAINST CINEMA: THE HYPERREAL ADAPTATION OF *BILLY LYNN*

Ang Lee's 2016 adaptation of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* has been called, by its director, "a new format of filmmaking" (Film4) and, by others, "a fucking crime against cinema" (@ BilgeEbiri). The hypermediated ambiance of Ben Fountain's satiric novel survives its adaptation into film because of cutting-edge filmmaking and theatrical projection technologies:

> The brief on this technological milestone? Images shot and projected at 120 [**frames per second**], dual 4K RGB laser projectors that display wide color gamut and high dynamic range, bright RealD 3D, 12-channel audio with overhead speakers plus sub-bass. Talk about immersive! (Leitner)

In the history of film production and projection, advancements in image resolution, color, sound, and even optical 3D have been embraced by filmmakers and audiences as enhancements of the cinematic experience. Yet the rate of 24 frames per second (FPS) has, for initially technical but increasingly aesthetic reasons, remained the standard for analogue film and most digital cinema. Twenty-four FPS is the accepted "cinematic look," and continues to be legitimized by the industry convention of "filmizing" digital video to avoid comparison with less prestigious artforms like the soap opera, sports broadcast, or video games. For many, the discomfort created by any deviation from this norm indicates that 24 FPS "is an inherent part of the cinematic experience … [in] the way we accept cinema [and] the way we suspend our disbelief" (Yamato). But, in the novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Billy cannot suspend his disbelief within the spectacle that subsumes his life and the American culture. He cannot reconcile his averageness, his history as a high school delinquent, or his muted individuality as a soldier with the celebrity status that lands him on stage next to Beyoncé. And so, a proper film adaptation would invite the audience, as other hero films do, to inhabit this particular subjectivity. Lee achieves this effect by filming at a high frame rate of 120 FPS, more than four times the standard and higher than any prior film in history, ushering in what he claims to be "not just a new technology, but a new habit in watching movies" (qtd. in Engber).

Billy's words, "nothing looks so real as a fake" (Fountain, 325), are integral to the theatrical presentation of Ang Lee's film. Artificiality is brought to the foreground with a kitschy chamber choir cover of David Bowie's "Heroes" in the film's trailer (Movieclips), a steady zoom beyond the scan lines of the movie's opening news broadcast, and cellphone interfaces that float over the screen as Billy composes text messages. In order to share the hero's subjectivity with the audience, all the traditional cinematic tricks are deployed, yet everything is mediated through images that contain forty-times more visual data due to

the film's 4K resolution, its **high dynamic range** (HDR) color image, and its delivery at the rate of 120 times a second. The high frame rate sensation of the film's dissolve between an exploding Halftime pyrotechnic and the destruction caused by rocket propel grenades (RPG) in Iraq or its frequent first-person close-up addresses lie somewhere between too real and too fake. "Some people might use the term hyperreal," explains technical supervisor Ben Gervais, "but we feel very much like it's just real, and what you've been seeing for the most part in other films has been less than real" (Sony Pictures). For others, however, the effect is not realistic but grotesque and video game-like, as Daniel Engber from Slate writes, "the scene looked queer, uncinematic, like a theater sketch acted out in virtual reality." This ambiguity evokes questions central to the novel: Is it better to have access to the real, or to be insulated by its approximation? "You ever kill somebody … watch them die?" asks a member of the Cowboys in direct address to the camera, an address to an audience who will later have the privilege of witnessing, through the eyes of Billy, the most information-dense close-up of a person bleeding out ever created (Lee, 00:38:23 & 01:16:37).

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk is a strange text to adapt into a medium traditionally considered to be so passive and pacifying. Lee's film transgresses the conventions of the classically spectacular medium of film in more ways than one. Even though its trailer invites audiences "to walk in the path of the hero" (Sony Pictures), and certain production team members believe the film's goal is to increase immersion within Billy's subjective experience, I abide that the 120 FPS 4K IMAX presentation of the film is a deliberately constructed situation against the spectacle—a potential provocation of new, and possibly revolutionary, desires and subjective positionings.

At one point, Debord defines situations as "the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality," comprised of a perpetual interaction between and a playful intervention in "the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to" (12).

FRAMERATE (FRAMES PER SECOND):

In both analogue film and digital video, camera footage is recorded in a procession of still images, or frames. When projected or played back, the rate at which these frames flash on the screen per second is the framerate, or FPS. This process produces the cinematic illusion of motion. The cinematic standard FPS is approximately 24 frames per second (FPS).

HIGH DYNAMIC RANGE (HDR):

A dynamic range higher than what is considered to be standard dynamic range; often used in discussing display devices, photography, 3D rendering, and sound recording including digital imaging and digital audio production.

In Lee's "new habit of watching movies" (qtd. in Engber), novel projection technology, specifically designed auditoriums, and a new vision of the cinematic experience formally reconfigures the pacifying spectacle of the cinema and produces an ambiance with an unprecedented "passional quality" (12). The culminating effect of Lee's new cinema is, as has been said, a criminally uncinematic and unsatisfying experience. But in this way, audience members may feel uncategorizable unsettlement and be provoked into a reflection on the nature of and their participation in the architectural and psychological structure of cinematic spectatorship. Ang Lee's film is an exceptional anti-spectacular situation, a stirring of consciousness against the mediation of the real in accord with Ben Fountain's original text. *Billy Lynn* in 4K at 120 FPS disrupts the spectacle's ability to comfortably close the gap between the audience and the film's depicted heroes, suggesting that the modern spectacle cannot channel the twenty-first century interactive impulse through film. Indeed, with this properly avant-garde experiment, Lee recognizes such limitations and seizes "the first elements of a more advanced construction of the environment" through the incorporation, or remediation, of the high frame rate technology and aesthetic already used in the, arguably, more interactive medium of video games (Debord 11).

THE HARD LIMITS OF SACRIFICE: PROCEDURAL RHETORIC AND TRANSGRESSION IN *CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE* AND *SPEC OPS: THE LINE*

As megaplex theatres close and digital streaming platforms bring films to exponentially smaller screens, it is difficult to imagine a future where US theatres are equipped to show Lee's film (Giardina), let alone anything of a larger scale. The film's high frame rate does, however, gesture towards the format of video games. At the time of publication of Fountain's novel, franchises like Activision's *Call of Duty* were already setting records for the biggest entertainment launch of all time (Stuart). In this sense, Lee's remediation of high frame rate may be a late concession to a cultural shift to and interest in the immediacy of video games. Plainly apparent since at least the 1960s, passivity and noninteractivity are principle in the spectacular alienation of the revolutionary impulse (Debord 14). But, in the post-9/11 era, the desire for agency and experiential knowledge is more alive than ever—a desire that the new medium of video games can facilitate in unprecedented ways.

As a medium, video games are particularly equipped to aid in constructing political meaning as players explore the intentionally crafted limitations and possibilities of their design. Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric reveals how video games can be used to both perpetuate the military-entertainment spectacle and construct anti-spectacular situations. Procedural rhetoric illustrates that games are not a didactic medium: Meaning emerges out of interaction and through the formation of behaviors, which condition and inspire a player's understanding of game rules (hard limits) and their experimentation against those rules (what is possible). Moving
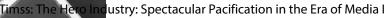
beyond graphical realism, "the effective arrangement of a [game's rules]" affect persuasion and create "a desirable possibility space for interpretation" (Bogost 124). As objects of a new media with a unique capacity for political expression, video games warrant theoretical and critical attention. Through our play, though we may not realize it, what seems like leisure may be politics. Roger Stahl warns us, "[T]here are many ways of killing that do not necessarily involve pulling a trigger oneself, such as the collective condoning of state violence" (118). Video games and the military have had a close relationship since the rise of computer simulation technology, bringing military-funded simulations, like Apache (1995), to the commercial market (Stahl 116-7). The militarization of games justifies their consideration under the war-media scholarship already commenced in the era of the military-entertainment complex.

In accord with Hammond's assertion that US interventionism in the twenty-first century is a project of manufacturing meaning for American culture, Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric can help to explain how the manufacturing of heroic subjectivity and visuality in military first-person shooters militarizes civilians. In the single-player campaign for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), players inhabit the avatars of several soldiers across a global conflict which threatens to break out into a nuclear war. Warfare in this game is ostensibly modern, refiguring contemporary war's asymmetry into an even-sided conflict between a high-tech coalition of Western nations and a Russian-led rogue state of advanced paramilitary contractors. As Matthew Payne notes, this "adroit sleight of hand . . . enables the [player's] virtual war experience to be politically and ludically satisfying" (LOC 1514). After presenting players with this simplified, pre-Cold War narrative of conflict, the game manufactures a globalized visuality of the battlefield by inhabiting British SAS soldiers and US Marines fighting the same war from different parts of the world. Moreover, this visuality extends temporally through history as the player also participates in past, fictional conflicts. *Call of Duty* can manufacture the heroic subjectivity for players

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that Hollywood films cannot, reconciling the citizen with the soldier as per Stahl's concept of the virtual citizen-soldier. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* sinks its virtual citizen-soldiers even deeper within their subjectivity during in-game moments of virtual sacrifice when their weapons are taken away and they are forced to die. These moments of conscripted sacrifice are shocking because they remove player agency, defining the hard limits of sacrifice with no room for experimentation. The spectacular deactivation of the citizen is achieved within the subjectivity of the virtual citizen-soldier as the apolitical role of the soldier supersedes the democratic social role of the citizen. *In Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare,* the "[subordination of] critical and ethical questions to movement and action" depoliticizes democratic citizenship (Stahl 126).

Video games such as the *Call of Duty* series perpetuate spectacular oppression in the interactive medium by constructing virtual environments and gameplay mechanics with a possibility space that constrains the po-

litical agency of players. But procedural rhetoric can also be harnessed to construct possibility spaces which contend with the political hegemony upheld by militarized culture and conditioned by many military video games, creating forms of protest within and through the architecture of video games. By relating the theories of Bogost and Debord, this medium can realize much of what the SI hoped to affect through material urban landscapes in their theorized experimental cities. Situations occur in the interaction between "the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to" (Debord 12), and, in the virtual realm of games, the management of environment and possible behaviors utilizes these exact same mechanisms for producing many types of meaning through play. In fact, the situation is described by Debord as a new type of game (13), of which the large-scale physical production, in the form of experimental cities, was perhaps too difficult and expensive to realize in the 1960s (14), but which could certainly be facilitated virtually today.

Released in 2012, Yager Development's third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* directs attention to the limited possibility space that typified the play experience of military shooters during the seventh generation of console gaming. Spec Ops: The Line was the first entry in ten years for a series of generic tactical military shooters that had long been forgotten in a market obsessed with *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* and inundated by their mediocre, yet often profitable imitators. Besides being uniquely set in a sandstorm-devastated Dubai, advertising for the game leading up to its release betrayed nothing of its anti-war gaming messaging, nor did it signal the difficulties it had planned for players all too comfortably inhabiting their virtual citizen-soldier subjectivity. The story situates players in the role of US Army Captain Martin Walker as he and his squad-mates explore a ravaged and inhospitable Dubai, following the last received signal of the esteemed Colonel John Konrad, who was trapped by

the storm with his company of soldiers on their way home from Afghanistan. The game's objectives and mechanics reflect de facto industry standards, allowing even the most casual seventh-generation player to immediately intuit its cover-based shooting mechanics and A-to-B checkpoint level design. With the volume muted and without ever reading a single line of tutorial text, players could play *Spec Ops: The Line* and know exactly where to go and exactly who to kill, exercising the lethal instinct of a well-trained virtual citizen-soldier. The unsettling ease with which players take to *Spec Ops: The Line*'s by-the-numbers military shooter design becomes apparent when the game begins to condition success upon murdering American soldiers.

Spec Ops: The Line hijacks the form and limited possibility space of pacifying military shooters to encourage a new behavior within the culture of the military-entertainment spectacle. In the chaos of a fracturing state of martial law, the last of Konrad's company of soldiers, the 33rd, mistake Walker and his squad for armed dissenters and fire upon them, forcing the player into a defensive stance. The legitimized murder of American soldiers in *Spec Ops: The Line* complicates the rigid possibility space of the shooter and its virtual citizen-soldier subjectivity with what should be an ethical dilemma. The situation's contradiction compromises the player's identification with what is and is not possible in this play experience; and, poignantly, the form *Spec Ops: The Line* borrows cannot facilitate the ethical dissonance its narrative creates by allowing players to win and not kill American soldiers. This constructed environment can harbor only the mechanisms of uncritical murder. *Spec Ops: The Line* inhabits

VIDEO GAMES AS A MEDIUM ARE INHERENTLY INTERACTIVE, BUT THE CONSTRUCTED ENVIRONMENT THAT FACILITATES THEIR IN–GAME INTERACTIONS DETERMINES WHETHER OR NOT PLAYERS PARTICIPATE AS DEMOCRATIC AGENTS OR DEPOLITICIZED CONSCRIPTS.

the familiar environment of the military shooter and explodes it to reveal how such games prefigure a depoliticized and pacified subjectivity.

Unpronounced in the media landscape of the twentieth century, the architecture of video games now stands among, and often taller than the original mediums of the touch-shy modernist spectacle. Video games as a medium are inherently interactive, but the constructed environment that facilitates their in-game interactions determines whether or not players participate as democratic agents or depoliticized conscripts. Harnessed by the military-entertainment spectacle, video games can work, as Stahl argues, to shift the emphasis from the ethical question of "why we fight" to the dazzling showcase of "how we fight" (126). Within the novel medium of video games, the military-entertainment spectacle perpetuates its pacifying transformation of the political citizen into the virtual citizen-soldier, manufacturing heroic subjectivity in response to the conspicuous lack of heroes in postmodernity. However, as Spec Ops: The Line demonstrates, video games may prove to be dangerous to the industry of hero manufacturing insofar as it remains necessarily restrictive and intolerant of agency. Yager Development has seized upon a limit and now we must, as Debord says, transgress and begin construction of new, better ambiances (11).

Is the hero real in the twenty-first century? No, it is absurdly artificial. The music video for David Bowie's "Heroes," essay documentarian Hito Steyerl asserts, heralded the truth of this in 1977:

> [Bowie's hero is] an object: a thing, an image, a splendid fetish—a commodity soaked with desire … [H]e has become above all an image that can be reproduced, multiplied, and copied … [T]his hero's immortality no longer originates in the strength to survive all possible ordeals, but from its ability to be xeroxed, recycled, and reincarnated. Destruction will alter its form and appearance, yet its substance will be untouched. (Steyerl, XX)

The hero commodity is, like Billy Lynn and virtual citizen-soldier subjectivity, a porous vessel for audience desire; it short-circuits the satisfaction of being a meaningful symbol by only resupplying the original desire for meaning. The post-9/11 military-entertainment spectacle's obsession with manufacturing heroes reflects a real desire for heroism in postmodernity, but it only has Rambo and cowboys to offer. The unreachable ambiance of this spectacle wears these heroes like a coat, begging not to be touched and, oh, don't even think to ask if it is real! I suspect we will know the era's new heroes when we see them radiating with insane artificiality, urging us closer. Real heroes fake enough to be real would never be afraid of the twenty-first century's touch.

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