

9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

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DAVID SYKES, MAY 18 2010

The political, moral, and ethical functions the mediation of the War on Terror and 9/11 in the 'Halo' series of video games.

As Timothy Luke points out 'writing is reading, reading is writing'[1]; how an author interprets the world, influences how he writes about it, and when one reads a text they add to the meaning of the words on the page their own interpretation of what they mean, and this influences how they act, or write based on an interpretation of the interpreted world. This bizarre but inevitable process goes on in all areas, in speeches and academic texts, to novels, films and video games and can be seen in the creation of popular culture through the process of 'mediation' and 'remediation'. A medium such as a book, even one that is fictional, tries to recreate the world within its pages. Even when the book is set in a fantasy setting such as Tolkien's Middle Earth the detail of the prose turns the book into a window to the world which, despite possibly being in a fanciful or impossible setting, lures the reader into believing that, for that moment, the prose is describing a real world. This is more obvious in cinema, and even more so in 3 dimensional cinema, where the boundaries set by the words on a page are pushed back to the edges of a screen, which becomes an ever more believable and immersive window to the world of the creator's making. Another step beyond that of cinema is the massively expanding media of video games, where the boundaries are pushed even further making the consumer a part of the action, free to explore the world by their own control. This is particularly the case in games where the player controls a character from a 'first person' perspective where rather than the screen being a window into another world the screen becomes the eyes of a person within the world.

Whether intentional or not, any author, director or game producer invariably recreates the world, be it through descriptive prose, through light captured on camera, or through three-dimensionally modelled environments; they mimic reality. But also in the mediation of the real world, they add other elements they understand to be real. Human emotions, actions and ideologies are mediated on screen or page. And through the mediations of the real, messages are given to us about the real. We remediate what we see on the screen as we absorb and learn from what is presented to us.

Cathy Sandford and Leanna Madill's study into the educative properties of video games helps to identify the power of this particular rapidly expanding and developing media. Their explanation of how boys are not meeting expectations of reading and writing because they experience and seek out more immersive and exciting alternative illiteracies and experience fiction, science fiction, realism, adventure and mystery from more 'purposeful, active, engaging, and enjoy[able]' medias of television and video games[2] exemplifies the influence of video games on the player's mind. But such education is not limited to complex narratives; they also teach about what the world is like, what is right and wrong, and political messages such as who are 'the good guys' and the 'bad guys' that a player can learn from and easily apply to the real world. David Leonard argues that "video games-more so than schools, religion, or other forms of popular culture-are teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class, and national identity"[3]. The power of the First-person shooter in presenting and constructing a specific identity and morality has not been lost on the US Army, which has funded a number of military shooters in a drive to improve recruitment including the free to play 'America's Army' and 'Full Spectrum Warrior' which take place in apparently realistic Arabian settings and putting the player in control of US troops.[4]

While 'America's Army' and 'Full Spectrum Warrior' present a 'realistic' recreation of US military action, this essay

9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

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will focus on the science-fiction 'Halo' series of video games by American producer Bungie and Microsoft Game Studios to show how mediation, remediation, and hypermediation in the series has significant political, ethical and moral influences on its audience in relation to the War on Terror. This essay will draw heavily upon Bolter and Grusin's 'Remediation: Understanding New Media' to describe how this colourful, futuristic 'space opera' depicting an interstellar conflict for the fate of humanity has a constructive role in creating a post-9/11 American identity and morality.

All forms of media seek to capture and recreate the real world; this is the process of mediation. When the video game producer attempts to mediate, they strive to remove all signs of the mediation, they make the grass look as it should, the light illuminates, reflects, 'blooms', cast shadows and glares as it does in the real world in order 'to make viewers feel as if they were "really" there'[5]

But 'Halo' is clearly not realistic; it features very bright colours, the landscape is unbelievably dramatic, a disembodied orchestra seems to follow the player around, during between level cut-scenes the player leaves their first person perspective and their freedom to control what happens on screen is taken from them, and whenever a player commandeers one of the in game vehicles they suddenly fly out of the eyes of the protagonist and hover behind the vehicle, and most unrealistically of all, the player's character can die at which point the player instantly travels back in game-time where they resume control of the character before they were killed. Bolter and Grusin call such departures from the mediation of reality 'hypermediations'; where the designers 'take pleasure in the act of mediation'[6] and take advantage of the things that the media can do above and beyond the limits of reality to make the mediation more emotive, impressive, and enjoyable.

These hypermediations do not end here however; the science-fiction fantasy setting in the 26th century itself could be a hypermediation, taking advantage of the media's ability to build an entirely new and 'alien' world in order to elaborate reality by making it more fantastic and enticing. The aliens, cyborgs, spaceships, hover cars, gigantic planet-sized machines, and the laser guns and plasma grenades, while distancing the game world from the real world, are all created to enhance the game-playing experience and further draw you in to the story.

The game does not simply mimic and elaborate reality; it also mediates other forms of media. The game's cinematic soundtrack follows the pace of the action and the events in the game in the same way that movies have done for decades. The game also remediates 'lens-glare' that a film camera records when something very bright (such as the sun) enters the frame, but a human eye does not see. The cut-scenes especially are clear remediations of cinema, presenting short third-person sequences using multiple 'camera' shots, focussing effects, dialogue and scenes that would appear more at home in a blockbuster movie than a first-person-shooter. In its remediation the game becomes a recreation and improvement of the recreation of reality in film[7]. One can also point out remediations of far older medias; some of the characters and plot elements have been compared to those of Virgil's 'Aeneid'[8], and references to Ancient Greek lore and to the Old and New Testaments of the Bible including clear allusions to both the story of Jesus and Noah's Ark.

Media is a form of language, a way of understanding, explaining and describing the world. Language is not a neutral conveyance of fully present meanings; it is an active mediation; a recreation and representation of reality.[9] When we view a photograph, film or play a video game we understand ourselves as being in the place of the camera or the character. 'This is not to say that our identity is fully determined by media, but rather that we employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity.'[10] Our experience of mediation becomes a remediation as we copy media and mediations of people, characters, identities, appearances, morals and politics. 9/11 enabled the production, reproduction and transformation of identities, causing debate of what it is to be American and what it is to be good.[11] Media played a powerful role in this period of redefinition and reproduction and in many ways 'Halo: Combat Evolved' can be seen as creating a template for the post 9/11 American to remediate in its representation of a stoic, noble, self-less, and brave hero who had suffered immense loss after the sudden invasion and destruction of his home-planet moments before the beginning of the game who, finding himself in a distant and unknown part of the galaxy fights on behalf of his people against new enemies in alien territory, who fights without hesitation and ultimately gives his life for his cause. The 'Master-Chief' is nameless and faceless, wearing his helmet throughout the game; this allows the player themselves to become the character both on screen through their controlling of him and

9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

Written by David Sykes

enables them to remediate the character in reality because as Mark Dery explains, the body and mind have become objectified 'not as an object of desire, but as an object for designing.'^[12] The first instalment of the series was released in November 2001 so although the production of the game took place before the terrorist attacks, the messages, just like those of 'Pearl Harbor' which was released earlier that year, undoubtedly resonated with its audience.^[13]

Timothy Luke's concept of 'entertainmentality' also plays a role here. Luke explains that "entertainments" are arrangements to keep one occupied, to engage one in a specified manner, or to maintain one as such.^[14] He explains that while entertaining and 'assorting certain visual images, symbolic codes, or iconic signs together in a cohesive system of meaningful imagining... [Mediations] create symbolic pictorial resources for depicting contemporary social individuality and political community.'^[15]

The political, moral and ethical mediations in the Halo series become even more apparent and more relevant to the War on Terror in its second instalment which was created entirely after 9/11 and released in November 2004. In this game, the enemy is much more fully explored through the use of a storyline that runs parallel to that of the main protagonist which reveals the society of 'The Covenant'; an alliance of alien races joined together by religious beliefs. This bares clear comparisons to the perceived enemy of the War on Terror, with the 'evil' government being one based on religion, like that of Iran, and the alliance of alien species possibly representing all of the undemocratic governments of the middle-east identified by the Bush Administration as the 'axis of evil'. The Covenant religion is based on the erroneous belief that by activating an array of gigantic super-weapons capable to destroying all life in the galaxy they can achieve godliness. They believe the human race to be 'demons' that stand in the way of the completion of their holy mission. They believe the human race to be unholy, weak and evil, guilty of desecrating their sacred land 'with their filthy footsteps'^[16]. This is very similar to the perceived beliefs of extremist Muslims and Al-Qaeda, and there are a number of moments in the game where the game makes clear allusions to the tactics of terrorist groups, in particular there is a scene at the beginning of Halo 3 where a meeting between the protagonists and their colleagues is interrupted by a power-cut followed by a large television monitor illuminating the darkened room with the playing of a video from the religious leader of the enemies who states:

'You are, all of you, vermin! Cowering in the dust thinking what, I wonder? That you might escape the coming fire? No, you're world will burn until its surface is but glass, and not even you're 'demon' will live to creep blackened from its hole to mar reflection of our passage; the culmination of our Journey. For your destruction is the will of the gods. And I? I am their instrument!'^[17]

This is a clear remediation of the video messages of Osama Bin Laden and other terrorists and this would certainly strike a chord with a post-9/11 western audience. But the similarities and mediations do not end here; the video might well be guilty of a hypermediated orientalist presentation of Arabs. Vit Sisler analysed video games for orientalist content and found that many games construct a "'fantastical' Middle East, using quasi-historical elements in order to give the player an oriental impression"^[18] This can be seen in the exotic, middle-eastern inspired outfits of the antagonistic characters, the similarities in the behaviour and societies of the alien species and even their physical appearances which can be seen to draw upon middle-eastern orientalist archetypes:

The fantasised War on Terror of the 'Halo' series enables players to take part in fighting the same conflict that America wages through a dramatisation of the conflict as outlined by George W. Bush by enabling the player to fight an enemy that bares marked similarities to the enemy of the War on Terror who threaten to destroy the players' way of life. The games create an idealised conflict where the player does not encounter civilians or women from the enemy society and it simplifies the real enemy of the War on Terror to being a single society of fanatical religious zealots whose single-minded goal is to cause mass destruction and death. On the other hand, the lead character is a human super-soldier who fights for a very western styled international organisation called the United Nations Space Command alongside numerous military personnel, the majority of whom are voiced by American actors. The humans are undoubtedly the 'good guys'; they are innocent victims of the Covenant's aggression and they do nothing that is presented as controversial, embarrassing or immoral. The fact that the player fights on behalf of the all of humanity for a futuristic form of the United Nations, rather than just the US and its allies is an interesting point. This could be a sign of the game's wide target market, being sold in many countries across the globe, it could be yet another way of

9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

Written by David Sykes

streamlining the moral maze of the real War on Terror by expanding the 'coalition of the willing' to encompass all states, thus making the side on which the player fights undeniably fighting a just war, or it could be a means of spreading the appeal of the game beyond American or Western borders in order to manufacture world-wide consent on the political messages in the game.[19]

The game clearly contains a number of moral lessons in its presentation. This could not be expressed more clearly than in the beginning scenes of 'Halo 2' in which the player and the surviving characters of the first game are rewarded in a medal-giving ceremony for their actions in the first game of the series: 'your father's actions were in-keeping with the highest traditions of military service. His bravery against impossible odds reflects great credit upon himself and the UNSC. The Navy has lost one of its best.'[20] This ceremony involving military drums and brass fanfare is then contrasted to the unfair trial and capital punishment of the 'Supreme Commander' of the fleet the player faced in the first game, the character is branded as a heretic and stripped of his rank, sentenced to be 'hung by [his] entrails and [his] corpse paraded through the city'[21]. The ethical teachings of this sequence could not be more obvious as it shows the rewarding of specific qualities and actions of a 'good' society and then the brutal and unwarranted punishment of similar actions in a 'bad' society. It clearly mediates the identities of both 'us' and 'them'; the 'good guys' and the 'bad'. Just as with the recreation of the holocaust death camps Timothy Luke observes in 'Museum Politics' these scenes in 'Halo 2' present a moral and political message through showing the viewer first-hand what horrible acts America stands against, 'Halo' shows that the communities of the future, and the correct societies of today, are against dictatorships, religious based government, capital punishment, genocide and terrorism, while it encourages bravery, 'acts of daring and devotion'[22] and offensive as well as defensive actions to protect life, including pre-emptive action.[23]

But the moral and ethical influence of the game goes one step beyond this, as within the back-story of the final game in the series it is possible for the player to uncover the story of an apparently extinct species revered by the Covenant, and it is suggested that this race is the origin of human religions. In the various 'terminals' hidden throughout the game the player can read the story of this mysterious species and the moral code by which they lived and handed down to their chosen successors; human beings. This set of morals, named the 'mantle' bound the species to acting as 'guardians', protecting and ensuring the survival of all lesser species. But as a consequence of this religion the species disarmed and become pacific and their protection of other species meant they developed without any sizable danger and so were vulnerable to attack; which eventually happened when a virulent plague-like species evolved which consumed the galaxy, causing the pacifist god-like species to resort to the destruction of all sentient life excluding those they chose to protect, including human beings, in order to ensure their survival. In this manner the game seems to display that while initially pacifism and peace-keeping appear to be morally sound, they do not have lasting positive effects. In this manner then, the game could be mediating the failure of the humanitarian interventions of the 1980s and 1990s which have arguable caused some of the conflicts of the contemporary period.

Remediation is our experience of the mediation; media and mediations of people, characters, identities, appearances and morals become copied and remediated by those that consume them.[24] In the series' depiction of the War on Terror the games help to construct American identity by describing 'who we think we were/are; who we wish we'd never been; who we really are; and who we might become'[25]. The moral, ethical and political remediations garnered from the trilogy construct an identity for the player, it defines and sets out how people should act, what actions are good, bad, necessary and encouraged in the contemporary setting. For following the orders and for becoming the heroic protagonist and 'finish[ing] the fight' against the enemy, adopting the morality, ethics and politics of the Master-Chief and his American creators, and fighting for the survival of humanity and the protection of the values of the protagonists, the player is rewarded with a memorial and a military funeral commending them for their actions.

In the final scenes of the trilogy the commander of the UNSC gives a eulogy that applies just as much to the main character (and the player) as it does to the real life soldiers fighting the War on Terror, thus cementing those who fight the Covenant/global terrorists as heroes in the eyes of the game and the culture that created it and bringing the apparently fictional story back to reality where even the casual player who has been unaware thus far of the mediations of the real world in the game cannot help but realise the relevance of what the fictional character of the 26th century is saying about a fictional pan-galactic conflict to the world in which the player resides:

9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

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'For us the storm has passed; the war is over. But let us never forget those who journeyed into the howling dark and did not return. For their decision required courage beyond measure, sacrifice and the unshakeable conviction that their fight; our fight, was elsewhere. As we start to rebuild, this hillside will remain barren; a memorial to heroes fallen. They ennoble all of us and they shall not be forgotten.'[26]

In this way, reality and fiction collide and the games carry out a political, moral and ethical function in relation to 9/11 and the War on Terror.

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9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

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9/11, the War on Terror, and 'Halo'

Written by David Sykes

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