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Militarization And Modern Gaming: An Analysis Of The Relationship Of The Military And The Video Game Industry

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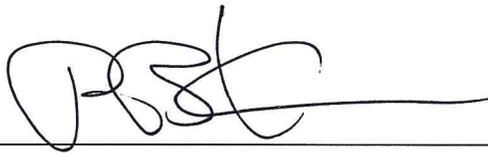
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MILITIRIZATION AND MODERN GAMING: AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATION OF THE
MILITARY AND THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

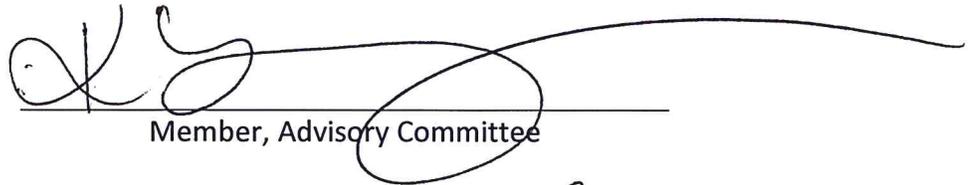
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AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF
THE MILITARY AND THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of militarism and the military itself in modern video gaming. The military's involvement includes developing its own, free of charge, video game title used as a recruitment tool, and training games used to desensitize new soldiers. Surrounding this direct involvement is a massive gaming industry that markets war and killing in the execution of the former in a "realistic" yet intensely glorified manner. The macro-cultural and societal implications of this phenomenon are explored.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The United States has always been a nation at arms. We are a nation founded through battle and have forged our way into becoming a culture forged in militarism. We pride ourselves on being the few and the proud, being all that we can be, always there, and always ready. More than any time in our nation's history, Americans are enthralled with military power (Bacevich, 2005: 1). Our highest grossing movies, novels, and other past times are often rooted in some sort of militaristic conflict. With the military mindset so commonly found in our sources of entertainment, it is only natural for us to want to explore that world more fully. We are able to do this through the virtual worlds presented in video games.

To understand what impact that the military presence in video gaming has on the public we need to better understand the demographic of American video gamers. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2013) has a list of industry facts in regards to American consumers. Among these we learn that:

- 1.) Fifty-eight percent of Americans play video games
- 2.) Consumers spent \$20.77 billion on video games, hardware, and accessories in 2012
- 3.) Fifty-one percent of U.S. households own a dedicated game console, and those that do own an average of two.
- 4.) Forty-five percent of all game players are women. In fact, women over the age of 18 represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (31 percent) than boys age 17 or younger (19 percent).
- 5.) Parents are present when games are purchased or rented 89 percent of the time.

From the above facts, we can easily see that video gaming is a huge industry. The major question, however, is: What influence has the militarized, post 9/11 culture had on

video game culture? In what way has it effected the content, consumption, and cultural influences through this major media industry?

Military video games are, annually, among the bestselling forms of entertainment. The highest grossing of which often reaches into the billion dollars of revenue and selling over a million copies. With this high rate of sales and 58% of Americans playing video games, what does that mean for our culture? What do the video game industry and the military stand to gain through the production and consumption of these titles? We, as Americans, have persuaded ourselves that we possess a particular genius when it comes to war (Bacevich, 2005: 10); it is only natural that we time and effort reinforcing this with video games, movies, novels, and other forms of recreation. But we have to ask ourselves why do we pine for increasingly accurate representations of warfare? What advantage does having a military adviser give a software developer? Why does it matter to the public if the virtual weapon is an accurate representation of military hardware? Does a more realistic virtual weapon impact the sales of a game; if so, does the realism reinforce military recruitment rates of the target audience? This study explores the how the relationship of American culture and the military-entertainment industry developed into its current form and what implications it has on our current society.

Methodology

This study takes a multi-method approach in looking into the macro-cultural aspects of the relationship between American militarism and modern video gaming. The approaches this study utilizes are historical review, ethnographic research, and qualitative data analysis. These were used because each allows for a particular understanding of the phenomenon, but not one alone allows for the whole picture to be explored. Through

ethnographic research we are able to witness, first hand, the nature of these games and what they present to the player. The following games were utilized: Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Battlefield 3, Ghost Recon: Future Soldier, and Homefront. And, finally, through qualitative data analysis we look into the substance of the games themselves. In analyzing the plot lines and direction of the games we can apply meaning to the games and the phenomenon itself.

To conduct the study, I first researched the history of the video-game industry and its military connections starting in the 1960's to the present. With this knowledge in mind I chose a selection of video game titles that had direct influence from the military. While playing these titles I performed a qualitative analysis of the material in the campaign story, language used, weaponry, and my reaction to the situations presented. I kept track of these things through notes taken during and after the experience. Once the single-player campaign experience was done with these games, I began playing online multiplayer aspects of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, Battlefield 3, and America's Army with a local group of players I was introduced to through a GameStop employee. I would join these players in online matches of the games, roughly, four times a week. During these matches I kept notes on the language the players used, their methods of play--"tactical" or "casual", with tactical being a tendency to use military jargon in their speech and filling out their squad with diverse fireteam elements—Assault, Support, Engineer, and Recon. Casual players didn't prioritize a military feeling, they played what they felt like playing and used common language when moving throughout the game.

The players of the gaming group also consented to discuss their thoughts on the military and militaristic video games with me. I kept notes on these discussions in a notebook.

CHAPTER II

MILITARIZATION AS ENTERTAINMENT

Moving through the suburbs of north-eastern Virginia, you watch as planes fly overhead the soldiers they carried parachuting into the American capitol and its surrounding area. You shoulder your rifle as you take cover behind a sport utility vehicle. An enemy vanguard is moving in your direction. Your squad leader gives you an order as he throws a grenade at the enemy, you take aim at the nearest man and fire. As his body falls, you adjust your aim at center mass of the next in line. The screen flashes red as you take enemy fire, you fall to the ground as the screen fades to black. You have died and the mission has failed... Three seconds later, you are moving through the suburbs of north-eastern Virginia, you watch as planes fly overhead...

-Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

To understand why the vicarious military life is so popular in current American culture, it is imperative to understand the ideas of militarism and militarization. The ideology of militarism is presented “to be a set of beliefs and values that stress the use of force and domination as appropriate means to solve problems and gain political power” (Kraska, 2001: 123). Furthermore, militarism glorifies military power, hardware, and technology as its primary problem-solving tools. With this ideology running rampant in the American mindset we find the blurring of the line between real world and entertainment scenarios. Other ways to explain this ideology include an aggressiveness that involves the threat of using military force, glorifying the ideals of a professional military class and supremacy of the armed forces in the administration or policy of the state. A standard dictionary definition of militarization is to give a military quality or character to something. The militarization of a nation often imbeds itself into every function of the society it represents. It can be found in the country’s economy, political relations, geopolitical relations, social relations, as well as race and class relations.

Militarization, according to Kraska (2001: 15), is best understood as the preparation for war. War is defined as state-sanctioned armies attempting to take over each other's territories using lethal violence. Building upon the foundation of militarization is the idea of militarism as a cultural pattern of beliefs and values supporting war and militarization that comes to dominate a society; Nazi Germany is a prime example of this. However, current American society easily depicts this ideal as well, albeit in a different form.

The ideology framework of militarism stresses that effective problem solving requires state force, technology, armament, intelligence gathering, aggressive suppression efforts, and other assorted activities that fall in line with military thought processes (Kraska, 2001: 17). This ideology has spread its hooked fingers into the minds of many Americans, exploiting their desire to feel safe and secure. They wish to experience no risk and willingly give away choice freedoms in exchange for the potential of safety from a focused enemy. This can easily be seen in the fiscal figures of how much we spend on our military entertainment sources.

Militarization and culture within America hold a highly dialectic relationship; they react to and shape each other affecting the lives and emotions of citizens. This dialectic was brought to a sense of hyper-reality in the aftermath of the September 11th attack with massive amounts of pro, and anti, government propaganda found in every facet of culture. Whether it was Toby Keith singing a ballad of an angry American or the Dixie Chicks becoming publicly ostracized for not supporting George W. Bush, we could not help but witness culture and militarization shaping each other. This phenomenon is found in every aspect of American entertainment; from music to movies, television, video

games, clothing, and policing. People have come to accept a type of “tactical” element into culture. In video gaming it can be found in players forming “elite clans”, a grouping of players, where people have specific roles and speak in military jargon (Off Duty Gamers, 2012). Even with all the controversy of Blackwater and Xe industries a video game has still been made to highlight life within a private military. Many people buy high powered military type weapons with no real ability to fully utilize them. I personally know a middle aged male who has bought a .50 caliber sniper rifle simply for the fact that it can fire a bullet that can go a distance of, up to, one mile. The late-modern culture, and its emphasis on risk aversion, has made it easy for militarization to root itself further within the lives of citizens.

Through understanding the ideas of militarism and militarization we can see why American culture feels the need to maintain a strong military capability and be prepared to use it aggressively to defend or promote national interests. Sadly we allow for militarization to be our national pastime; and when militarization is used as the national philosophy for punishment and justice it leads society and culture into a downward spiral of fear and anger. The militarization of a nation often imbeds itself into every function of the society it represents. It can be found in the countries economics, political relations, geopolitical relations, social relations, as well as race and class relations; which allows it to be used as the policing tool of future fear.

Culture and Militarization have an interesting relationship when it comes to tension between emotionality and rationality, as well as conceptions of justice. The competition of punishment exists between the morality of our culture and the administration of militarization. Within our Durkheimian morality we have values and a

competing range of emotions that are constantly being shaped and reformed by Foucaultian administrative bureaucracy. We, as citizens, come to expect results from the bureaucracy; these expectant results are socially constructed through our sensibilities and reaction to the world around us. Punishment is an emotional thing, war even more so, so when we see that our justice system is becoming highly militaristic a lot of emotions are brought to surface. Punishment, or more specifically the militarization of punishment, inflicts pain; and our sensibilities affect what we allow and how much we allow. This is adjusted according to the “feeling rules”, the norms of how we are supposed to feel in certain situations, of our current culture. In 9/11 ushered in a massive shift towards militarization due to our sensibilities seeking shelter and wishing for revenge. This allows for our culture to adapt accepting camouflage based clothing, tactical video games and police that present themselves as a military force.

Mentality and sensibility, according to Garland, are inseparable; together they shape how we view offenders and form theories (Garland, 1990: 45). This aspect of our culture is what forms our penal practices. We, as a society, are at odds with our desire for rules of treatment and for discretion. Many problems arise from the opposing conceptions; there are incompatible assumptions and contradictory outcomes. They require a process of compromise that allows for a type of social placebo effect. What militarization gives us is a culture that can focus its aggressions on a constantly updated media enemy in a manner we have come to culturally trust. We are fed military movies and video games of “Blockbuster” status every year.

The torrential force that is the American media weapon is touched upon very well by authors like Douglas Kellner and Andrew Bacevich. In *9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and*

Media Manipulation, Kellner (2004: 2) points out the fact that the word “terrorism” is highly contested in its current meaning and emphasis upon the workings of current issues and life within late modernity. He brings up the idea that terrorism is highly constructed and contested; where one persons “terrorists” are another group's “freedom fighters.” Building off of this idea, it is easy to understand that, for Americans, the actions of 9/11 were seen as terrorism, whereas for those committing the action 9/11 was the ultimate sacrifice for their beliefs and ideals. Therein lies the difficulty faced with trying to label a meaning to the term “terrorist”. It is impossible to truly label an ideal, or belief, to the term “terrorist,” because no matter whom it is you are trying to apply the term to there is someone who views them as a hero. For example, the actions of the American military during World War II in the bombing of Hiroshima. This was done as an act of war, in an attempt to put an end to the war. It was viewed as a success and ultimately brought about the surrender of Japan; but, to the Japanese this was an act of extreme violence. Countless civilians were killed and injured in the thermonuclear explosion. This could easily be viewed as an act of terrorism against the Japanese people. On the flip side of that, the bombing of Pearl Harbor could also be viewed as an act of terrorism.

From this we can see that acts of heroism can, often, also be viewed as an act of terrorism. So, what can we do to try and stop others from trying to be heroes? We have to out class them. This is done through the spectacle of terrorism. It is like a visually, flashy, deterrence. The Japanese blow up some ships... We can out do that. Let's bomb the hell out of an entire city. Spectacles of terror, according to Kellner (2004: 4), use dramatic images and montage to catch attention, hoping thereby to catalyze unanticipated events that will spread further terror through domestic populations. Pearl Harbor

terrorized Americans in the 1940s, 9/11 terrorized Americans in 2001. Both attacks were flashy and drastic. They left evidence and witnesses and devastated lives and landscape. It left a taste of fear and vicious villainy for those left to tell the tale. The spectacle of the act is “symbolic”, it sends a message. Military video games are comprised of nothing but this type of spectacle. The spectacle and our focus upon, post-9/11, military values, have seduced our society into proving our patriotism through video game sales. We don’t question those who play military games, for those are the culturally acceptable virtual simulations. It is perfectly acceptable for a 30 year old male to play the latest war game, but it is viewed as childish to for that same individual to play the latest Pokémon video game. Why? Are they not both a virtual simulation of a different life and world than that person lives? We present these war games to the population, ages 10-35, and begin preparing them for the wars of tomorrow. We witness these events first hand and take part in the action. Through our virtual avatar, we are allowed the agency to shoot, stab, bomb, pilot, and drive our way to victory. We rarely have to worry about things like the Rules of Engagement or Civilian casualties, or any other negative effects of virtually salting the earth. And these things are smiled upon because they are militaristic actions; and the military equals a post 9/11 America.

During his time as President of the United States, George W. Bush stated that it is our nations “responsibility to lead in this great mission.” This propelled the idea of a post 9/11, anti-terrorist, and manifest destiny. This was due, in part, to the American need for military superiority. We, as Americans, thrive on the fact that we are the biggest and baddest. For example, the U.S. Marine Corps possesses more attack aircraft than the entire Royal Air Force. As Bacevich points out, the United States spends more on

defense than all other nations in the world together. We are born and raised on the bread and butter of a militarized nation. We know that our Armed Forces are a strong and noble force to be reckoned with. Naturally, this sort of thinking boosts the sales of a militarized video game industry, which in turn promotes a militarized upbringing of young Americans.

The History of the Military-Entertainment Complex

To understand the implications and influence of the relationship between the military and the video game industry we have to look at the creation and history video gaming. Through understanding the history of this relationship, from its beginning in the 1960s to the creation of modern day annual blockbusters, we can understand how and why it is so influential in our everyday lives. *Spacewar!*, one of the first games produced, was made in 1962 by Steve Russell. In this game two players, represented by rocket ship avatars, would confront each other, firing missiles until only one player remained. This was representative of the Cold War, nuclear threat, and the space race. In 1967 Ralph Baer, while working at Sanders Associates, a military electronics firm, invented the 'Television Gaming Apparatus'. This invention remained a classified military training tool until 1968, when it was given permission to be developed commercially. These two early gaming inventions highlight how influential the military was in the creation of the video game industry; as stated by Matthew Thomson, "The games industry... grew out of the 'military-industrial-academic complex'; which he holds to be "a variant of military funded computing developments intended for practical military purposes which included war gaming" (Thomson, 2012: 8).

In 1971, Nolan Bushnell developed his own version of *Spacewar!*, and the following year founded the videogame company Atari. Bushnell's version of *Spacewar!* was simplified and became the immensely popular *Pong*. Atari quickly became the head developer of coin-operated video games, and in 1977 made crossed the threshold into American living rooms with the home gaming console Atari 2600 (Turse, 2008: 128). The Atari 2600 was revolutionary in the video game industry due to its eight-bit graphics and interchangeable video game cartridges. After the release of the home game console and military-themed games such as: *Combat*, *Air-Sea Battle*, and *Battlezone*, Atari garnered over \$5 billion over the next five years (Turse, 2008: 129).

Battlezone got the attention of the U.S. Army Training Support Centre (ATSC) to be used as training and skill enhancement. After modifying the controls of the game to be more similar to a real tank, the ATSC experimented using the game to develop hand eye coordination (Thomson, 2012: 8). In 1983, Ronald Reagan even acknowledged the value of video games in training pilots. Instances like these have led to a standing relationship between the video game industry and the military, leading to a mutually beneficial relationship between both parties; becoming known as the 'military-entertainment complex'.

The military-entertainment complex was further reinforced by the meeting of The Committee on Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense, and Marine directive 1500.00. The Committee was a request by the Department of Defense's Defense Modeling and Simulation Office (DMSO); and, according to Thomson (2012: 9), had tasked the National Research Council's Computer Science and Telecommunications Board to convene a committee to investigate areas for collaboration between the military

and entertainment industries. The result of the committee suggested that a formal collaboration between entertainment companies and the Department of Defense (DOD) would be desired. Individual firms would create simulation and modeling technology to both and joint endeavors would be run by university research centers.

In the 1990s, the military expanded upon its virtual training by looking at civilian games altered for military use. A prime example of this is The Computer War Game Assessment Group evaluating and recommending 30 games in 1995 (Thomson, 2012: 10). This assessment group led to Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak's directive 1500.55 stating that:

The use of technological innovations, such as personal computer (PC) based war games, provide great potential for Marines to develop decision making skills, particularly when live training time and opportunities are limited. Policy contained herein authorizes Marines to use Government computers for approved PC-based war games.

Out of this directive, the computer game *Doom* was altered by the Marine Modeling and Simulation Office to become *Marine Doom*. *Marine Doom* was used as a training tool equipped with bunkers, real weapons, friendly fire and fighting holes, and eventually tailored to represent a mission in the Balkans prior to deployment (Thomson, 2012: 13). Later, in 1997, the Marine Corps awarded a contract to Mak technologies for the development of MEU 2000, which would be released as both a commercial and a military game. This was the first example of a 'dual use' computer game co-funded and co-developed by the Department of Defense and the entertainment industry (Thomson, 2012: 13). The result of this type of joint endeavor, as stated by Turse (2008: 134), is the production of a "video game which is much more realistic than any other game ever produced for this genre, making its commercial success highly likely, while at the same

time, giving the DOD the cost benefit of unusually high sales for a military training device”.

Until shortly after 9/11 most military themed video games were focused on either World War II or the Vietnam War; however, 9/11 opened a new common enemy: The Middle East. With the exception of a few titles, most current military themed video games have you facing off against a brown enemy in an Orientalized city with a goal of fighting terrorism. Modern Warfare even includes a nuclear device being used against your player avatar in a Middle Eastern country. As this happens your character crawls out of his downed helicopter and his last moments are of seeing the utter devastation that the bomb has wrought. You then switch to your British avatar character and have the emotional goal of kicking the ass of all who were responsible. It’s late-modern writing propaganda at its finest. In the past decades we had movies such as Red Dawn, Rambo, and Sniper to make us want to kick ass, now we have a system that allows us to kick ass first hand from our couch.

The important thing to draw from this is the effect that the *setting* these games have upon players. When players sit down to their virtual escape they are presented with the world they have purchased. These each come with, at least, two modes of play: Multiplayer, in which you and others across the globe seek virtual dominance, or Single Player Campaign. The single player campaign is an interactive story in which the player, through written avatar, progresses through goals and plot devices. The Modern Warfare series draws upon a World War. Battlefield 3, a current best-seller, draws upon the war on terror leading to a possible nuclear attack on NYC that you must stop. The Homefront series draws upon the idea that North Korea invades America 20 years from now. The

thing that should be pulled from this line of thinking is that it all plays upon an idea of desire and fear (Graham, 2010: 65). Fear makes these stories possible; desire makes us want to “play” them away. What makes this even better is that military advisers are brought in to help write these stories, as well as make sure the military mechanics work properly, with professional writers. The most famous of these is probably John Milius, the writer of Homefront. Milius also wrote Apocalypse Now and Red Dawn. This type of scripted warfare that is shown in the military approved stories shapes the minds of the intended consumers to desire the military life and its glory. They want young people to want the glory of fighting off the evil other and protecting their loved ones.

From the viewpoint of many players, this can be a good thing. An interviewed player said that “military assisting and advising generally adds a lot to the experience, including a good bit of accuracy, and sometimes bigger things” (Elec, 2013). Another said, “I think having people from the military involved in these storylines is essential. At some level, you need to have a feel of authenticity to take the story or experience from being a game that glorifies the violence to one which shows the reality of it, and the harsh conditions and choices soldiers have to make in the midst of battles. If you leave these human elements out of the storyline, then loses a lot of the drama of the storyline. For the multiplayer modes, this might not be as important, but working to emphasize teamwork to complete objectives encourages social interaction. Also, the more realistic games, such as America's Army, or games where they put in a "one death and done" mode where you're out of the match after you're killed in the game until the match is over, puts more scope on how quickly things can go bad, and help players to realize just how tough condition are in the field” (Elder, 2013).

Giroux (2011: 5) points out that “war and its intensifying production of violence cross borders, time, space and places”; while also bringing to light the idea that the “pedagogy of brutalizing hardness and dehumanization is also produced and circulated in schools, boot camps, prisons, and a host of other sites that now trade in violence and punishment for commercial purposes...” Big business and the media are solely responsible for this sort of thing. It started small with things like pong, G.I. Joe, and Platoon, then all of the mediums of commercialization got together and started a war mongering campaign in order to sell their products. The old moniker “sex sells” seems to have been replaced by the idea of a violent cash cow. Giroux (2011: 7) brings up the movie “The Hunger Games” as an example of how Hollywood is cashing in on the violentization of mainstream entertainment; however, this began a lot earlier. One can think back to Roy Rogers, The Lone Gunman, Kelly’s Heroes... the list goes on. As David Sirota points out, in his book *Back to Our Future*, the military has been using things like the media and Hollywood for a long time (2011: 110). A prime example of this is the movie Red Dawn, it is the first movie to garner a PG13 rating, even though at the time of its creation it held the record for instances of violence within a film. The reason it got the new rating was due to the military pushing for it to be available to a younger crowd so they may think of enlisting. This same type of military presence can be felt in any military based video game of the last two decades.

In *Disney, Militarization and the National Security State After 9/11*, Giroux (2011: 3) says that certain Disney films, “attest to the company’s endorsement of, if not active participation in, partisan political issues, especially the “war on terror” and the emerging security culture in the United States”. This is important to think of in the realm of video

games as well. Post 9/11, most of the games taking place in the military world occur in tandem with the “war on terror”; and as Giroux (2011: 4) says about films, the stories in the game act “much like the propaganda they critique, attempt to shape their audience’s emotional responses...” This is an important aspect of much of the video games made today. For example, Ghost Recon: Future Soldier starts with a mission that your team fails, leading to all of their grisly deaths. Your character in particular has his arms catch on fire while hanging off a cliff before plummeting to his demise. The next scene is of your new avatar character witnessing their coffins being unloaded before he goes to take revenge. This sort of thing evokes an emotional response. Modern Warfare involves fighting throughout the streets of New York City, Paris, and London. All of which lose a popular land mark or experience the death of civilians; in Paris, the Eiffel Tower falls, in London a young girl is next to a gas bomb as it goes off, in New York you see the city being destroyed all around you as you rush through it. All of these things carry with them strong responses of emotion, particularly anger. Mix that anger with the grandiose idea that you can, single handedly, save the world and the fact that the target audience is already growing up in a strongly militarized culture, and you have a lot of potential for young meat filling up the recruitment lines.

What the target audience doesn’t realize is that they are being pushed towards that decision. On the surface, the goal of making these types of games is to allow for an action packed media experience; however, the underlying goal is to, as David Sirota puts it, promote militarism while hiding bloodshed (2011: 115). Commercials that claim “It’s not science fiction—it’s what we do every day” have a certain awe factor to witness. They are sleek and cool and make us think we could be Terminators, or at the very least

Kyle Reese. Now amplify their emotional response by applying a first person view point to everything they do. That is the propaganda of military gaming.

CHAPTER III

SHAPING THE VIRTUAL BATTLEFIELD

The influx of the military into the gaming industry cannot be discussed at this point in time without looking into both the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and Battlefield series. These are arguably two of the biggest names in the commercial video game market. Modern Warfare reached \$1 billion within 16 days of its release. The previous record for this amount of sales was James Cameron's film Avatar in 17 days (Stuart and Sweney, 2012). Both series pride themselves on being accurate in everything from weaponry to environmental destruction. Boasting advertisement and praise such as: "Real-as-hell single-player combat delivers a true warrior's experience in the global war of tomorrow" (Battlefield 3, 2011); and, "The most photo-realistic video game we've ever seen" (Game Informer quote on the back of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare game case).

Modern Warfare 3, while not used directly as a military training tool, received military advisement during its development. During a question and answer session (Bowers, 2011), Robert Bowling, the creative strategist at Infinity Ward, discussed what role veterans and current military members have, as far as input and feedback, in the development of Call of duty games. When asked how much input veterans and active-duty services members is implemented into the development of "Call of Duty" games, Bowling responded with:

Active-duty service members and veterans make up a big portion of our community and provide invaluable feedback throughout the development of the game and are constantly providing input. Especially when it comes down to the personality and detail of the weapons, gear and tactics we use in the game. You can easily look at the textbook stats of a weapon and look at a standard-issue piece of gear right off the assembly line and get all

the details you need, but what makes the game is the feedback from our military counterparts and players who are able to delve into the personality of their weapons, what makes them unique in their look and feel, the language and tactics used in the field and most important how they alter and adjust their gear and load outs to be more functional in the field... I hope they notice and appreciate the amount of detail that goes into every weapon. We use service member feedback, in addition to going out and getting hands-on time with every weapon we put into the game to really get the feel of every weapon. Its weight, how that impacts your speed, the way you reload it, the sound it makes as the magazine scrapes the side when removed and replaced, how your gear shakes and moves. Sometimes we have to rely fully on our military fans for reference on weapons we're unable to get our hands on, such as the XM25, which is featured in "Modern Warfare 3," something we had to reach out to our Delta Force counterparts and relied on for input.

This is highly important due to the fact that it elucidates the role that service members play in validating the realism and authenticity that these games try to show. Because we have real service members saying that this gun is accurate in its fire rate and accuracy at 300 yards, we as non-serving consumers can trust in the experience that our virtual battlefields show us. Vicariously living through an epic war is validated by accurate arms fire and tactical pursuits. A player from the gaming group I followed during this study mentioned that he prefers the realism that these type of games are able to offer. The lack of reality in other titles, such as Halo (a science fiction shooter), keep him from being able to feel immersed within the world the game offers.

America's Army, the official U.S. Army game that competes with commercial games, operates on similar context that Modern Warfare and Battlefield do; levels with mission objectives and competitive online multiplayer. This "free-to-play game has become a more effective recruiting tool for the Army than all other Army advertisements combined, according to MIT researchers (Hsu, 2012). According to Hsu, in 2010 America's Army has more than 11 million registered users having played over 260

million total hours and counting since 2002. In an interview with LiveScience, Marsha Berry, America's Army executive producer, stated that "the whole concept behind the game was that it was not going to be about scoring based on kills... We wanted it to represent Army values and career options... We wanted kids to be able to start playing at 13, if they haven't thought about the Army by the time they get to 17, it's probably not something they'll do" (Hsu, 2012).

In America's Army players advance through the stages of soldierhood — drilling in basic training, taking target practice with an M-16, studying basic emergency medicine and, finally, going into combat. It's been such a hit that the Army has recently gone one step further with the game, organizing video-game parties around the country like this one in Woodinville, offering free game play, free "chow" and plenty of exposure to the Army's recruitment tactics. Woodinville and Bellevue recruiters plan to repeat the events every three months. The Army makes no bones about the fact that it designed the game to attract a new generation of potential soldiers reared on ever-more-realistic video games. Information on joining the Army is a mouse-click away through an Internet link.

Since the Army released the game in July 2002, it has proved to be a low-cost advertising jackpot. The game has been downloaded more than 16 million times, and the Army estimates that nearly a third of all young people of prime recruitment age have been exposed to it (Downing, 2012).

The recruiter in charge signed up one new recruit from the Woodinville tournament. From the Bellevue event, recruiters said last week they have signed up one new soldier and are finishing testing and background checks to sign up two others (Downing, 2012). In the recruiting game, that's a pretty good rate of return. At a recent

series of three tournaments in New York City, recruiters generated 320 new leads but only two enlistments. Each new soldier counts. Together, Martin and his recruiting partner in Woodinville, Sgt. 1st Class Harold Hunt, have a 46-enlistee annual quota. Across all the armed services, recruiting costs about \$4 billion annually, according to a 2003 government study. Between 1998 and 2002, the military's annual advertising expenditures alone more than doubled, from \$299 million to \$607 million. That's why the America's Army video game has proved such a bargain. The first version cost \$7 million; costs of updating the game and operating the America's Army Web site are about \$5 million per year. A survey by the Army this year 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. As part of the recruitment effort, Martin brought in active-duty soldiers with battle experience to join in the tournament (Downing, 2012).

The high number of young gamers that this recruitment method has brought in has forced changes in military training. In 2010 the Army announced that it would “reshape basic training to accommodate a new generation of tech-savvy recruits who may have more gaming skills than physical fitness” (Hsu, 2012). Using training versions of America’s Army, the military can integrate real military weapons or hardware with the game software; due to this soldiers can “physically hold the launch tube of a Javelin antitank missile and practice firing it in a virtual setting” (Hsu, 2012).

Through the history the military’s use of the video game industry, we can understand that there is a certain dialectic that exists between these two industries. As one side advances in technology and need, the other adjusts itself to utilize the strengths of its counterpart and to bridge the gap of need. We have seen this relationship at work in

the development of training and recruitment aids--Full Spectrum Warrior and America's army, respectively—but, military virtual technology utilization has advanced in other directions as well.

In 2008, virtual recruitment was utilized in Philadelphia in the opening of the Army Experience Center (AEC). This was a “one-of-a-kind, 14,500-square-foot virtual educational facility” (McLeroy, 2012). The slogan, “The Army is more than you think it is”, illustrates the intended purpose of the center. According to Ryan Hansen of Ignited Corporation, the partners of the project, “The center is an attraction tool. There is no recruiting mission here; it is more about changing perceptions.” According to Maj. Gen. Thomas P. Bostick, the goal of the AEC is to reach out to Americans and give them an opportunity to understand their Army.

Visitors to the center are limited to people 13 years of age and older, as the Entertainment Software Rating Board rates many of the gaming activities T for teens. To be allowed admission they must give their name, date of birth, address, and education level; at this point they are given the option to receive further information about the Army.

The AEC has different areas for the visitors to explore and interact with:

“The Global Base Locator highlights Army installations throughout the United States and abroad. The Career Exploration Area lets visitors use its touch-screen technology to learn about 179 different Army career fields. The simulator area houses three simulators, including an Apache helicopter with pilot and co-pilot experiences, Black Hawk helicopter with four door gunner positions, and an armored Humvee with driver and gunner positions.

The gaming area lets visitors play America's Army, the Army's official computer game, as well as other games. There are a number of Xbox 360s plus networked PCs for video games.

The Tactical Operations Center highlights Army career opportunities in communications, command and control, military intelligence and

technology. The area can also be used for group presentations and online education”

While the AEC is a good way to showcase the options and goals of the Army, without the expressed goal of recruitment, it can be argued that recruitment is a primary purpose of the facility. As Marsha Berry stated, if people haven't thought about the Army by the time they get to 17, it's probably not something they'll do. This calls into question the minimum age of 13 for visitors of the center and its primary attractions; such as the three virtual simulators they have access to.

The repeated use of this targeted age group often leads to questions of whether or not the subject material is responsible for a more violent youth; this has been brought up numerous times by numerous individuals. A ready example would be Jack Thompson and his numerous lawsuits that claim simulated violence is a cause of real-world violence. However, that is not the direction that this thesis takes. Instead, this project builds upon the mutually beneficial relationship present in the military-entertainment complex. We look into its effect upon the social construction of a cultural militarization and the social production that comes as a result. Where does our desire to be a militaristic individual, or society, come from? What about war thrills us so much that we feel the need to live it vicariously through a screen?

The level of military based culture within our society has been steadily growing throughout the years. What started with glorified battlefield depictions of World War II, Vietnam, and American civilians defending their homeland from invaders in Hollywood Blockbusters has advanced into yearly installments of an interactive virtual battlefield. Many selling millions of copies within days or weeks. Ad campaigns run for weeks and months leading up to the release as the target audience waits and anticipates the newest

depiction of weaponry and technological advancements. Critics hail the newest rendition as ground-breaking or find fault in its similarity to last year's war. All the while the game flies off the shelves of stores and is played on couches across the nation. Eyes gloss over and the story and setting is absorbed. A generation of war heroes feels the effect of militaristic glory and starts to wonder "What if?"

CHAPTER IV

TIME AMONG A GAMING CLAN

My research into this topic lead me to join a small group of online gamers. This group was spread out in an area of about 100 miles and the people it consisted of knew each other personally, but, in some cases, did not see each other very often. The members were young adult males and females between 24 and 28 years old. My gatekeeper for the group was a young male who will be referred to as “Bo”. Bo is a 24 year old male who is employed at a major video game retail store. Most members of the group knew each other through this company, in some way or another. Some worked at different outlets and knew each other professionally, while others were brought into the group as friends of a member and found a compatible group of people to plug-in with.

I was brought into the group as a friend of Bo and experienced several titles with the group. Most titles that were played were of a militaristic variety, squad based combat with high powered ballistic based weaponry. While some outside genres were explored occasionally with a few members, the group was always most active when it came to military shooters. My time spent with the group was split into two types of interaction; I either spent time with them in person, or, more often, I interacted with them virtually through video game multiplayer and voice chat.

Typically, the conversations had with this group would start with discussing what new things are happening in their lives: days at work, education, instances of members getting engaged. For camaraderie based around a virtual landscape, it often led to very personal conversations. After the pleasantries of catching up, we would discuss what game would be played, most often the newest military shooter that was released, and

would start a multiplayer squad within the game. From here communications would generally be kept to military lingo or jokes about a player's performance. Examples of this would be: calling out for a "medic", confirming that you have someone covered, or saying you are on their "six". It often was situational when it came to tactics. Things like "move to the objective, I'll cover you", "drop some C4", "form up", or "give me a spotter" were often said throughout a match. Lakoff and Johnson tell us that our perceptions and actions correspond to the perceptions and actions of a party engaged in war. The authors point out that, for our experiences to be coherent, we "superimpose the multidimensional structure of the concept WAR upon the corresponding structure CONVERSATION" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 81). Applying this idea of conversation being built upon similar concepts of war, it's interesting to look at the conversations and interactions had upon a virtual battlefield and their implications upon the mindset of the virtual combatants.

One of the more common things that I noticed about how the game affects the players is the feeling and expression of rage. Going into this project I had heard of the act of "Rage Quitting", the act of closing down an application, due to anger or frustration, because of poor performance. While participating in the gaming group I often saw instances of rage in the other players and, in some instances, myself. This most often occurred when someone in the group was unable to keep their avatar "alive" for more than a few seconds or were unable to get a kill in a match. The players most responsive to this feeling were Bo and Youth. They would often become so frustrated at the game that they would either turn off their voice chat so party members couldn't hear what they said, or they would back out of the game all together until they had a chance to calm

down. There were also instances of extreme rage and displeasure, mostly in the case of Youth, that the group member would launch into a verbal tirade full of anger and derogatory comments. These comments mostly focused upon themes of sexual orientation, gender, and race. Often these tirades of derogatory comments made by Youth would start calmly and then escalate in intensity as the match went on. Often starting with calm statements such as: “Fucking children. I’m playing with fucking children” to things like “Cocksucker! I know I shot you” and “Only niggers use grenades” and finally getting to the point of screaming out things like “Are you fucking kidding me?” and “Faggot” over the party chat before he would abruptly quit playing and leave the game for the evening. It should be stressed that any comments made by Youth, or any other player, are not based in a real knowledge of who they are angry with. Party chat only allows audio inputs from those who are in your party; so, they never hear the voice of the person they are displeased with. Thus, they never learn things like the possible age, gender, race, or any other factors that add up to an identity. The focus their rage upon a virtual representation of an enemy, one that is depicted as a dangerous other. With many of the comments and slurs focusing on sexual orientation and belittlement, it is important to take note that this virtual world is a highly masculine arena. Femininity and homosexuality are something to be pointed at and ridiculed. There is no room for “weakness” or being “soft”. It is kill or be killed. Demoralize and conquer.

Often, rage was kept in check through acts of virtual revenge. When you are killed by another player you are shown who killed you, where they were located, and what they were using. This allows for you to specifically have a nemesis to hunt down and seek vengeance upon. Upon killing that player you are awarded a higher match score

due to having gotten payback. In the case of one of the group managing to kill his killer, Elec exclaimed, “That Russian is going to go home with a second mouth because of that bullet”. The Russian in question was simply another player on the Russian faction of the game parameters. The game was Battlefield 4, which casts players on the virtual battlefield as either American, Russian, or Chinese. The player that Elec killed was in real life, most likely, another American citizen; but, in the game he represented a faceless foreign national with goals opposite of Elec’s squad. In a military shooter, you are always faced with an opposing force. Your job is to accomplish your mission, while stopping the opposing team from completing theirs. At this point the people that you are set against are no longer people; they are the enemy. Which leads to things like “a lot of parachuting and a lot of shooting people in the face” (Elec, 2013).

The majority of the group has admitted to having an interest in the military at some point, but do not believe that video games have had much influence in that career interest. In some cases the members mention family history of the military, a few members are ineligible for the military due to chronic illness, and others mention an interest in the military but a fear of all careers involved with it. When asked if they feel that the vicarious nature of military gaming is a reason that they enjoy the titles, members responded with statements like, “Playing a soldier on a video game is exciting enough for me. I can't even imagine the situations that our armed forces have to deal with on a daily basis, I don't think I could handle that” and “having that little bit of fantasy does improve the enjoyment a bit”.

Bo once said that playing these types of games is a great stress reliever. He claims that being able to log on with his friends and kill bad guys is, for him, a way of

working through problems. For Bo, shooting people in a virtual world is like talking a long walk or drinking a cup of tea, it is relaxing and helps to process issues. But, why has playing soldier in the virtual battlefield become a way to calm down or relieve stress? What about our culture makes us want to take out our aggressions by dominating an enemy?

CHAPTER V

FOCUSING THE AUDIENCE

Many proposed sources of aggression within this type of media fit the American ideal of who might be viewed as suspicious. Now in this case, suspicious means anyone who might be a terrorist, or threat to national security. In most recent cases, possible terrorist meant someone of Middle Eastern descent; this type of profiling is explained in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Said, 1985: 4). When speaking on orientalism Said can be quoted to say:

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Muslims and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression.

At the end of the Cold-War we, as Americans, were left without an enemy to focus our aggressions on. Communism was no longer the enemy and had effectively fallen with the Berlin wall. Throughout American history the U.S. Government has demonized and rallied against common enemies with military force or the threat thereof (Kraska, 2001: 18). At first we were given the war on drugs to vent our frustrations upon.

The war on drugs was becoming a ubiquitous metaphor, used by the media, politicians, and citizens in everyday talk and elaborated floridly in references to “battle plans,” “fronts,” and “enemies.” ...Americans were finding “wars” to wage all over their political and cultural agenda. As they did so, they marked the completion of the inward turn of militarization.” (Sherry, 1997: 431).

This emphasizes the idea that Americans have to have a common enemy upon which to focus their ire. This desire for a focus has led us into the realm of militarization. We have allowed the ideology of militarism to sink its claws into our hearts and minds. Americans, at this point, need it to feel as though they can walk out of our houses in the morning and make it through the day.

As previously discussed, we can see this need for a common enemy very easily in the video game world. Many militarized video games, especially first person shooters, pass the mantle of “enemy” and “dangerous other” around to ethnicities and nationalities that can be linked to current media fears. Games like Homefront and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, that focus upon North Korea and unrest in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, aid in the fear and mistrust of those nations and its people. The player being shown the faces of a specific ethnicity or nationalities are more likely to focus their derogatory comments on the race and nationality being represented. The elements of rage and frustration are still present in their speech; but, the comments change. “Nigger” becomes “Gook” or “Dune Coon” or “Abu”.

The names change with the video game, but the meaning is always present. You, the player, are given a virtual representation of an enemy and you must prevail over him. That is your mission. That is your quest. Your only purpose while playing these games is to dominate the opposition. There is no diplomacy that time has passed, there is only a black and white objectivity of good and evil... and evil must be destroyed.

A current holy war adds an element of race and ideology to the “war on terrorism.” As history has shown us, ideals cannot be fought with arms. Attempting to cut down an ideal causes it to burrow deeper into the hearts of those who believe. The

writers of these games are able to take the fear and unrest that has been kindled within our culture and run with it. Kellner (2004: 2) points out that “The U.S. Media and the Bush administration thus created a legend of bin Laden and Al Qaeda, projecting into the figure of bin Laden enormous evil and power, which in turn elevated his status in the Arab and Muslim world to a quasi-demigod able to inflict harm on the American superpower.” Think of this along the lines of Frankenstein and his monster. We created, through media imagery, a monster, of mythical proportions, out of a single man. And through this man, we elevated the idea of the dangerous Middle Eastern other to the top of most current generation video game wanted lists, with his similar likeness being constantly in our crosshairs.

Sadly, this was ignored and the “war on terror” took on an aspect of ideals. It became a fight to preserve “freedom”. Using established writers, with the aid of military advisors, current video games have in-depth plots and stories that use this as the driving point behind any action that occurs within. The motive of madness is that of a “clash of civilizations”. Kellner (2004: 5) explains that this clash “established a binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilization, and largely circulated retaliatory discourses that whipped up war fever and called for military intervention.” With a face and a motive, Americans were now able to funnel their rage and fear into an entity. Sadly, because of the portrayal presented in the military video game, it became an “us against them” mentality and many encompassed all of Islam into the same mindset as those in Al Qaeda. The plot lines of these games bring the idea of good versus evil into play. You establish a bond with the characters, much like when watching a dramatic film. It becomes a desire to fight the evil they are faced with and protect those faces that are

familiar against the shadow that the narrative presents. It becomes a crusade. The unity against the various enemies that we see in military video gaming is highly important to the narrative the stories of these games offer. The unity presented in a “them against us” scenario tends to obscure that most of the enemies are not white Americans; and, because of our militaristic conditioning, we do not ever question this. The video game industry must provide us with a common enemy, otherwise we would not be able to put ourselves in the role of the heroic defender (Gibson, 1994: 65). This type of mentality is highly prevalent within the post 9/11 military video gaming industry.

Playing the hero

Playing the role of the heroic defender is incredibly important to the world of militarized gaming. Ultimately, it is one of the things that draw so many players to the genre. For the price of the game software you can spend endless hours in a world that you do not have the skills or training to be a part of. You can sit on the couch and be John McClane in the Nakatomi Plaza building, you can save Private Ryan, you can star in your own action blockbuster. The realm of militarized gaming offers an escape from your ordinary real life. In current Western society the alpha male is highly prized and in these virtual worlds you are able to be take on that persona. In playing the game, you are offered the chance to be an elite warrior that has to make the tough decisions that no one being should be forced to shoulder. One player, Skrilla, expressed the need for this escapism when he said, “Sometimes it’s just fun to be the good guy. It’s not like I can slay dragons or kill terrorists in real life. I like playing the hero because it gives me a chance to do the impossible. I can help people and make major decisions while helping people.” Sometimes this escapism leads to a whole new level of immersion within the

virtual world. While gaming with Bo, there were several instances in which he would get so involved with what was going on that, if his character died while he was talking, he would cease all communication until his avatar was back on the battlefield. So, with this hero immersion in mind, how does being able to play the hero affect the player and their perception of military life?

In *New American Militarism*, Bacevich (2005: 97) presents the idea that “misleading and dangerous conceptions of war, soldiers, and military institutions have come to pervade the American consciousness and have perverted present-day U.S. National security policy.” Bacevich points out that “present-day tendencies... elevate the president to the status of a demigod whose every move is recorded, every word parsed, and every decision scrutinized for hidden meaning... What is most striking about the most powerful man in the world is not the power that he wields. It is how constrained he and his lieutenants are by forces that lie beyond their grasp and perhaps their understanding.”

Western culture is always portrayed as the hero within the current generation of video gaming. According to Bacevich (2005: 11), the Wilsonian paradigm “at its core, sought a world remade in America's image and therefore permanently at peace.” Wilson wanted worldwide peace by removing any differences in government. The idea of a world operating under the Wilsonian paradigm is rather hard to fathom let alone achieve. With such lofty goals as bending the entire world to a model of America it is easy to understand that only a deity could be responsible for such an idea; and since it was the will of a deity, it must somehow be possible.

In Bacevich's discussion of the six propositions of neoconservatism (2005: 6), the idea that neoconservatives believe that it is an article of faith that men, not impersonal

forces, determine the course of history. This can be understood to show that people will follow the charismatic leader into the depths of Hell; and when they get there they will drink sand because their leader tells them that it will quench their thirst. Our, overall, unquestioning belief in our leaders has led us to no longer question why we drink the sand... We simply do it. We have lost our self-restraint in our media centered training to go with the flow. We have been fed lines like “peace in this world, only follows victory in war.” Our movies, books, and other sources of entertainment glorify the soldier as being the pinnacle of existence because he fights for what is right. Realism is no longer present in depictions of war and its consequences. The hero gets the girl and the audience drinks the sand.

The Social Condition

With realism no longer a factor in the meaning of war depictions we must focus upon what takes its place, the “why” of this entertainment. It has already been shown that American military culture smiles upon the brave and the bold. We train our young early to be ready to jump into the fire; but, what purpose does a disassociated video game war depiction play? I like to refer to this purpose as the imprint phenomenon. Bostick, Hansen, and Barry have shown that the target age for military exposure is between 13-17. At this age the average American child has an incredibly impressionable mind. We give them a free copy of America’s Army, or Modern Warfare for Christmas, and later ask what they want to be when they grow up. I can guarantee that a few will raise their hands proudly and state that they want to be in the Armed Forces. Through overexposure to this type of video game, the player takes part in a social learning. They become their avatar and become subject to virtual Hollywood role models (Grossman, 1996: 308). They are

able to take the role of the masculine hero archetype so commonly found in action films and novels. By virtually becoming this year's incarnation of Arnold Schwarzeneger, Brad Pitt, Jake Gyllenhal, or Matt Damon, young players are able to take on the testosterone fueled role of the hero and power their way through difficulties that would kill mere mortals. Players are allowed to live the heroic fantasy, at no risk to themselves, and experience vicarious glory and virtual learning. Through playing these games, people are social conditioned to be desensitized to death and killing. In an interview, Grossman (2012) presents a compelling argument for how these games are so effective in normalizing violence. He has this to say:

“It's important to point out, up front, that we're talking about visual violent imagery; that, the written word can't be processed until age 8, and it is filtered through the rational mind. The spoken word can't be processed until age 4, and it, too, has to be filtered in the forebrain before it trickles down to the emotional center. But, these violent visual images: At the age of 18 months, a child is fully capable of perceiving and imitating what they see. And, at the age of 18 months, these violent visual images, whether they be television, movies or video games, go straight into the eyes, and straight into the emotional center.”

Now, if an 18 month old child can gain emotional information from violent imagery and children older than 8 can process the spoken and written word, we can see that the target age group of 13-17 years of age is fully able to “benefit” from the desensitized imagery and narrative; but, most likely will not disassociate the violence from the virtual glory. Children think of themselves as invincible; which is reinforced by endless spawning (infinite resurrection) in multiplayer gaming and continues (endless amount of lives) in single player gaming. When you die, you come back and try again. When a comrade character dies in the video game narrative, it does not make the player stop and think of the horrors of war. It fuels their need to overcome their enemy. There is

no real consequence to death. It is no longer a permanent thing. Death is merely an inconvenience.

In multiplayer gaming, the inconvenience being that you are shown the last few seconds of your “life” as seen from your killers point of view. You see where they killed you from and what they used to do it. You are shown your killers virtual death signature. You see what modifications they have put on their weapon, the tactics they used to lure you out, and what they may do with your corpse. This is a very popular feature in online multiplayer gaming, as it allows you to fully customize your weaponry and load out of your avatar. Through this you choose your preferred way to kill and thus leave your mark upon the opponent when they are given a replay of their death from your point of view, including your online name, weapon of choice, where you shot them, and what you did afterwards. It allows for you to leave your momentary mark in an, otherwise, anonymous virtual world. And you don’t have to worry about the bodies of countless previous lives cluttering up the fighting zone. When a player is killed their body will disappear, removing all evidence, aside from the occasional bloodstain, that they were there. This virtual battlefield sanitation acts to further limit the scope of consequences the player may see, leading to further desensitization of the individual. Which benefits the military and the corporations who make the games; people forget about the consequences of war and lose themselves in the game.

The line between the military and corporate America is quickly disappearing, allowing for things like the military-entertainment complex to rise and thrive. Stephen Graham talks about how “contemporary militarization runs on an economy of *desire* as well as an economy of fear”. This particular trend,

tracking, “blurs civilian and military applications of technologies for control, surveillance, communications, simulation and targeting”. This sort of tech has many applications within the civilian realm, especially the realm of criminal justice; however, the one that interests me most at this current time is that the power technologies for simulation and targeting have in the home and on the target audience of military based video games.

There are many aspects of this phenomenon that relate to the above idea, but the one that springs to mind when speaking of this is the home entertainment systems of PlayStation and Xbox motion gaming accessories. The PlayStation Move and the Xbox Kinect allow for the player to physically interact with the game they are playing. You target an enemy down the sights of a plastic assault rifle and pull the trigger (Move), you physically duck out of the way of enemy fire (Kinect), give specific military hand signals to your squad mates (Kinect), or fully assemble your gun from 20 million possible combinations (Kinect); all of this, according to Tony Stertzel, associate producer on the game at Red Storm Entertainment, allows you to “live out that Minority Report fantasy where you’re standing in front of an interface and swiping things around. It’s very smooth. It’s very sleek, and it’s really interesting to see the gun in that way” (Bueno, 2012).

This kind of at home technology can also be found in virtual recruitment centers, also known as an Army Experience Center (McLeroy, 2008). The first of these is based in Philadelphia and is a 14,500-square-foot virtual educational facility at the Franklin Mills Mall. Under the motto of “The Army is more than you think it is”, the center hopes to “change perceptions” and be an “attraction tool”. However, the most popular photo

associated with the center is that of four young men shooting at a screen depicting, obviously, men of Middle Eastern descent. A spokesperson for the Army said that they will run the Army Experience Center as a pilot program for up to two years, and "We will be analyzing results of the various areas throughout that time, and determine if any of the innovations can be used as separate entities at other locations." According to Major Larry Dillard, "The Army is not all about boots and guns (McLeroy, 2008). We want to give people the opportunity to experience the Army for themselves, so they have an understanding of what Soldiers do, and they can be proud of their service."

Major General Thomas P. Bostick, the head of the U.S. Army Recruiting Command, says that "What we are doing here is reaching out to Americans, giving them the opportunity to understand their Army. Oftentimes people have a negative perception of the Army, but the negatives are a very small part. Our Soldiers are well-trained, well-equipped and serving a great mission." This would be fine except for the fact that the Army has developed its very own video game to be given out for free at High Schools and recruiting centers, as well as being available for free download from the Army's website. A spokesperson for the Army has been quoted to say that "the target audience is young people ages 12-16; because if they haven't thought of the Army by then, chances are they won't think of it." This kind of thinking undermines the idea that a virtual center is more focused on public understanding through having young people sit in a Humvee and shoot a screen with computerized assault rifles (McLeroy, 2008).

We are given authenticity and realism in the virtual world. These are terms that are often used to market, provide audience feedback, reviews, and in criticisms of the games. Thomson (2009: 82) states that "The status of a game as authentic or inauthentic,

realistic or unrealistic, is of fundamental importance not only to how a game is marketed, but also to how it is received and interpreted. As a result, the perception of the authenticity and realism of games is central to considerations of the influence of military computer games on popular understandings of warfare”

The economy of desire is very visible within this medium of entertainment, perhaps even more so than the last three or four decades of cinematic based entertainment (Graham, 2010). Avatar, which is the highest grossing film of all time, made over one billion dollars in just 17 days. Modern Warfare 3, sold on all current generation gaming systems, made the one billion dollar mark in only 16 days (Stuart and Sweney, 2012). What’s more impressive is that the same game made over \$400 million of that within 24 hours of opening sales. The game centers on a world war declared on the US and Western Europe by Russian ultranationalists. The Guardian stated that “even Hollywood couldn’t afford this. Players pitch up to one bombed-out landmark after another, blowing up what isn’t already destroyed before moving on...” (Stuart and Sweney, 2012). You mix this kind of excitement with the technology of the PlayStation Move and the Xbox Kinect and you have a very impressionable audience, young people aged 12-24, being shown the glory of the military; but, of course, the military only wants to promote understanding and has no desire to enlist fresh, unspoiled, bodies for the cause.

This all directly applies to Graham’s (2010, 14) Citizen Soldiers, where the new military urbanism is being “forged within cultures of virtual and electronic entertainment and corporate news”. Graham states that to tempt the “nimble-fingered recruits best able to control the latest high-tech drones and weaponry, the US military produces some of the most popular urban warfare video games. ...games like the US Army’s America’s Army

or US Marines' Full Spectrum Warrior allow players to slay terrorists in fictionalized and Orientalized cities in frameworks based directly on those of the US military's own training systems". Graham brings up two very good points. The first is that of the military focusing on the technologically savvy to usher in a new age in warfare, the drone age. In which boot camp has been revamped to allow those who are more skilled at pushing buttons and playing Xbox, than they are at doing push-ups and running, to enlist and "kick some ass".

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The long standing cooperative nature between the military and the video game industry began with the creation of, the Cold War representative, *Spacewar!*, and it has grown exponentially as in the years following the attack of 9/11. This dialectic relationship is responsible for things such as virtual recruiting centers, America's Army being given free of charge to students, and video game development under military advisors. Military gaming has become so deeply rooted in American culture that we spend billions every year just to play the newest game and virtually kill our friends with the latest gear. Through experiencing five of the leading titles in this industry I have seen firsthand the effect of the military immersion. During my time writing this thesis, I found myself becoming more interested in the military, tactics, and weaponry. While I don't own a gun, I have gone to several shooting ranges with friends that play similar video games; and I am looking into finding nearby paint ball courses. I never had an interest in these kinds of activities before delving into these games. It is my belief that the immersion these games bring about desensitizes us to many aspects of warfare and points our eyes and minds towards the glory that enlistment can offer. For those that do enlist, because of the impression they have received through gaming, the military-entertainment complex has achieved its goal; a virtually trained recruit, ready for molding and deployment.

Interestingly, much like the real military, sexual bias and harassment is present among the virtual military. Marvel, a female member of the gaming group I followed, informed me that, as a female in military gamer, you get some people that are nice and

want to actually speak with you. You also get those who want you to 'get back in the kitchen' or 'show them your tits'. Girls can't play those types of games, according to them. Rape culture is prominent amongst the prepubescent commentators (Marvel, 2013). This goes to show that even in a virtual setting, the military culture is still segregated by gender, as well as race and sexual preference.

Unsurprisingly, the virtual battlefield is a very masculine setting. From its foundation as a military training tool, to being used for recruitment, to being a media spectacle based upon the war on terror, we can see the militarized culture has relied upon the gung-ho nature of masculine armament to become one of the most profitable forms of entertainment. With the narratives of the games being worked upon by military advisers and Hollywood writers, this isn't very surprising. The spectacle that these fantasies offer presents a fantastical story line that plays more like an action movie. It allows the player to be able to put themselves in the mindset of the character - however that may play out (Marvel, 2013).

American popular culture is very much based upon the action hero. Being able to escape into that role offers an immersive illusion that we are a mighty crusader, that we are a champion of the forces of light and good, armed with plot for our armor and a signature weapon based in military realism. We step onto the virtual battlefield ready to deliver punishment on the dangerous other that challenges us.

Through this idea we are able to see the major product of the military entertainment industry. As players, we experience war as entertainment. In drawing upon this fantasy, the mutually beneficial relationship of the military and the entertainment industry has grown into a billion dollar behemoth. The resulting

enthrallment of our culture towards a virtual militarism has led us toward the social masculinity of the action hero. We shoot first and dismiss the opponent as a dangerous other. We seek revenge in order to raise our score and vent our rage. In a social context we offer ourselves to war and situate ourselves in the comfort of domination of war entertainment.

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