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Digitized Virtuosity: Video War Games and Post-9/11 Cyber-Deterrence

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In post-9/11 America, digital war games have increasingly come to provide a space of cyber-deterrence where Americans are able to ‘play through’ the anxieties that attend uncertain times and new configurations of power. This article seeks to examine the increasingly close relationship between the US military and the digital-game industry, along with the geographies of militarism that this has produced. Focusing on the contribution that digital war games make to a culture of perpetual war and in the manufacture of consent for US domestic and foreign policy, the Pentagon’s mobilization and deployment of digital games as an attempt to create a modern version of the noble war fantasy is critically examined. With particular reference to America’s Army, the official US Army game, the article seeks to examine the influence of digital war games in the militarization of popular culture and in shaping popular understandings of geopolitics.

Keywords digital war games • simulation • geopolitics

Introduction: ‘I Got My Kills, I’m Coming Down’

Sergeant Anyett didn’t want to wait. . . . A dozen loud booms rattle the sky and smoke rose as mortars rained down on the co-ordinates the sergeant had given. ‘Battle Damage Assessment – nothing. Building’s gone. I got my kills, I’m coming down. I just love my job’ . . . Lt. Jack Farley, a US Marines officer, sauntered over to compare notes with the [US Army] Phantoms. ‘You guys get to do all the fun stuff. It’s like a video game’ (cited in Harnden, 2004: 1).

Many of the news reports compiled by embedded reporters during Gulf War II contain stories of US troops referring to their experience of combat as ‘like a video game’. In the quotation above, from a story written in November 2004 by a Daily Telegraph journalist
watching the destruction of Fallujah, Lieutenant Farley bemoans the fact that the Marines didn’t get to do ‘the fun stuff’, while Sergeant Anyett of the US Army Phantoms sounds as if he has just stepped out of a game: ‘I got my kills, I’m coming down’. The war-as-game motif is obviously a very old idea (Stahl, 2004), but what is new are the digital games themselves, the ‘virtual experiences’ of distant combat theatres they promise and the kind of stories they tell about the USA, its technologies and its ‘others’. Games are now beginning to filter down through the ranks to the lowest levels of infantry soldiers, while the broader vision that is being contemplated for digital games at the highest levels of the Pentagon is also unprecedented (Harmon, 2003).

Today, a walk through the aisles of any digital games retailer ‘can seem like a visit to your local military academy’ (Kane, 2005: 1), offering a range of ‘grittily realistic’ games that seek to represent and celebrate the arts of war. A big part of the appeal of such games is that most seek to ‘proudly transport the gamer into immersive, gut wrenching virtual battlefields. They persuade the gamer that, in an echo of WWII era journalism, “you are there” – on the beaches of Normandy, in the jungles of Vietnam, in modern military hotspots [like the deserts of Iraq]’ (Cowlishaw, 2005: 1). Such games, in a fashion similar to wartime newsreels from World War II, provide a real world hook by offering privileged glimpses from the front lines, and some of the backgrounds in these games are lifted directly from video footage of landscapes in which the US military has recently been engaged (Halter, 2002, 2006).

Since 9/11, a critical analysis of virtual war has become increasingly important given that many video war-game releases have exhibited a growing desire to mirror ‘real’ world conflict scenarios, particularly the recent US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus, game developers often turn to the national enemy de jour for ideas. Almost as soon as a new ‘rogue’ nation has been identified in Washington, a combat game appears ‘to exploit the thrilling potential of slaughtering its people’ (Deck, 2004: 12). Kuma: War, for example, a tactical first- and third-person episodic shooter game, comes as a set of online PC ‘missions’ including ‘Fallujah: Operation al Fajr’ and ‘Uday and Qusay’s Last Stand’. Kuma Reality Games, set up in 2004 by a group of retired military officers, currently offers 74 missions through a subscription website and is intended as a reporting as well as a recruiting tool. The Kumawar.com website also allows for messages of support to be left for the troops in Iraq, and even invites serving US troops to submit their own accounts of gunfights, ambushes and rescues as the basis of future missions.

Although such games are often a valorization of past US military conflicts, their plots have sometimes come to parallel contemporary American geopolitics in ‘rather disturbing ways’ (Allen, 2005: 2). The games in question

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1 Kerr (2006) suggests that the term ‘digital games’ is preferable to ‘video games’ since it refers to the entire field and embraces arcade, computer, console and mobile games in all their diversity.
involve simulations of guns, explosions, enemies and death. Virtual recruits
do battle with ‘enemies’ from the past or present including communists,
terrorists and other assorted ‘evil-doers’. Yet, these (racialized) enemies are
portrayed as groups that exist in the ‘real’ world, with the Iraqi army in
particular very easy to find here, resurrecting the idea of the Iraqi enemy in
the popular imagination of American gamers. As such, American civilians
can enlist and fight in a ‘virtual Iraq’ (Stahl, 2004) without ever leaving the
couch. There is a metaphor peculiar to this new crop of war-themed video
games then: ‘that to play is to be a virtual recruit in a war consumed’ (Stahl,
2004: 151).

Digital games are worthy of critical attention for a number of reasons, not
the least of which is their growing popularity and commercial lucrateness
(Berger, 2002). It has been estimated that 75% of US households play digital
games, with 228 million digital games sold in 2005 alone, effectively two
games for every household (Elkus, 2006). Popular console releases often rival
Hollywood films in terms of earnings. Globally, the games industry was said
to be worth $23.2 billion in 2003, which is predicted to rise to $33.4 billion in
2008 (DFC Intelligence, 2004). Aside from their profitability, digital war
games represent a powerful medium to explore the ways in which visual
culture can be used to elicit consent for the US military and to enable the
expression of militaristic fantasies.

Many games like America’s Army (the official US Army game) exist as
virtual advertisements for the present and future glory of the US Armed
Forces in ways that Frank Kapra, director of the Why We Fight series of seven
World War II propaganda films funded by the War Department, could only
have dreamt of. As Barron & Huntemann (2004: 3) have argued, current
games focused on militarism and warfare are similar to the Why We Fight
films ‘except they’ve morphed into “how we fight” video games which takes
away from a lot of the other “why” questions, and all the moral questions
that are connected to that’. Such games, besides primarily serving as an
increasingly effective military recruitment tool and as the ‘next generation of
wartime propaganda’ (Halter, 2002: 1) are a kind of ‘shock and awe’ display
of what the US military is capable of ‘without the consequences of context’
(Barron & Huntemann, 2004: 2).

This article seeks to examine the increasingly close relationship between the
US military and the video-game industry, and the contribution this has made
to the militarization of US popular culture. In particular, the article explores
the geographies of militarism that digital war games produce and the roles
they play in the ‘shaping of civilian space and social relations by military
objectives, rationales and structures’ (Woodward, 2005: 4). Tracing the con-
nections and networks produced by the entanglement between the military

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2 As if to underscore this point, console manufacturers Sony controversially tried and failed to register a
trademark for ‘Shock and Awe’ as the Iraq war was still ongoing.
and the digital-games industry enables us to pay more attention to ‘the small, the unremarkable, the commonplace things that military activities and militarism make and do’ (Woodward, 2005: 14), and also offers a different point of entry into thinking about popular, everyday understandings of geopolitics. Also of concern here are the cultural geographies of military representation constructed in digital games and the ways in which those games legitimate and justify US military interventions or are implicated in the production of geopolitical discourses of war and security. My aim is to critically interrogate the ‘visual economy’ (Poole, 1997) of post-9/11 digital war-game releases and the ways in which such games are imbricated in wider military networks of materials, technologies, markets and geopolitical contexts. Crandall argues that militarization, with its own logic of ordering the world, runs on a productive economy of fear (the fear of an omnipresent enemy who could be anywhere), but also on an economy of desire, often oriented around consumer products like video games:

[Militarization is] tied into the media and entertainment industries and very much a player in the youth-driven field of video game culture. It’s a powerful rhetorical frame and a machine of territorialisation, indoctrination and recruitment (Crandall, 2005: 20).

In this sense, it is important to bring militaristic issues down to the ‘home-front’, dealing with ‘ground level practices of subjectivisation’ (Crandall, 2005: 18). Digital war games invite Americans to ‘participate in a militarism of consumption and pleasure’ (Stahl, 2004: 21), and they do so by presenting a clean, sanitized and enjoyable version of war for popular consumption, obscuring the ‘realities’, contexts and consequences of war.

**Weapons of Mass Distraction:**

**Towards a Model of ‘Hands Off Killing’**

All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing – war. (Benjamin, 1968: 241)

When we talk about military power in the context of the visual economy of video games, it is necessary to situate this historically (Crandall, 2005). As Deleuze & Guattari (1987) remind us, a weapon is nothing outside of the combat organization with which it is bound up. Here, then, it is important to trace the rise of digital war games within what Der Derian (2001) calls the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, the post-industrial cousin of the military-industrial complex. Militarism and play have a long history, while war games have taken many forms ranging from large-scale battlefield exercises to abstract strategy games played with maps, counters and miniatures (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003). War has been a mainstay of commercial video-game culture from the very beginning, and similarly war films have
consistently portrayed battle in terms of a heroic and exhilarating game. In exploring the symbiosis of the relationship between the military and media, Der Derian (2001) outlines the parameters of ‘virtuous war’, by which is meant the virtual (the disembodied simulation) and virtuous (war as clean, good, as surgical, abstract and bloodless). Similarly, Virilio (1997) explores the goal of ‘pure war’, a dream of a clean, surgical war between disembodied technologies. While the military has concluded that there is no direct correlation between video games and an increased urge to kill, games are increasingly being used as effective training tools to preach a particular model of ‘hands off killing’ (Chaplin & Ruby, 2005: 210). Technologies for waging war, then, have undergone vast changes since World War II, while late 20th-century advances in communication technology have also vastly transformed the appearance of war (Stahl, 2004).

The video-game industry was born during an era when President Eisenhower was warning of the dangerous influence of the military-industrial complex and of the potential ‘addiction’ to military technology and weapons that this could produce. The video-game industry grew out of the soil that the US military began tending in the 1940s when it sought to pump money into ‘computational devices’ in an effort to improve code-breaking and the artillery-table calculating skills needed during World War II (Chaplin & Ruby, 2005: 202). According to Manuel de Landa (1991), after 1945 Command, Control and Communications (C3) was transferred from the military to the RAND Corporation, which employed John Van Neumann and his game theory to model nuclear dissuasion during the Cold War. Thus, the US nuclear strategy was itself partly defined using war games. During the Cold War, some of the earliest games like *Missile Command* presented a ‘proto-realist anxiety narrative about living under the threat of nuclear annihilation’ (Galloway, 2006: 73).

The history of video games is complex and multifaceted, while pinpointing the ‘first’ computer game is a contested issue centred upon questions of definition and chronology (Kirriemuir, 2006). Many accounts focus on the Hingham Institute, sponsored by the Study Group on Space Warfare, which produced the game *Spacewar* in 1962 that quickly spread across the USA like a ‘benign virus’ (Poole, 2000: 17). The first commercial home video console was the Magnavox Odyssey, launched in 1972, developed at Sanders Associates (a military contracting firm) and selling over 100,000 units within its first year (Kirriemuir, 2006: 23). The emergence of programmable machines or consoles in the 1970s created a flexible division of labour between hardware and software (Haddon, 1993; Johns, 2006), allowing a distinct software industry to emerge once the video-games cartridge manufacturers could sell games separately from the hardware they were played on.

The games and the entertainment industry they spawned would provide a forum for the naturalization and incorporation of military technology into
everyday life. As Hall (2006: 10) puts it, ‘integrating computer technology into entertainment helped fuel consumers’ economic and social support for the arms industry’. In 1972, the games company Atari was established in Silicon Valley near a Lockheed Martin missile installation, prompting one game critic to wonder whether Lockheed Martin was a test site for Atari’s imagination or the other way round (Sudnow, 1983: 90). The Army later collaborated with Atari to retool the 1980 arcade game *Battlezone* for use in training tank pilots. The digital games industry has thus been ‘heavily entangled’ with military industries for many years now and from the earliest days of the space programme (Hall, 2006: 9).

The US Department of Defense (DoD) has been the primary exponent of war-game design since the 1950s, yet commercial game designers have produced many of the ideas shaping the design of military simulations both before and after the advent of digital games (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003). The DoD defines a war game as ‘a simulation, by whatever means, of a military operation involving two or more opposing forces, using rules, data and procedures designed to depict an actual or assumed real life situation’ (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1997: 393). This notion of the war game as simulation, as an imitation of combat, preceded the use of computer-based models for encoding rules, data and procedures (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003). Often using historical reconstructions and imagined scenarios, war games allow military planners to rehearse and test their strategies by staging a *performance* involving people, systems and technology. Military officials, however, have availed themselves of strategic simulations at least since *Chess* and *Go* and the 19th-century development of *Kriegspiel* (Allen, 2002). *Kriegspiel* was a 19th-century Prussian strategy game that featured toy soldiers, cannons and other emplacements on a table-top map.

By the early 1960s, however, much more sophisticated war-game designs had been developed in the commercial sector (beginning with the founding of the Avalon Game Company in 1958), games that shifted the emphasis of game design from abstract strategy and chance to historical realism and simulation defined by rules and data. Within the US Army, Lt. Col. Ray Macedonia sought to invigorate military war gaming by reviving the war college system through the use of the latest commercial design advances and the modelling of historical simulations (Perla, 1990). Macedonia reintroduced war gaming for staff officer training at the Army War College in Pennsylvania and was an important part of the military’s first attempts to tap the potential of computer-based war gaming. Along with Macedonia, the US Army led in pushing for more detailed simulations in the early 1980s, leading to the establishment of the Naval War Game System (1979) and the National Training Center (1980). In 1982, the National Defense University created a war-gaming centre, and as the 1980s wore on the increasing expense of traditional live military exercises highlighted the resource efficiency of digital simulations.
One of the key players in providing the Pentagon with high-tech games is DARPA (the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), founded in 1958, in the wake of the USSR’s Sputnik launch. The biggest boost to military war gaming came from the construction of the DARPA-funded SIMNET (from 1982), the military’s ‘distributed simulator networking project’, which sought to explore more cost-effective forms of simulation and began to look for these outside the DoD, turning to the computer and video-games industry in particular. SIMNET was made operational in January 1990 and was trialled by General Norman Schwarzkopf, who prepared his staff at the US Central Military Command in Florida for a potential conflict in the Middle East by playing scenarios of the war game Operation Internal Look, which incorporated enormous amounts of data on Kuwait and Iraq and helped shape the defensive strategy for Operation Desert Shield. As Schwarzkopf (1992: 66) recalls in his memoirs: ‘As the exercise got under way, the movement of Iraq’s real-world ground and air forces eerily paralleled the imagined scenario of the game’.

The beginning of the 1990s saw a greater emphasis being placed on running a fiscally efficient military built on sound business practices (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003), with military planners beginning to work more closely with commercial partners as ‘teams’ sharing information and resources. The Gulf War provided an additional stimulus to this, leading to further DARPA-supported research and development efforts and the founding of the Army’s Simulation Training and Instrumentation Command (STRICOM) to help manage and direct the simulation effort. STRICOM’s motto is ‘All but war is simulation’. By 1998, the total budget for modelling and simulation programmes had reached in excess of $2.5 billion – funds that, despite being far short of the computer industry’s own R&D efforts, played a critical role in accelerating the development and dissemination of modelling and simulation technologies, and in promoting the mutually beneficial synergy between the military and entertainments industries (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003). There has also been a significant amount of movement and exchanges of staff (in both directions) between military organizations and commercial gaming companies like Atari, Avalon and Sega.

The adoption of the popular and influential PC ‘first-person-shooter’ (FPS) game Doom by the US Marines in the late 1990s took this a stage further. The game Marine Doom was modified and adopted as a fire-team simulation, and, instead of fantasy weapons being employed in confrontations with monster-like characters in a labyrinthine castle, real-world images (e.g. of bunkers and ‘friendly fire’) were scanned into the game’s graphics engine along with

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3 ‘First-person-shooter’ (FPS) games purport to recreate full-scale real-world battles. The phrase ‘first person’ refers to the player’s point of view – players use controls (keyboard, mouse or game controller) to look up, down and around on screen, and often the image that appears on-screen is a pair of forearms and hands aiming a weapon forward ‘into’ the screen.
images of weapons in use at that time. The games could be configured for specific missions immediately prior to engagement, as well as being used in general training for various combat scenarios. The Marines engaged in further discussions with MÄK technologies, a commercial game manufacturer specializing in the use of network simulation tools, leading to the design of tactical operations training games that could also be sold commercially, such as Spearhead, an online game released in mid-1998 (Lenoir & Lowood, 2003).

The contracts awarded by the Marines to MÄK envisioned a vast, shared virtual reality, with the use of massive multiplayer online games for the military, again involving simultaneous releases destined for the commercial market. The establishment in 1999 of the $45-million Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) at the University of Southern California meant that the crossovers between military simulations and the entertainment industries became much less opportunistic and spontaneous. The ICT was set up to advance military simulations yet further (enlisting Hollywood and videogame designers in this process) and is based on the premise that although military simulations are very good at modelling hardware components and can train soldiers in how to use their equipment, Hollywood and even video games are much better at conveying the uncertainty, the surprises, the experience and fear of battle.

Uncle Sam Wants You! (To Play These Games)

There has never been, in history, a crop of young soldiers who were so pre-stuffed on so much realistic-but-not-real war-like-but-not-war material (Seal, 2003: 2).

In charting the geographies of militarism that video war games produce, it is useful to consider the cultural geographies of military representation constructed in video war games and the ways in which they legitimize and justify US military interventions. Arguably, such interventions have become part of a ‘cyclical economic machine’ (Deck, 2004: 1) ‘greased’ by media products (including digital games) that endorse any war that can be made to appear necessary. Digital war games put a friendly, hospitable face on the military, manufacturing consent and complicity among consumers for military programmes, missions and weapons. By ‘mystifying the relationships between consumers, institutions and economies of violence’ (Hall, 2006: 13), representations of war and combat in digital games help to suture consumerism to citizenship ‘within a militarised ideology’ (Hall, 2000: 1). For some critics, this helps to ‘perform, practice and consume a militarised, technologically based form of citizenship training’ (Hall, 2000: 3). Further, war-themed video games offer a discourse that ‘displaces the citizen with the virtual soldier’ (Stahl, 2004: 131), a virtual displacement that (re)presents a
version of war (sanitized and enjoyable) that is increasingly designed for easy, popular consumption.

So how, then, can video games, as powerful rhetorical frames, be considered part of a ‘machine of territorialisation, indoctrination and recruitment’ (Crandall, 2005: 20)? The official US Army game America’s Army (released on 4 July 2002) is not directly concerned with mirroring ‘real’ world conflict scenarios in Afghanistan and Iraq but has been deployed by the Army as a recruiting tool, one that has had more success than any US military-recruitment campaign since the Uncle Sam I Want You ads in World War II (Cowlishaw, 2005), with nearly eight million people registered to play worldwide as of January 2007 (America’s Army, 2007). The use of such games as recruitment tools suggests that video gamers’ virtual prowess and enjoyment translate directly into real-world Army suitability and success (Cowlishaw, 2005). The game was first developed at the Naval Postgraduate School in California through an initiative called Operation Star Fighter (after the 1984 movie The Last Starfighter, a film about a teenager who is recruited by aliens to fight in an intergalactic war after getting a perfect score on his local arcade machine). The US military has invested millions of tax dollars\(^4\) in developing the game, with a view to enabling players to virtually explore and ‘experience’ the Army from basic training through to deployment and live situations that might be found in the so-called Global War on Terrorism (see Figure 1), creating ‘surrogate soldiers’ along the way (Schiesel, 2005: 3).

Developed by the US Army and seeking to model US Army experiences, the game can claim a ‘real material referent’ (Galloway, 2006: 79) in ways that other war games like Conflict: Desert Storm or SOCOM: US Navy Seals simply cannot. This remains however a ‘simulation of a simulation of a soldier’s life’ (Kumar, 2004: 6). When first released for the PC, the game originally featured two parts, one a training simulator called Soldiers (which includes boot camp) and another more traditional FPS called Operations, in which players work together in teams to carry out missions. In late 2003, a new version – Special Forces – was released, which had more than 200,000 people playing in the first week (Stahl, 2004: 157). In 2005, a console version of the game (subtitled Rise of a Soldier) was released for the Playstation 2. The PC game can be legally downloaded by gamers as young as 13 and is often bundled together with gaming magazines and given away at stock-car racing (NASCAR) events and state fairs.

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\(^4\) This is not the only military-funded game available to the public. PC games like Real War and Real War: Rogue States are modified versions of the Joint Force Employment, a trainer developed by the DoD that pits US forces against a global terrorist threat (Halter, 2002). Joint Force Employment was produced for the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1997 by the defence contractor OC Inc., and the game’s commercial release was prophetically set for 11 September 2001, under the name Real War, but was delayed until 27 September 2001 (Stahl, 2004).
The game lets gamers play as soldiers online, banding together with other Internet warriors to battle national enemies, and on a typical day more than 30,000 people log on to the Army’s official servers (which originally cost just under $1 million a year to maintain), while the game has proven so popular that the Army’s civilian developers now release updates every few months (Schiesel, 2005). The Army even sends soldiers and returning veterans to advise civilian game developers, but the developers also get to play at war games for a few days each year in what the Army calls ‘green up’ events held in Wyoming. In March 2004, a huge America’s Army gaming tournament was held, offering hundreds of thousands of dollars in prize money and computer equipment (Cowlishaw, 2005). Game tournaments are also held at Army recruiting offices and high schools (Stahl, 2004).

The latest version of America’s Army is based on actual soldiers’ experiences (including brief in-game biographies), and players can now take control of one of nine ‘real’ US soldiers who have been actively engaged in recent US interventions and whose likenesses appear in the game (with these hyper-masculine soldiers also immortalized as accompanying action figures) (Silverstein, 2006). Some missions involve defending or capturing prisoners...
of war, but players can also do battle with ‘terrorists’. One mission in the initial release of Operations was modelled after a raid conducted in Afghanistan (Kennedy, 2002), and the games are scattered with references to the Afghan landscape. One ‘insurgent camp’ is described as ‘high desert rolling with sand dunes and Wadis’ (where Wadi is Arabic for ‘valley’). While the subject the gamer is mapped onto is always American, there is a refusal to name the enemy here, constructing a space where the ‘enemy is irrelevant and technology provides a virtual cure for a global insecurity’ (Kumar, 2004: 14). The equipment and uniforms in the game are designed with maximum ‘realism’ in mind, but death and injury are treated differently. As Schiesel (2005: 3) points out, ‘limbs are never blown off. Instead, wounds are marked by a puff of red smoke. Injured foes never writhe and scream in agony’. The deliberate censorship of explicit violence in this game further mimics the US government and media censorship of images of dead US soldiers and coffins – in the game bodies vanish after being killed (Allen, 2005). No matter how many waves of enemy troops come at the virtual soldier, body counts do not pile up visually (Hall, 2000). The game as such is a ‘bold and brutal reinforcement of current American society and its positive moral perspective on military intervention, be it the war on terrorism or “shock and awe” in Iraq’ (Galloway, 2006: 79).

The official site for the game consistently denies that players can learn the basics of using weapons from gameplay. Rhetorically, then, the military has distanced itself from the violence of other video games, reinforcing a sense that it has a legitimate monopoly on violence (Allen, 2005). The games are, however, ‘seductive’ to potential recruits and may suppress an aversion to killing. According to Anthony Swofford’s (2003) best-selling memoir, Jarhead, soldiers in the Gulf War used scenes from antiwar movie Apocalypse Now to hype themselves up for combat. Perhaps in Gulf War II, video games like America’s Army offered an alternative means of pre-stuffing the troops and getting them ‘pumped’ for combat? Gulf War I veteran Mary Spio (now the editor of the US popular culture magazine One2one) has argued that ‘what we saw in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was the tip of the iceberg – it was a glimpse of a generation of war gamers coming of age. Video games that allow players to kill real human beings are desensitizing generations of American society’ (cited in Elkus, 2006: 3). There is an important body of literature on the desensitization of killers in 20th-century warfare (Bourke, 1999; Marshall, 2000), but a focus on video war games might help to extend these debates in new directions.

Seal (2003) is also concerned with the impacts on soldiers who have trained extensively on approved military simulations (where they are encouraged to ‘shoot at anything that moves’) and with the impact of exposure to such games on men enlisted in ‘missions involving real weapons and real lives’ (Seal, 2003: 1). As Seal puts it, ‘once in the field . . . these soldiers may become
“charged” in the same way stimulated by the games and with lethal results, thanks to the “disconnect” between 3-D flesh and blood and 2-D pixel people’. Within the ‘hyper adrenalised disconnect’ that US soldiers exhibit, any consideration of consequences is lost. Seal (2003: 2) recommends the use of pre-discharge support groups for troops, facilitated by older vets from Vietnam or Gulf War I as a way of preventing ‘smouldering PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] from gaining an upper hand’.

In 2005, the ICT initiated just such a project together with the Office of Naval Research (ONR): an initiative that is creating an immersive virtual reality system for the treatment of Iraq war veterans diagnosed with combat-related PTSD. The treatment approach involves recycling and adding to the virtual assets that were initially built into the combat tactical simulation incorporated in the commercially available Xbox game Full Spectrum Warrior (Rizzo & Pair, 2006). The version created is designed to resemble a Middle Eastern city and outlying village and desert spaces, and it offers the clinician the chance to monitor the patient’s behaviour and customize the therapy experience. Full Spectrum Warrior is another game originally produced in 1999 by the US Army in two versions, one for military training and one for commercial release. The Army intended Full Spectrum Warrior to help reinforce the values troops learned about in their training and offered a real-time strategy game that combined a highly rendered street-level perspective with proven Army tactics in the art of urban warfare or MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) (Loftus, 2004). The game was set in the fictional country of ‘Zekistan’, but for all the dusty alleyways, mosques and Arab villages the setting could easily be Iraq or Afghanistan. OXM gaming magazine referred to Full Spectrum Warrior as the ‘game that captured Saddam’, in that the game was made to train the US army infantry and ‘they were the ones who dug Saddam out of his hole’ (cited in Cowlishaw, 2005: 5). With the initiation of the ICT ‘virtual therapy’ project, then, we seem to have come full circle. Not only are video games now used to recruit for the US armed forces and to train and prepare troops after they have enlisted, but they are also played by US troops during a tour of duty and are even now being used to treat the consequences of combat engagement in the form of PTSD ‘virtual therapy’.

It is important, however, to remember that games are often used in ways not intended or anticipated by their developers and military sponsors. Game data, rules and codes can be modified to produce different narratives, characters and outcomes. In May 2006, DoD public diplomacy specialist Dan Devlin (speaking to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence) warned the US Congress that the makers of combat video games have unwit-

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5 Most combat video games, as Deck (2004) reminds us, do not portray the streets of US towns and cities but rather places that look like the most recent war zones visited by US troops.
tingly become part of a global propaganda campaign by Islamic militants to exhort Muslim youths to take up arms against the USA (Morgan, 2006). The DoD warned that ‘tech-savvy’ militants from al-Qaeda and other groups have modified video war games so that US troops play the role of bad guys in running gunfights against heavily armed Islamic radical heroes, and that children as young as seven can play at being troop-killing urban guerrillas if they register with the site’s sponsors. One of the most popular games, Devlin said, was *Battlefield 2*, which had been the subject of considerable software modification. The game’s publishers, Electronic Arts, claimed they had no control of the many game modifications that existed around the world, describing the process of modification as like ‘drawing a moustache on a picture’ (cited in Morgan, 2006). The game *Battlefield 2* ordinarily shows US troops engaging forces in China or a united Middle East coalition, but modified versions depict a man in Arab headdress carrying an automatic weapon into combat with US invaders.

In a strange and surprising parallel with games like *America’s Army*, Islamic militants, Devlin claimed, were using video games to train recruits and to condition young people to attack US-led coalition forces in Iraq. The manufacture and distribution of the first Arab 3D digital war game, *Under Ash* (later renamed *Under Siege*), occurred in 2002 and was released by Syrian publisher Dar Al-Fikr. Finding that no US company would sell them the basic graphics engine required, the game designers built their own, and *Under Ash* is seen as a direct response to games that encourage players to bomb Arab cities. Game players take the form of Ahmad, a young Palestinian, who has decided to resist and join the intifada (Stahl, 2004). There is also *Special Force*, published by the Central Internet Bureau of Hizbullah, an FPS based on the armed Islamic movement in South Lebanon, where the central character is a holy warrior fighting against Israeli occupation. The ideological opposite of *America’s Army*, these two FPS games are played from the perspective of a young Palestinian participating in the Islamic jihad, and although they contain similar militaristic representations to US-made shooters and have a similar look and feel, the narratives are very different.

The existence of such games and the culture of game modification reminds us, then, that we should be attentive to the nascent counter-movement in the gaming sector and should look beyond the ‘blood ‘n’ guts’ marketing of combat video games, avoiding the assumption that a product’s narratives cannot be read in different ways just because it bears a military title (Kane, 2005). Nonetheless, repeated rehearsing of the will to power and exertion of global domination and the experience of death within controlled and renewable parameters creates a false sense of power and invincibility among American consumer-citizens, which in turn ‘contributes to US imperial arrogance’ (Hall, 2006: 15).
Conclusions: A Therapeutic ‘Virtual Revenge’ for 21st-Century Angst?

Virtuous war requires a critical awakening if we are not to sleepwalk through the manifold travesties of war (Der Derian, 2001: xvii).

If, as Baudrillard (1991: 28) suggests, ‘we prefer the exile of the virtual’, then scholars of video games need to explore the ways in which ‘virtual wars’ feed our willingness to ‘unleash the real world’ (Baudrillard, 1991: 27–29). Digital war-game simulations do not represent pre-existing reality, yet they are real, existing as quasi-objects, as hybrid entities. It is also important to attend to the roles that digital games have as affective assemblages through which geopolitical sensibilities emerge and are amplified in order to explore the kinds of affective resonances that digital games create among gamers. Arguably, the integration of military technology into the world of entertainment ‘trains’ consumers to take on a militarized, aggressive stance and ‘disrupts connections to self, body, sensation, and history’ (Hall, 2006: 12), inviting consumers to embody the force, conformity and power of the militarized state (Hall, 2006).

Often accompanied by ‘thrash metal’ soundtracks, video war games offer ‘an alternative posture for US Americans – that of being wronged and righteous’ (Warner, 1992: 677). If the power of militarism is ‘to naturalise and legitimate military action and to obscure its effects’ (Woodward, 2005: 14), then digital war games have an important role to play in making US militarism appear benign. Hall (2006) suggests that consumers hunger for benign versions of spectacles of power that offer a sense of security and trust in a state that seems increasingly distant, unresponsive and disconnected. Many post-9/11 video war games offer a ‘therapeutic way to work out 21st century angst by battling the bad guys’ (Loftus, 2004: 4). Games like America’s Army, then, can be read as forms of what Der Derian (2001: 114) calls the ‘simulation of digitised superiority’ or ‘cyberdeterrence’, taken like prozac and serving as a ‘technopharmacological fix for all the organic anxieties that attend uncertain times and new configurations of power’. Games offer the possibility of getting back control, of overcoming fear, and are fantastical and temporary: ‘for 45 minutes you can pretend you have some sense of agency, some control, or at the very least some part in trying to make the world a better place’ (Barron & Huntemann, 2003: 5).

As Deck (2004: 1) points out, ‘the entertainment industry has assumed a posture of cooperation toward a culture of perpetual war’. Games can also produce a moral and ethical distance between players and history (particularly where that history may be painful and still a little raw), allowing players to experience violence cleanly (gone in a puff of red smoke) and encouraging them to accept the role of perpetrators who bear no moral or
ethical culpability for their actions carried out in a just/virtuous crusade against evil (Hall, 2006). In disseminating ideologies of hegemony (Leonard, 2004), games thus propagate an image of war as bloodless play, which consolidates an ethos of militarization, making US safety and security seem of paramount importance. Games can reinforce the image of a clean war with clean battle lines, no moral questions posed and no consideration given to the reality of taking a life. Death and bodily dismemberment are often banished from games (in much the same way images of death were excluded from images and accounts of World War II), so that war becomes more palatable as the ‘mud of battle’ is pasteurized.

Many recent video war-game releases are not so much ‘realistic’ but cinematic, in that they reproduce not the real-world experience of war but the theatrical experience of war (Cowlishaw, 2005: 6). So, playing a game becomes like starring in a war movie, since games use all of the same techniques as movies for framing shots, editing, pacing and narration (Poole, 2000; Murphy, 2004). Digital games, then, represent not one medium, but many different media. For some, they can be understood as ‘interactive movies about war with all the boring parts taken out’ (Cowlishaw, 2005: 6). As immersive/interactive movies about the experience of war, they permit gamers to see themselves on screen as the noble hero, in the Pentagon’s latest version of the noble war fantasy. Here, the player of the game is the story. With each new combat simulation celebrated as the ‘most realistic ever’, and contemporary warfare ‘increasingly like science fiction’ (Deck, 2004: 1), there is a certain inevitability about the associations people make between digital war games and cinematic warfare. Given that the mediated violence is contextualized in narrative ways within video games, the techniques employed by propagandists, game developers, writers and filmmakers regularly overlap (Deck, 2004: 10).

For some gamers, virtual war offers the chance to correct misperceptions of history through gameplay, and its appeal partly comes from its perceived ability to teach history and not just represent it (Cowlishaw, 2005). A range of video war games offer precisely this possibility of reworking historical battles for modern-day virtuous play, from WWII battles to Vietnam and Somalia, offering players the chance to seek ‘virtual revenge for American losses’ (Halter, 2002: 2). Others seek to restage past military engagements in ways that have a direct bearing on present-day confrontations. Games also enable the military to rewrite history such that the complexity and geopolitical ‘messiness’ of a conflict is edited out and will not register with gamers: ‘They will remember military conflicts as pure contests of strategy and force, with none of the external political, moral, historical, ideological and humanitarian factors involved’ (Elkus, 2006: 3). What are important here, then, are the ways in which games produce ‘an electronically induced amnesia. . . . Video games do not teach the wrong ethics, they teach that ethics are superfluous: only the game counts and the game can be started over and over
again’ (Schroeder, 1996: 153). The power of many digital war games lies not solely in the ability of players to occupy and conquer foreign lands, nor in the mass carnage gamers can effect through carpet bombing, but in the ability to transpose fear into historically based combat scenarios (Stallabras, 1993) with clear battle lines, in a war that is safe and winnable.

Games also offer a (cinematic) romanticization of war that is both seductive and powerful, and they can provide a (heroic) experience of winning a war single-handedly. For Deck (2004: 5), game producers ‘call forth a cult of ultra-patriotic xenophobes whose greatest joy is to destroy, regardless of how racist, imperialistic and flimsy the rationale’. Here, the simplification of cultures and history is itself a form of violence. As video games and immersive simulations become increasingly significant forms of representation, the predominance of narratives that construct the USA as an indomitable force becomes more problematic and increasingly in need of critical attention.

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