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# **From America's Army to Call of Duty: Doing Battle with the Military Entertainment Complex**

**Robin Andersen and Marin Kurti**

*This paper explores the collaboration between the Pentagon and the entertainment industries at the site of the popular interactive format, the war-themed video game. The commercial media industry is heavily invested in the research and development of digital technologies used to create simulations, graphics, and virtual worlds, which are also essential to the networked protocols of military training and weapons systems. In addition, video games such as America's Army have been developed by the United States Armed Forces as recruitment tools.*

*With advances in digital computer-based technologies, war-themed games make increasing claims to realism, authenticity and historical accuracy. Real war footage is frequently inserted into narratives and battlefield sequences. We compare the narratives of the experiences of gamers to narratives of recruits and soldier's experiences of war. Though war themed interactive games are taking simulated battlefields to higher levels of realism, including more intense graphic violence, the thrilling excitement of entertainment replaces the emotional truth of war, a trend with highly negative consequences.*

*On August 18, 2007, 90 veterans and active duty service members stood in front of an America's Army game booth in St. Louis in company formation and "sounded off" with the chant, "War is not a game." Their protest was part of a "truth in recruiting" campaign organized by Iraqi Veterans Against the War.<sup>1</sup>*

**W**ar-themed video games, a significant sector of the interactive entertainment industry, command attention because of the variety of provocative issues raised by the history of their development and the trajectory of their uses. War games connect the disciplinary interests of social psychology, media and military studies and critical cultural theory, to name a few, as they present intersections where media technologies, entertainment,

education, cultural practices, and media violence converge. Alone, any one of these areas might spark research interest, but when this profitable entertainment format is combined in an industrial complex tied to the Pentagon, its critical relevance is undeniable, particularly for those concerned with the increasing influence of the military on American culture and economics. It is fair to say that war-themed video games are part of the transformations that have taken place in weapons technology, military recruiting practices, training platforms and other aspects of war planning. As one of the most notable sites where entertainment and the military meet, their contribution to shaping public attitudes toward war must also be considered. As we explore this confabulation, we hope to advance a critical discussion of the consequences of increasingly realistic immersions, as gamers enter the killing fields of war. We draw out some of the more disturbing markers of a media geography that champions war's necessities, and where the virtual worlds of war games reward some of the most brutal and problematic conduct of actual war, even as those wars are being fought.

We start with an outline of interactive entertainment and position war-themed computer and video games within that industry, followed by a brief history of how creating virtual worlds of war became a mutual enterprise uniting the media and military industries. We document the parameters of the military/entertainment nexus, and detail the Pentagon's use of virtual war worlds, including *America's Army*, as recruitment and training formats. We have polled teenage gamers and interviewed ROTC recruits, and we draw on the experiences and observations of collage-age gamers. We employ game theory to draw out the consequences of participatory entertainment appropriated for military purposes, and draw parallels between the narratives and virtual war worlds and the narratives of actual war.

### **Positioning War Games in the Industry**

The popularity of video and computer based games continues to increase and is now a multibillion dollar global industry. According to the Entertainment Software Association, 65% of the U.S. population played video games in 2008.<sup>2</sup> In the US, video and computer game sales increased from \$7.4 billion in 2006 to \$9.5 billion dollars in 2007. A Nielsen study showed that 41% percent of U.S homes have a video game console.<sup>3</sup> We will focus here on first person shooter games, which comprise 12.1% of the gaming genres played in the US.<sup>4</sup> Though such games represent a small proportion of total combined gaming formats, which include other popular strategy and action games such as sports, racing and guitar playing to name a few, first-person shooter games are quite popular, especially with young people.<sup>5</sup> Of the top ten selling games of 2007, *Halo 3* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, were ranked first and third respectively. Globally, *Call of Duty: World at War* was one of the top 5 selling games in 2008 with \$5.89 million combined sales for the US, the UK and Japan.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Military/Entertainment Complex**

During the last 2 decades of the twentieth century the military's embrace of computer-based digital technologies led to the development of a vast array of new high-tech weapons. Shared, computer-based digital technologies tie the media industries to the Pentagon in what has been termed the military/entertainment complex.<sup>7</sup> The First Persian Gulf War became known as the Nintendo War when powerful visual persuasions of smart bombs blasting precision targets aired repeatedly on television coverage. The electronic graphic style of war coverage, already proven to be powerful and popular, would be adapted in earnest to interactive fantasies of war.

## **Video Games and Weapons Systems**

As computer-based digital technologies, video games share essential components of military weaponry. A foundational element of the high-tech generation of weapons was computerized flight simulation. Designed initially for military use, the image generator is at the heart of the computer-based digital game worlds. The development of flight simulators marked a crucial point in the history of computer-based imaging. Through the use of this central protocol, video games can be viewed as direct descendants of weapons research and the passage of military-driven technological innovations into the heart of entertainment culture.<sup>8</sup>

Working together, commercial and military researchers continued to advance and refine the technology of interactive digital platforms for both weapons and video games. The high-tech products of commercial and military developers are multipurpose. Cyberlife Technology Creatures 2.0 offered the cutting edge of Artificial Life simulation and helped realize the dream of smart weapons systems such as pilotless fighter aircraft. The CIA has made use of this technology, most recently when President Obama signed an order allowing the agency to strike targets along the boarder between Pakistan and Afghanistan with unmanned Predator drones.<sup>9</sup>

Early on, the military provided the funding stream for AI that led to computer-generated characters (CGC), known now as "synthespians."<sup>10</sup> When CGC act and react in realistic ways to numerous stimuli, they make video games more challenging. Military trainers believe that practicing on realistic enemies and targets makes better "warfighters." Another essential technological advance useful to both entertainment and military industries came from commercial designers; the interactive first-person shooter technology was developed by id Software in 1994.

## **Military and Commercial Research and Development**

During the 1990s, the flow of development funding into computer-based interactivity accelerated as commercial researchers joined engineers from the Department of Defense to trade expertise in pursuit of cutting-edge multi-platform technologies. Consider the connections articulated by the National Research Council in 1997 in a

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report titled “Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense,” after a conference in Irvine, California, at the height of the military/media technology surge of the 1990s:

Modeling and simulation technology has become increasingly important to both the entertainment industry and the US Department of Defense (DOD). In the entertainment industry, such technology lies at the heart of video games, theme park attractions and entertainment centers, and special effects for film production. For DOD, modeling and simulation technology provides a low-cost means of conducting joint training exercises, evaluating new doctrine and tactics, and studying the effectiveness of new weapons systems. ... These common interests suggest that the entertainment industry and DOD may be able to more efficiently achieve their individual goals by working together to advance the technology base for modeling and simulation.<sup>11</sup>

At Irvine, military research teams<sup>12</sup> met with industry people from Pixar, Disney, Paramount, and George Lucas’ Industrial Light and Magic. Joining this group were other computer industry executives and academic researchers in computer science, art and design.<sup>13</sup> War games and other platforms that create virtual worlds have been the beneficiaries of these shared media/military technological innovations.

The Marines were the earliest enthusiasts for the new video game technologies. The Corps modified the first person shooter game *Doom* in 1997 into a training simulation it called *Marine Doom*.<sup>14</sup> The partnership between training and gaming was encouraged by General Charles C. Krulak’s who understood that such games would serve the purpose of “implement[ing] Military Thinking and Decision Making Exercises throughout the Marine Corps.”<sup>15</sup> With the successful modification of commercial gaming technology for direct military purposes the merger of an important sector of interactive entertainment with military training was well advanced.

## **Research Partners and the Institute for Creative Technology**

Military funding remains essential to entertainment technologies with millions of dollars in grants awarded to academic research facilities such as the University of Southern California’s Institute for Creative Technology, which enlists the resources and talents of theme park innovators, computer and special effects designers among others, to advance the state of military immersive training simulation, and other applications.<sup>16</sup> At ICT the management skills of former media executives from NBC, Paramount and Disney can direct designers from Silicon Valley to help adapt the same digital effects used for movies, amusement parks and video games to military platforms. Hollywood has now become a full partner in new weapons training and development. This trans-sector reciprocity is now a stable, on-going mutually beneficial industrial relationship.

## Recruitment Hard Drive

In 1999, the U.S. Army was falling short of its recruitment goals by 6,300 soldiers.<sup>17</sup> This led the Department of Defense to increase its recruitment budget to 2.2 billion dollars. As the new high-tech military became more media savvy recruiters understood the compelling features of games, such as the heightened sense of realism, total immersion, and intense focus on destroying targets. It is no surprise that the Army, which has the highest recruiting budget, would spend an estimated \$12 million on *America's Army*. It would prove to be the best way to reach the desired demographic. According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, in 2002, 79% of children played computer and video games, and children from ages 7 to 17 played an average of eight hours a week.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, 77% of the players are male and mostly under the age of 34.<sup>19</sup> A survey conducted by the Army in 2007 showed that "29 percent of all young American adults ages 16 to 24 had had some contact with the game in the previous six months."<sup>20</sup> These figures demonstrate that the home gaming console is an ideal place for the United States Military to introduce would-be recruits to the excitements of virtual war. One ROTC recruit confirmed the role played by *America's Army* when she joined. "Army recruiters used [it] as a tool."<sup>21</sup>

### *America's Army*

*America's Army* was released on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July in 2002. Its creation had been envisioned as early as 1997 in a brainstorming session between the National Research Council, and (MOVES), the Modeling, Virtual Environments, and Simulation Institute at the Naval Postgraduate School.<sup>22</sup> The game was given out at recruitment stations, but most significantly, visitors to the U.S. Department of Defense *America's Army* website could download the game for free. In its first six months *America's Army* saw 1.5 million downloads. It was considered the most successful game launch in history at the time and became the number-one online action game in the country with more than three million registered players. The game received several awards for its realism and was ranked as an 8.4 by the gaming source, Gamespot.com.<sup>23</sup> By 2007 players had devoted "212 million hours representing some 3.6 billion rounds of online game play."<sup>24</sup>

*America's Army* boasts the most authentic rendering of combat because real soldiers help create the synthesesians. Players are positioned as first-person shooters, and after basic training the advanced "marksmanship" is so realistic that the computer screen moves in time to the digital soldier's breathing under fire. The commercial developer, Epic Games provided the game engine, and the realistic 3-D environments where gamers/soldiers "walk through" combat zones opened new avenues for training. Building on the success of what *Wired* magazine called an "interactive recruitment ad", the US Army opened a video-game studio with industry veterans, former employees of companies such as Interactive Magic, Timeline, Vertis, SouthPeak Interactive, Vicious Cycle Software and Red Storm Entertain-

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ment.<sup>25</sup> The task; “to write other kinds of software to simulate training for a variety of armed forces and government projects.” The new studio in North Carolina was headed by Jerry Heneghan, a West Point graduate and former Apache pilot who had produced Tom Clancy-style military simulation games at Red Storm Entertainment. Close to Fort Bragg, programmers would be able to pattern simulations on real Army vehicles. Heneghan said the “positive response for this type of training content has been overwhelming. We are having a difficult time keeping up with the many opportunities presented to us.”<sup>26</sup>

The next *America’s Army: Special Forces* was introduced on June 1, 2004 and Army’s web page boasted that the game “continues to focus on the crucial, specialized role of the Army’s special forces...as they fight the Global War on Terrorism.” Action-packed entertainment merges with virtual boot camps as personnel from the CIA to Special Forces learn techniques for eliminating cell-operated terrorists units worldwide, but especially in the Middle East.<sup>27</sup>

## Contemporary War Themed Games and the Military

The Institute for Creative Technologies continues to work with the US military on increasingly advanced virtual training scenarios and video games. In June 2004, *Full Spectrum Warrior* was released by THQ, a game that could be played on the family friendly Xbox.<sup>28</sup> Working with the US Army, ICT helped develop the high-budget *FSW*, which simulated urban combat against Middle-Eastern “terrorists.”<sup>29</sup>

By 2005 the Marines partnered with another commercial software company Destineer, to create the sequel, *Close Combat: First to Fight*; in this ground training game the bullets fly on a virtual battlefield in Beirut. Marine battalions now regularly train with games before being deployed to fight in Iraq. Computer knowledge and skills are highly advantageous to soldiers, and the new generation of ROTC recruits is often referred to as the “computer generation,” and called “nerds” because of attachments to computers: “Computer simulation has been a great learning tool when teaching us new tasks,” explained one recruit. “The first time I fired a weapon was with a computer simulated M16.”<sup>30</sup> Marine Staff Sgt. Brad R. Richard pointed out that the technology is helpful in understanding the possible problems that can arise in a real mission, especially because in video games “when a mistake is made here, no one dies.”<sup>31</sup>

## Fighting in the Game Space

In video games, depictions of war are not confined to the two-dimensional spaces of film and television. Video games create virtual worlds of action and combat that engage players as participants. Interactive war games generate a cybernetic feedback loop of different sequences as the game progresses. Once in the game world, the player becomes more skilled as he/she masters increasing levels of difficulty while overcoming threats and challenges. In mastering the game space, the goal is to respond faster and more accurately to a changing set of complex stimuli. One

game theorist describes the interaction created in the game *Doom*. As the player adopts a "first-person perspective of the game's virtual world and attempts to survive frequent deadly attacks by a variety of monsters while navigating labyrinthine environment in level of increasing complexity and difficulty." The cognitive multi-tasking of gametime is coterminous with the process of tuning the perceptions to the needs of war. Succeeding in combat, virtual or real, depends on anticipating contingencies, advanced skill levels and increased proficiencies, all with the goal of surviving the battle by dominating the space.<sup>32</sup>

Engaging and learning in game time and space results in a sense of power and control over a simulated battlefield. But for the military, video games have more to teach potential recruits than skills. Game space demands that the enemy be "neutralized" in order to win. The enemy is blown away over and over again. In most war games the enemy has human form, even in *Halo* where the heavily armored anonymous-looking space invaders take human shape.

Adopting the role of shooter, gamers are positioned to identify with the aggressor. Educators understand that active participation increases learning, and young gamers actively control the characters they inhabit. Media theorists have long understood that perspective is a key factor in the depiction and interpretation of violence (Miller, 1990). Identification with the shooter can be further emphasized, when for example, players pick which characters they want to be and personalize their uniforms, or even substitute a photo of their own face for the player's. Aggressive behavior is rewarded, and enemy dead adds up to a winning score. For the first person shooter, killing is a measure of success.

To begin to understand the affective response to killing in the game space, we asked a group of young gamers, "How do you feel when you shoot an enemy soldier and kill them?"<sup>33</sup> Responses to this initial survey illustrate a positive association between simulated killing and winning in video games. Answers ranged from, "Happy. I'm winning," to "Feels good, you rank up extra points." Killing was also associated with skills: "Good at the game," and advanced skills levels: "Good, cause I'm passing the level," or "It feels good because I'm getting more skills, getting my funk up." Fun and excitement were also tied to virtual killing: "Fun, Thrilling." Out of 62 teenagers, only one said they felt bad about killing. In addition, unlike a movie or television show, the violence in an interactive video game is intense, sustained, and repetitive.<sup>34</sup>

Positive associations to killing in war games are not due simply to the fictional nature of the entertainment, but to the way the actions are contextualized. Certainly fictional renderings of death can elicit feelings of sadness or grief, but the killing scenarios of war games do not evoke emotional responses such as, grief, remorse or responsibility. For example, *America's Army* features cutting edge technology and the latest in high-tech weaponry, yet there is no graphic realism with regard to the wounds such weapons inflict. The enemy is faceless, masked, and when hit releases a puff of red smoke and falls to the ground. There is no pain or gruesome graphics that follow in the wake of killing. One of the troubling aspects of depictions of game violence is the lack of consequences. Writing about *America's Army* in the UK Guardian, one journalist noted the lack of affective realism:



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Colonel E Casey Wardynski, *America's Army's* project director, offers this defence of the fledgling military-entertainment complex: 'Young people need to know the army is engaged around the world to defeat terrorist forces bent on the destruction of America and our freedoms.' Thing is, the army isn't engaged in virtual combat zones where no one really dies. These games may be ultra-realistic down to the calibre of the weapons, but when bullets hit flesh, people just crumple serenely in a heap. They're like Tom Clancy novels made into episodes of the A-Team. No blood. No exit wounds. No screams.<sup>35</sup>

At the time of this writing, the America's Army website registered 9, 934, 234 users,<sup>36</sup> and continues to receive awards,<sup>37</sup> but other war shooter games are now more popular, and the violence has gotten more graphic. Activision has developed the *Call of Duty* franchise, creating games that incorporate the themes and settings of on-going wars, while referencing other war-themed entertainments and mixing documentary footage of past wars. In doing so, *Call of Duty* takes war games to a higher level of realism, including more intense graphic violence. During online play, gamers can stab, enflame, and watch their enemy die with missing limbs. In *COD5*, if you kill seven online players in a row, you are rewarded with a pack of vicious dogs that eat the enemy. Realistic depictions are mixed with visuals from real wars past and present. We will now direct our attention to the issues raised by these more recent mergers between interactive entertainment and military sensibilities. The following descriptive narratives of the *Call of Duty* games are based on the experiences of 4 college gamers.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Call Of Duty 4: The Game Space***

*Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* consists of two parallel campaigns. In a narrative that unites the Cold War to the War on Terror, thereby connecting anti-communism with anti-terrorism, *COD4's* storyline is set in the not-too-distant future where Civil War rages in Russia by "Ultrationalists" seeking to bring back Soviet Communism. Simultaneously, a radical Arab leader has successfully overthrown a Middle Eastern monarchy, instituting what is an anti-Western and presumably terrorist-sponsoring government. The opening credits of the game illustrate the brutality of this new radical Arab regime, showing a number of men being executed by the victorious revolutionary forces.

In the British campaign, the player occupies the position of "Soap" MacTavish, a member of the S.A.S. on a mission to defeat the Communist revival in Russia. At the first level of the British mission, the player engages in a nighttime assault with other SAS squad members, by dropping from a helicopter onto the deck of a ship in order to secure a "package." Visually coded as terrorists, the ship's crewmembers are wearing black ski masks. As your player moves around the ship's games space, you are given the opportunity to execute two men asleep in their bunk beds.

The American portion of the campaign begins with you playing as Sgt. Jackson

on a mission to capture Al-Asad, the radical Arab leader behind the coup. The enemies are AK-47 wielding, Khaffiya-wearing, Arabic-speaking, brown-skinned Middle Easterners. As one gamer noted, "They can be Hamas, Iraqi insurgents, the Taliban, etc. Their vagueness allows them to be stand-ins for any "terrorist" enemy the players see them as." Another gamer said of these enemies in *COD4*, "war is undertaken against unidentified Arabs who fit nearly every stereotype used to portray Arabs since September 11<sup>th</sup>."

In many ways the American mission is reminiscent of the film *Black Hawk Down*. About a dozen of what appear to be Black Hawk helicopters are filled with marines en route to the building complex where Al-Asad is hiding. The helicopters take rocket fire from enemy forces on the ground while a Middle East-inspired instrumental soundtrack scores the scene. After dodging the RPGs, the helicopters arrive and Marines use ropes to slide down to the ground.

In a clear reference to the invasion of Iraq, the mission called "Shock and Awe" has the Marines assaulting a city where Al-Asad is alleged to be located. Unlike Saddam Hussein however, this fictional Arab leader has gotten his hands on a Russian warhead. You board a Cobra helicopter this time, manning a high-caliber gun: your objective -- to "soften" resistance on the ground in preparation for a ground assault on your way to stop Al-Asad. As the level approaches an end, a fellow Cobra is downed, and your objective is now to land and rescue the pilot. You successfully rescue this female pilot, only to find that in a *24*-esque moment, a nuclear warhead detonates, causing your helicopter to crash, giving Sgt. Paul Jackson a "K.I.A." status.

The remainder of the game focuses on the civil war in Russia, with you once again taking the role of a British S.A.S. In one mission, Al-Asad is found, hidden by the Russian "Ultrationalists." He is captured and tortured with his hands tied behind his back strapped to a folding chair. As your character looks on, a fellow squad-mate of yours, Captain Price, beats him to a pulp during interrogation, and finally executes him with a pistol. Since he was responsible for detonating a nuclear warhead, the violence against him is retaliatory and therefore justified.

## The Rules of War

Though numerous scenarios position the player to engage in whole-scale killing without restriction, there are references to rules of war. For example, in one aerial attack on a town, your freedom of war making is constrained by an order saying, "You are not authorized to level the Church. Do not fire on the Church." This command implies however, that all other buildings below are fair game. While at one point you are specifically ordered not to fire on two vehicles said to be occupied by civilians, you are soon authorized to fire on "everything" the next village over, having received confirmation that all targets were "hostile."

Unexplained in the game is the justification for sending US Marines into this hypothetical Middle Eastern country. With no apparent military threat to the U.S., and without explaining why force is used against Al-Asad, the Bush Doctrine of preemptive war remains in full effect. Other direct reference condones the use of

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highly dangerous and questionable weapon's system. In one mission the player must "escort the M1A2 Abrams tank to safety." A slick graphic outlines the tank's structure and points to its "depleted-uranium" armor. Little publicized but well-documented, DU is a substance charged with causing illness and death to numbers of soldiers and civilians in war zones from Bosnia to Iraq. But such charges are ignored as the player clears the path for the tank's assault.

Though the player watches brutality against those defined as enemies, the realities of civilian casualties from aerial bombardment are hidden. No views of the aftermath on the ground or the consequences of bombing campaigns are shown. Curiously, while fighting your way through the crumbling buildings and city landscapes, no civilians are present. Civilians are seen only when enemy forces are victimizing them.

In the event that you are killed during *COD4's* campaign, you are greeted with one of a variety of quotes relating to war. The quotes are all presented at random and without contextualization. Some are explicitly anti-war, while many are left open to interpretation. One quote from former Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat, is an example of the latter:

"Whoever stands by a just cause cannot possibly be called a terrorist."

One wonders about such inclusions. Several such quotes are from anti-war figures like Albert Einstein, and even cautious words from George Washington or John F. Kennedy flash on the screen. This one by Ronald Reagan clearly celebrates the military enterprise:

"Some people live an entire lifetime and wonder if they have ever made a difference in the world, but the Marines don't have that problem."

Included are quotes from the recent architects of war that take a different tone, most condoning the invasion of Iraq. The words of Condoleezza Rice relate directly to the game's merger of nuclear threat and Arab terrorists.

"We're in a world in which the possibility of terrorism, married up with

### ***Call of Duty 5: World at War: The Launch***

*Call of Duty: World at War* was launched with great fanfare on Veteran's Day eve, November 10, 2008. For 3 hours, from 9pm to midnight, at GameStop outlets located at the Pentagon City Mall in Washington D.C., and on Powell Street in San Francisco, about 1500 enthusiasts played the new game in real-time, tournament-style competitions. Using Xbox Live, their opponents were soldiers stationed at Fort Drum, New York, and Marines stationed at 29 Palms in California.<sup>39</sup>

The GameSpot outlet was reportedly "decked out like an Army field base" for the Veterans Day punch-up between saddos and Marines." One reviewer wrote that the streets of San Francisco were "awash with blood as geeks battled real-life Marines at the debut of Activision's *Call Of Duty: World at War*." Teams of six went "head-to-head" deploying "virtual machine guns, flame throwers, tanks and more in an orgy of mindless violence and much a-whoopin' and a-hollerin."<sup>40</sup>

The *Call of Duty* games have been developed with the help of military advisors, such as retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Hank Keirsey. A 24-year veteran with combat experience of the first Gulf War, Keirsey also worked as a private contractor in Iraq. Keirsey trained over 1000 infantry platoons, as well as West Point cadets in tactics and leadership. He told one interviewer that he worked with the *Call of Duty* franchise "to pass on his experiences and help make the most intense and authentic game possible."<sup>41</sup> Keirsey teamed with another Army veteran turned game advisor John Hillen, who also served in the first Gulf War, and later with "special operations units the world over."<sup>42</sup> Hillen also offers his expertise in book reviews for the *New York Post* and *ABC News* as an on-air commentator.

### **COD5: The Game Space**

The latest game in the *Call of Duty* Franchise is played on two fronts during World War II, the Russian push toward Berlin and the American drive through the Pacific island of Peleliu, a Japanese stronghold. As the storyline progresses in the European campaign, there is no safe harbor for the injured or POW's. In one scene, the player is handed a rifle and expected to shoot and kill the already wounded Germans. One gamer noted, "The insanity of Adolph Hitler and his vicious campaign of total war on Europe is projected upon every German soldier that the player encounters." When a German is seen kneeling before his Russian captors before taking a bullet to the head, as one player put it, "the player feels no remorse for the soldiers. The player feels sympathy for the Russians who have had their homeland devastated by the German onslaught and every act of revenge in the game is justified."

In another level, as German forces are defeated in a final push to Berlin, five Russian soldiers are standing at the top of a staircase leading down to a locked subway entrance. At the bottom of the stairs are three German soldiers trying to escape the bloodbath that is occurring on the street above. It is left up to the player whether to shoot them or let them live. One gamer reports his experience of this situation.

The first time I played this game, this scene did not sit well in my stomach. I stood there not sure what to do. There were unarmed soldiers and the narrator of the game was expecting me to shoot them. I did not. However, shortly after my indecision my comrades shot them down with their machine guns. In all of the bloodshed in the game, this is the first time I felt I was presented with a moral dilemma. I had willingly killed wounded Germans

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on multiple occasions earlier in the game, but there was something different about this instance, like it had gone too far even for an experienced gamer. Nonetheless, the desired effect was achieved. Later, when I replayed the game on a harder difficulty level, I was presented with the same situation and for the sake of continuing the game more quickly I reloaded my machine gun and shot the surrendering soldiers down.

The game is an environment of revenge and retribution with a kill or be killed mentality. Any mercy within the game could result in a bullet from a handgun in the back from a wounded soldier. The incentive is to kill the wounded.

*Call of Duty: World at War* uses real videos and pictures from World War II in visual cut-ins as the next mission loads. One such scene is a 3-second clip of a blindfolded German officer tied to a pole being assassinated by a firing squad. The graphic clip shows bullets entering the condemned man's chest. The gamer observed, "This scene of a real war merely passes by without a second thought or emotional reaction."<sup>43</sup>

## Virtual and Real Worlds of War

After evaluating the games space and gamer's responses to the *Call of Duty 4 and 5*, it comes clear that the narrative content supports military force and recent war policies in a number of ways. *COD4* reinforces stereotypes that vilify Arabs, a troubling consequence of the war on terror. Enemies armed with Weapons of Mass Destruction, one of the false justifications for the invasion of Iraq, is also confirmed in *COD4*. Most troubling are the depictions of World War II battles in *COD5*. In the brutal execution of trapped soldiers, this particular narrative return to the Grand Narrative of the Second World War deliberately ignores a half-century of international formulations that established rules of war attempting to ensure humane treatment of wounded soldiers and prisoners of war. By the twenty-first century, revenge and brutal retaliation are once again the norm. *COD4* the partial restrictions on bombing churches allows the producers to claim acknowledgement of Geneva Conventions, while condoning the worst aerial bombardment of civilian populations at the same time. Indeed, the ambiguous inclusion of anti-war references seem little more than a clumsy attempt to create the appearance of counter-points and deflect criticism of what is otherwise a troubling celebration of war's brutality. It is to this point that we will now turn.

Considering these games have been developed with the help of the military designers and researchers, with the participation of active and retired military personnel, with claims to real experiences and authentic representations, we will now compare the narratives of the experiences of gamers to narratives of recruits and soldier's experiences of war.

### **Virtual Killing and Military Training**

Military historians have long understood that it is not easy to train soldiers to kill other human beings. To become soldiers, recruits experience various forms desensitization training, and video games have become part of that experience. Consider the remarks of one young Army recruit during a virtual training session: "After learning the functions of the game, and learning the keys, we were told to practice. The first thing I did was kill my fellow comrade. I was interested in what would happen if I shot him. I ended up shooting him numerous times until he collapsed and died. After I did this I felt no remorse and thought how cool it was. I noticed that I even fit into the new generation of players who become...desensitized to death."<sup>44</sup> Military training on video games can be understood as an important step in becoming desensitized to the "idea" of killing.

### **Killing at a Distance with High Tech Weapons**

The disassociation of blowing up targets on a computer screen from the human consequences is fundamental to video games, and to modern weaponry as well. In fact, war games<sup>45</sup> take such disassociations to another level as they celebrate strikes in the games space. The "Death from Above" sequence in *COD4* allows the player to bomb moving targets. Soldiers are heard hooting, "Ooh, that's gotta hurt," "Hot damn!" and "Go ahead, smoke 'em out!" Though this is "only a game," it is also a realistic representation of how war is now actually being fought. With global positioning satellite targeting and computer-based weapons systems, bombs can be directed from distant locales far from the carnage they inflict. Air Force Major, John Thomas explained such practices to reporter Norman Solomon (2007, 161): "An air force officer could go to work in Nevada, spend the day directly guiding planes as they dropped bombs in Iraq, and get home in time to tuck his kids into bed." But *COD4* presents such actions as fun and exciting. Recent bombs dropped in Pakistan using pilotless drones were responsible for killing civilians, including children.

Air Force pilots have reported that proficiency with the technology of air war, and the digital graphics of bombing, distanced them from the human cost, and their emotional responses to it. In testimonials featured in the Vietnam documentary *Hearts and Minds*, for example, pilot Randy Floyd explains, "during the missions, after the missions, the result of what I was doing, this game – this exercise of my technical expertise never really dawned on me." Floyd recalls following "something like a TV screen" in front of him, and "I could pull the 'commit' switch on my stick and the computer took over." Another pilot, Lt. George Coker says that from the air Vietnam could have been an "electronic war." The bombing was "all business," and he felt his role was "strictly professional." Both airmen describe their participation as a game of skill and excitement, using metaphoric references to other games, such as the thrill of exploding firecrackers. Only later they say, did they realize the consequences of their actions. In emotional breakdowns on camera they feel remorse for the people they bombed.

### ***Collateral Damage***

Reports of the battlefield conduct of US soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan bear a striking resemblance to actions common in virtual worlds. Testimonial from soldiers are documented in the book *Collateral Damage*, a collection of hundreds of hours of interviews with war on terror veteran who tell of the air strikes, patrols, home raids, detentions and military checkpoints. Some of these narratives resonate with the representations of virtual combat. For example, as gamers move through dangerous simulated war zones, they control the space by shooting everything that comes at them. The consequences of a “shoot first and ask questions later” mode are drawn out in *Collateral Damage*. Sgt. Geoffrey Millard describes an incident in Tikrit, Iraq with an “18 year-old kid on top of an armored Humvee with a .50-caliber machine gun” at a check point: “And this car speeds at him pretty quick and he makes a split-second decision that that’s a suicide bomber, and he presses the butterfly trigger and puts two hundred rounds in less than a minute into the vehicle. It killed the mother, a father, and two kids. The boy was aged four and the daughter was aged three.”<sup>46</sup> Shooting first is the highest priority in a war game, but with no experience of the consequences. The surprising force of a new breed of deadly weapons is often not fully appreciated until after the effects on the human body are experienced. As writer Adam Gopnik argued, the dreadful and surprising power of a new weapon, the machine gun, accounted for much of the slaughter during World War I. At Waterloo rifles could be fired twice a minute. By contrast, the machine gun sent out six hundred rounds a minute creating “a zone of death that would simply saw a soldier in two if he entered it.”<sup>47</sup> One young American soldier observed in the film *Fahrenheit 911*, *when you kill someone in real life it’s not like a video game*. With “butterfly” triggers and deadly force, today’s weapons like the machine gun in WWI, are contributing to what Chris Hedges refers to as “mechanized slaughter.”<sup>48</sup>

### **Deadly Force and Desensitization**

Accounts from soldiers detail various types of cognitive habituation to killing. Peter Sullivan, a veteran of the war in Iraq explained during the Winter Soldier hearings, that throughout his training he and comrades frequently chanted such things as “left, right, left, right, left, right kill!!! Left, right, left, right, yes we will!!!” Only after he left the military did he fully appreciate the psychological conditioning he underwent to accept killing, and the imperative, “kill or be killed.” Sullivan also described the deionization of the enemy. Before being deployed to heavily populated Islamic countries, racial slurs such as “hadjis” were continually used to refer to Muslims. The extreme conditioning and acceptance was best illustrated by the repeated call and response, “What’s the heel of the boot for? Crushing baby skulls!”<sup>49</sup>

In an article about the air war over Baghdad, the *Washington Post* reported that

the 20-year-old-pilots sometimes address the five-foot-long Hellfire missiles regularly fired into the Shiite slum of Sadr City to "Haji." Such racist terms have long reinforced attitudes in war that turn human beings into abstraction, in the same way "gook" was used on Vietnam. Another combat veteran, Sgt. Ben Flanders who ran hundreds of military convoys in Iraq, describes this loss of empathy. "I felt like there was this enormous reduction in my compassion for people. The only thing that wound up mattering is myself and the guys that I was with."<sup>50</sup> As part of military training, video games can set the pre-conditions for the dehumanization of the enemy, such as the Arab stereotypes of enemies in *COD4*, an important complement to the process of desensitization.

In Iraq, soldiers describe the enemy as often anonymous, dangerous, and hard to detect. Fear and frustration, not satisfaction and control, often characterize the actual war zone and conditions of occupation. As Hedges writes, "The rage soldiers feel after a roadside bomb explodes, killing or maiming their comrades, is one easily directed, over time, to innocent civilians who are seen to support insurgents." Hedges found that civilians were often viewed as "abstractions in human form," a phrase that aptly describes many enemy targets "neutralized" in video games. Retaliation and revenge are common motivations for video game violence.

Hedges details the conditions and context under which air strikes in Iraq are called in:

Human beings are machine-gunned and bombed from the air, automatic grenade launchers pepper hovels and neighborhoods with high-powered explosive devises, and convoys race through Iraq like freight trains of death. These soldiers and Marines have at their fingertips the heady ability to call in air strikes and fire-power that obliterate landscapes and villages in fiery infernos. They can instantly give or deprive human life, and with this power they become sick and demented. The moral universe is turned upside down. All human beings are used as objects. And no one walks away uninfected.

Brutalities of war are the end result of an atmosphere where extraordinarily deadly weapons have been celebrated in a void of human empathy. This, together with the "algebra of occupation," according to Hedges, culminates in "the capacity we all have for human atrocity."

### **Coping with the Consequences**

The merger of entertainment sensibilities with military uses is at the heart of the issues raised by war games. They revolve around questions of war and humanity, killing and compassion, and the psychic distress of war's aftermath. Emotional detachment is characteristic of virtual killing, but the aftermath of actual combat is something quite different. When soldiers are trained using protocols that trivialize the consequences of death, how do they cope with the realities of war? The answer is not very well. The most notable example is the, now very troubled veteran, cele-



brated on the cover of the *New York Post* in 2004 called the “Marbloro Marine,” who was said to have “kicked butt” in Falluja. So disturbed by what he had done there, he said he could not live with himself and abused drugs and alcohol.<sup>51</sup>

On February 5, 2009, the Army announced that 24 soldiers killed themselves the previous month, more than died in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan combined. The Army has reported the highest suicide rate among soldiers in three decades. An investigative series on PTSD published by Salon.com reported high levels of psychological turmoil at the military base, Fort Carson. During several visits to interview soldiers reporters found high levels of prescription and illicit drug abuse, extremely heavy drinking, suicide and murder.<sup>52</sup>

One young Iraq Army veteran featured in the series, Adam Lieberman, was suicidal and trying to get help for PTSD. He described the combat experience in Iraq that troubled him. During an attack, the gunner atop his Humvee “suddenly collapsed in Adam’s lap. Only a thin flap of skin attached the gunner’s head and torso. Beheaded. Adam vomited.” Another time he saw the lower half of a friend’s body sheared off by a roadside bomb, but before he died his friend still moved his right arm and tried to talk. Adam saw a look of “terror” in his eyes.<sup>53</sup> The type of violence that caused extreme psychic distress and ideational suicide in Adam is depicted in *COD5*. In one sequence a captured American soldier next to the player is beheaded by the Japanese. But in the video game, there is no emotional terror. As one player described the scene, “The graphics are so realistic that it took me a good ten seconds to realize the actual war videos had morphed into the video game. As soon as a Japanese soldier is about to chop off my head, American soldiers come to the rescue while bashing and stabbing all the Japanese silently from behind.”

In *Wartime*, noted author and WWII veteran, Paul Fussell quotes from the memoir of one marine, Eugene Sledge, who fought the Japanese at the real killing fields on the island of Peleliu. He had watched men “hosed down by machine-gun fire” on the beach at Peleliu: “I felt sick to the depths of my soul. I asked God, why, why, why? I turned my face away and wished that I were imginging it all. I had tasted the the bitterest essence of war, the sight of helpless comrades being slaughtered, and it filled me with disgust (293).”

Though *COD5* includes documentary footage and claims to authenticity, the game rewrites the emotional history of WWII combat, omitting war’s “bitter essence.” Horrific visuals from the war include: the charred hanging corpses of 7 Russian civilians, one is a child; Germans walking through the battlefield killing all survivors; Holocaust victims; an American GI stuck in a Japanese trap; and a Japanese bunker engulfed in flames with a burning soldier trying to escape. In one sequence narrated by Kiefer Sutherland in a humorous tone, tanks bogged down in mud make it hard to get the wounded out of Okinawa. The last clip shows two GIs struggling to get up a hill while carrying a medevac. One slips in the mud and the wounded soldier falls out of the stretcher and rolls down the hill. One gamer found this scene disturbing, “Our fathers and grandfathers fought and died to keep our nation free in World War II, and the video game industry believes it is okay to acknowledge that by laughing. Our culture has condoned a video clip in which dead bodies are shown, some burned severely by flamethrowers, and we are supposed to laugh at a dying soldier’s misfortune.”

## Conclusion:

We have attempted here to problematize claims made by the military entertainment complex that war games are based on real wars and are therefore "authentic," while at the same time asserting that such games are only entertainments.

The *Iraqi Veterans Against the War* understand that war is not a game, even if presented as such in digital entertainments. But war games are designed as entertainments because they can not tell the emotional truth of war or they would not be useful as recruiting protocols. Nor would they be effective simulations for desensitizing enlistees to the idea of killing. Including war's true anguish would, no doubt, also deaden the excitement evoked by the sensationalized horror, and thus end their value as a profitable entertainment format. The merger of the media and the military has served the needs of both industries well.

The rapid growth of this mutually beneficial arrangement and the products of this merger have been developed without much scrutiny or critical discussion of the possible, yet predictable consequences. Yet the psychic damage of the battlefields promise to endure. At a news conference on January 29, 2009, the Pentagon announced it will spend \$50 million trying to understand the astronomical suicide rates, increasing even faster for the youngest veterans of the war on terror, even as reporters document the Army's reluctance to diagnose veterans with PTSD.<sup>54</sup> Future research should explore the connections between virtual war worlds and real ones, to better understand the influence of war-themed games and training protocols on the conduct of war, and the psychic distress of real soldiers.

## Notes

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  36. See the official website at <http://www.americasarmy.com/>
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