

War in Video Games - Between Reality and Entertainment

Written by Michael Hitchens

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/11/26/war-in-video-games-between-reality-and-entertainment/>

MICHAEL HITCHENS, NOV 26 2014

Defeated enemies surround the hero, the mound of dead bodies evidence of the savagery of the fight. A description of a scene from the latest first person shooter (FPS)? Perhaps. Or just as possibly a description of the carving of Rameses II at the siege of the Dapur, which can still be seen at his mortuary temple, the Ramesseum. The use of cutting-edge media in the representation, even glorification, of war and conflict is almost as old as civilisation itself. It should be no surprise, then, that depictions of current conflicts can be found in videogames. It would be a surprise if videogames did not make use of these events and settings. If it was good enough for Shakespeare to make entertainment out of England's (then) recent wars, why shouldn't videogames? And use it they do, from *America's Army* to the games in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series and a host of lesser known titles, the wars of today have leapt into our homes, our keyboards, and game controllers, promising us direct, if vicarious and virtual, involvement in the action.

But what do these games tell us about the conflicts from which they draw inspiration? It is hard to argue that they are demonstrating reality. Apart from the obvious lack of real injuries and deaths amongst their players, these games are not attempting to be faithfully realistic representations of real combat. In most cases, even when the events of the game are based on facts, the game mechanics ensure an experience that is less than faithful. Player characters can take much more damage, and keep functioning when wounded, far beyond what is possible in the real world. The kill counts in a single-player game will typically be in the hundreds, if not the thousands. And the role of the player is often atypical for real world combatants. At best, most games will focus on individuals or small groups operating outside of a normal military command and control environment. This is what Machine and van Leeuwen referred to as the "special operation discourse". Special Forces do operate in this mode in the real world, but they do not represent the majority of combatants. Games do strive for realism in some sense. Mark Long, of Novalogic, spoke about realistic elements of a game in a 2002 interview with IGN (Butts, 2002) about *Delta Force: Task Force Dagger*. "The levels are based on real operations" and "It's been very challenging to get the details of uniforms, equipment, weapons and tactics right". But, as he added, "We'll leave the politics to the Department of Defense". Yet this striving for realism does not mean that the games are realistic. Games do exist where a single bullet can kill (for example, the *ARMA* series, although even there some aspects of the damage system are unrealistic). Some games, such as *Task Force Dagger*, are based on real-world situations, but others use fictional situations loosely equivalent to the real world. Strict realism is not a top priority of these games, but they are no worse than Hollywood. And both are, in the main, pitched as forms of entertainment.

Whilst enthusiasts argue that it is obvious when playing these titles that they are only games that offer players exciting, but essentially harmless, entertainment, some commentators question whether the blurred lines separating the hyper-real play of videogames and the reality of actual warfare creates a dangerous propaganda campaign. Some (for example, Roger Stahl of the University of Georgia (Stahl, 2006)) go as far as to claim that western consumers have already been transformed into virtual soldiers through the seductive spectacles staged by the creations of the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Stahl supports his claim with evidence of the ties that exist between the military and gaming industries through such lures as lucrative simulation and training commissions. The U.S. army provided consultants to work with EA Games on productions in the *Medal of Honor* series. Mark Long was a major in the US Army before his career in video games. Other games companies have employed retired soldiers as

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consultants (for *Rogue Warrior* and *Kuma/War*, amongst other titles). *Kuma/War* illustrates the alignment between game and reality. On the 2nd of May 2011, Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. Navy SEALs during a raid on his compound in Pakistan. Less than a week later, game episode 107 was released for *Kuma/War*, allowing players to recreate that real-life mission. These links have led some to argue that such games are, at least in part, tools for conveying particular political messages. David Leonard (of Washington State University) contends that they “elicit support for the War on Terror and United States imperialism” (Leonard, 2004), while critic Ed Halter calls them “the next generation of wartime propaganda” (Halter, 2002). Yet a game that is attempting a somewhat realistic simulation of motor racing could be criticised if its design didn't involve consultation with people with real world knowledge of its subject. Should a different set of rules apply to games that simulate conflict?

Halter's statement bears more consideration. Calling games the next generation of propaganda acknowledges that previous generations existed. Criticism of the negative effects of media is nothing new. Plato warned about the insidious influence of dramatic stage plays. Long before Plato, the Egyptian Pharaohs were well aware of the value of depicting their wartime deeds. Massive images of the Pharaoh crushing his enemies could not have failed to have an effect on his people. Ramesses II was far from alone in this. It is easy for each generation to forget the everyday context of the people who have gone before. What to us are historical monuments, worn by time, were topical when they were created: Persian wall murals, Greek vases, Roman triumphal arches, Chinese woodblock prints, Japanese watercolours. It seems that every advance in recording and communication, every new media, has rapidly been put to use in depicting the conflicts and victories of the day. Western civilisation, even before the advent of electronic media, has participated just as eagerly. Illustrations of war can easily be found in the pages of medieval chronicles. The Bayeux tapestry depicts the Norman conquest of England. As painting advanced, the topic of war was far from shunned – although painting may not have been as instantaneous as the cell-phone image or even the efforts of the *Kuma/War* designers. For example, Heller's painting of the Battle of Pavia in 1525 was not completed until four years after the battle. Yet the events it depicted were still well within current memory when it was first displayed. Many more examples can be found in public and private collections.

Despite these precedents, a still image, be it painting, illustration, or tapestry, is not a game. They don't have the movement, the host of characters, the narrative that can be found in a videogame. Not that those elements are unique to games. Long before electronic media, they were the province of stage plays. And depictions of war can easily be found there, even in Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays, or at least some of them, have not escaped criticism. A recent review (Johnson, 2012) of *Henry V* baldly states “this play was written largely as propaganda”.

Yet this is not a precise analogy. Video games are making more use of contemporary enemies than Shakespeare ever did. A survey of first person shooters by this author found that in the years 2002-2005, over half of the games released featured enemies that were either terrorists or other forms of political enemies of the West. Ten years previously, this figure was just 20%. The figures show significant jumps after 1998 and 2001. In 1998, Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists bombed the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. In 2000, the USS Cole was attacked by the same group, followed by the 9/11 attacks in 2001. It is undeniable that the videogames industry (or at least that part of it producing FPS games) is reacting to real-world events. Despite this, the offerings from the industry are anything but uniform. Quite apart from the games which are populated with other forms of opponents (ranging from the supernatural to alien threats to more mundane criminals), the terrorists depicted in games are not uniformly those seen in the news. Terrorism itself has changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, it consisted primarily of “international terrorism” groups (such as the Italian Red Brigades and the PLO). These groups were the most recent Western experience of terror when the FPS first ventured into contemporary settings during the mid-1990s. Contemporary terrorism is different. In the words of Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University, “the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important characteristic of terrorist activity today” (Hoffman, 2006). Prior to 1999, the above-mentioned survey found only one game that depicted terrorists of the kind mentioned by Hoffman, and that game came from 1998. Since then, the mix has changed, but even so, many games continued to be published with opponents inspired by the previous generations of terrorists. *Kuma/War* may have reacted quickly with its representation of the death of Bin Laden, but other influences can last long after their contemporary relevance has faded. While games with terrorists or political opponents of the West form a majority of FPSs from 2002-2009 (roughly 55%), if the games focusing on past enemies are subtracted, the percentage falls to under 50%. That only a minority of FPS games is presenting the enemy of the day casts doubt on the picture of an overwhelming military-industrial-entertainment

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complex directing the content of games to focus attention on its current opponents. It must also be remembered that the FPS is only one form of game, and not necessarily the most popular. Other popular genres, such as action games and roleplaying games, very rarely feature enemies shared with western nations.

The videogames industry is like any other industry in its need to meet commercial imperatives. Using society's anxieties as commercial leverage has a history almost as long as propaganda. And the stereotypical image of the video gamer as overweight, unfit, and allergic to authority is hardly one that presents as ideal recruitment material. Yet it is clear that the U.S. Army does not subscribe to the view that all videogame players fit that stereotype – and that it considers that there is significant propaganda potential in videogames. *America's Army*, first released in 2002, and with version 4 released in 2013, was created with the support of the U.S. Army. As reported by the *Seattle Times* shortly after the game's launch (Woolley, 2002), the U.S. Army did not try to hide its purpose as a recruiting tool, even giving out copies of the game at recruiting stations. With millions of dollars spent on its development, the U.S. Army has to be expecting something in return for all that effort. More than many other games, *America's Army* attempts to portray elements of a soldier's existence besides combat, including drilling by a sergeant at a boot camp. With the imprimatur of an actual armed force, it might be expected to be highly realistic. While it has a reasonably realistic damage system, it has been criticised for less than realistic representation of teamwork and tactics. Yet its purpose is not to be a battlefield simulator. Such programs do exist, some developed from game code (for example, from the *ARMA* series). Given this, and its free distribution, it seems reasonable to assume that the central purpose of *America's Army* is to be an advertisement. Does it encourage an unrealistic attitude to combat? *America's Army*, at heart, is an online, team-based, first-person shooter. Typically, in such games two teams go head-to-head. This is the format of *America's Army*, *ARMA*, *Counter-Strike*, the *Battlefield* games, online play in the *Call of Duty* series, and in a host of lesser known examples. In such a match, players can expect their character to die multiple times (although *America's Army* is an exception here, with death meaning the player is out of that match). Whether dying and then returning ('re-spawning') trivialises death, or whether the multiple fatalities convey the lethality of combat, is debatable. Even in *America's Army*, death is temporary, the waiting time is simply longer. Death of the player character, and the return from it, are hardly the province of games depicting contemporary conflict. It can be seen in games ranging from the most realistic first-person shooter to the abstractness of *Pac-Man*.

Whether games as a whole give their players unrealistic expectations of surviving combat is highly debatable. Any argument that games depicting contemporary conflicts are significantly different rely on an assumption that players do not distinguish between games with a real-world setting and the real world. There is far less evidence for this than there is for the potential of these games as propaganda. The interest of the U.S. Army in using games-related technology for recruiting extends beyond *America's Army*. The Virtual Army Experience (VAE) is more akin to virtual reality than a traditional game. The VAE employs large, wrap-around screens and replica hardware (such as guns and even Humvees and Black Hawk helicopters). The simulation is limited. While the guns employ recoil and kickback, jamming is not part of the simulation. Computers running *America's Army* are also available to the public as part of the display.

Yet, what are players doing in these games – or even the VAE – that can't be found in movies, or TV, or even the nightly news? What has to be remembered about games is that they are interactive. This sets them apart from other modern media, and ones that have been around for centuries. Before the advent of games, there was a divide between the observer and the observed. The observer was passive. Perhaps, in the case of a play, he was able to shout encouragement to a favoured character. And Shakespeare's audiences could be vocal – yet never part of the action, never able to genuinely influence what was being observed. Games put the player in the action, or at least closer to it, mediated by a screen and a controller. They give the illusion of presence, of experience. Is the illusion dangerous, given the unrealistic nature of the portrayal?

The debate still rages over whether playing violent video games, regardless of their setting, has an effect on behaviour. There have been attempts to measure this both by short- and long-term changes in behaviour, but the results are still inconclusive. If we can't answer such general questions, is it any surprise that we don't know whether a specific type of games (those depicting contemporary conflicts) are successful pieces of propaganda or, even if they are, whether we should be more concerned about them than their myriad predecessors?

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Perhaps the danger lies in ignorance. If the only exposure to real world conflicts was the one through their representation in games, then it would be easy to draw drastically incorrect conclusions about the conduct and politics of those conflicts and the experience of a participant. But balanced against an informed understanding of the conflict, it may be just as easy to understand the nature of games as entertainment and highly imperfect portrayals of reality. One of the most quoted articles linking games and the behaviour of soldiers is Toby Harden's article on US soldiers in Iraq, published in *The Times* in November 2004 (Harnden, 2004). The line from a soldier, "I got my kills... just love my job", has been quoted many times, often in an attempt to show soldiers regarding combat as a game. Another soldier is quoted in the article as saying, "It's like a video game." Yet, what is less often quoted from that article is the following about a soldier from Phantom Troop, the unit the journalist was embedded with: "On his wrist was a black bracelet bearing the name of a sergeant from Phantom Troop. 'This is a buddy of mine that died,' he said. 'Pretty much everyone in the unit has one.'"

These soldiers know the cost of real combat. And learning about their experiences can convey it to those of us who are fortunate enough to never have experienced it first-hand. Representational media gives its producers the opportunity to choose how their subject matter is portrayed. Society expects some responsibility in this, although to different extents in the case of video games than it is the case for, say, news outlets. But with all such media, the possibility of embellishment exists, for the more off-putting and realistic elements to be excised. And western societies do not insist on their citizens consuming any specific presentation, whether balanced and factual or not (assuming agreement could be reached on what constituted such a portrayal, an almost certainly unrealistic assumption). It is more than merely conceivable that the only exposure to conflict could be from a video game (or equally unrealistic representations in other forms of media entertainment). While the soldiers of Phantom Troop know the cost of real combat, there is no guarantee that other members of society have the same appreciation. This is not an argument for censorship. Media consumers need to be sufficiently educated to be able to identify glorification and propaganda when they see it. Games may not even be the most pressing venue for this. Games rarely make much claim to truth and absolute realism (examples like *Kuma/War* are a minority). The productions of Hollywood are far more likely to explicitly blur that line. In either case, an informed public is proof against distortions. Entertainment is not, and should not need to be, education. It is the responsibility of any society to ensure that its members are capable of separating the two. Once that is lost, propaganda can masquerade as truth. Any consumer of media (and games are just another form of media) needs to know its limitations and where reality ends and entertainment begins – regardless of the form that entertainment comes in.

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