

# Pixels and People: Videogames, Warfare, and the Missing Everyday

Written by Helen Berents and Brendan Keogh

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HELEN BERENTS AND BRENDAN KEOGH, OCT 26 2014

In 2004, the US Army-funded and euphemistically-titled Institute for Creative Technologies, alongside game developer Pandemic Studios, released the videogame *Full Spectrum Warrior*. On the one hand, *Full Spectrum Warrior* is just one of the many military-themed videogames of the early 2000s that emerged in the context of the persistent and ubiquitous “War on Terror”. On the other hand, though, *Full Spectrum Warrior* is different from most military-themed videogames in that it was directly funded by the US military with the aims of producing two versions of the same game: a commercial entertainment product and a realistic simulator suitable for training military personnel. The contrasts between the two versions are telling. Whereas the ‘army version’ is unforgivingly difficult, the ‘civilian version’ is much more lenient and allows the player to save their progress and return to a previous point in the mission if they make a mistake. The army version removes flourishes such as narrative-driven cut scenes, but does add civilians that are not entirely happy with the US-led occupation of their country (King, 2007: 55). Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, in their analysis of the game, are scathing: “the military version teaches soldiers how to make (or at least follow) smart decisions in the nightmare of urban combat; the civilian version... makes this an entertainment experience” (2009: 104). In order to make war entertaining and sellable, the civilian version simplifies and dilutes warfare to right and wrong, to good and bad, to occupation without consequence or collateral.

The complexities, intricacies and mediations between the simplistic representations of conflict in videogames and the plural experiences of actual conflict run deep, both in terms of representation and industrial forces. In a range of popular military-themed videogame franchises from Call of Duty, to Battlefield, to Medal of Honor, war is sold in ever-increasing graphical fidelity in the form of crumbled streets and movie-set battlefields devoid of civilians or bystanders or press. Benevolent Western men exert technological superiority over Russian and Middle Eastern bad guys. At the same time, while blockbuster military videogames make particular claims to ‘authenticity’ through their advanced visuals and bombastic spectacle, the wars they depict are increasingly, ironically, virtualized. The first Gulf War, with its live camera feeds of black-and-green streaks of light, was often dubbed the “Nintendo War” (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter, 2009); with an influx of young soldiers adept at maneuvering virtual bodies with gamepads, militaries increasingly use videogame-like controllers to pilot unmanned drones. The US Army’s own free videogame, *America’s Army*, functions as a recruitment portal. These intricacies have led no shortage of authors to explore the relationships between the videogame industry and the military through the lens of a military-entertainment complex (Dyer-Witford and De Peuter 2009; Crogan 2011; King 2007; Der Derian 2009).

Here we are interested in how this conflation of ‘actual’ and ‘virtual’ warfare (in both real battlefields and their entertainment counterparts) obscures the messy ‘everydayness’ of conflict. The “connections between world politics and popular culture are intimate, complex and diverse” (Weldes, 2006: 178), and analyzing the methods and messages of popular culture is a key way to understand how dominant discourses of politics, conflict, and everyday life are constituted (and resisted) (see Weldes, 2006; Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009; Shapiro 2008; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Berents 2012 among others). One feature of this link between popular culture and global politics can be seen in the ubiquity of videogames as an entertainment medium, and in the complex interactions of foreign policy, world politics, and ‘recreational’ practices of citizens of states such as the US.

While much of the rhetoric of modern conflict is about ‘precision’, ‘tactical strikes’ and ‘remote warfare’,

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simultaneously modern conflicts are increasingly 'messy' — fought through the everyday lives of civilians who find themselves in the midst of wars without 'frontlines'. We see the consequences of this around the world right now: the duration and brutality of the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for civilians, the insecurity of those who live in eastern Ukraine, the fear of sudden death of Palestinians in Gaza, Yazidis trapped atop a mountain in Iraq — the relentless pounding of conflict takes its indiscriminate toll on the daily lives and experiences of people. We see these events on the news, and yet often this 'messiness' is erased in analyses of conflict and war within both international relations discourse and videogame production and consumption. Sylvester highlights the ways in which IR tends to overlook people's experience in accounts of war, instead operating at abstract levels of analysis: "states, organisations, laws, norms, discourses and the like" (2013:1-2). Parashar argues that "war keeps alive the idea of 'high politics' and in turn is (re)produced by it" (2013: 625). The theorizing of war and the understanding of war in IR frequently take this ontological framework as a given (and this framework is replicated and reiterated in popular culture, including many videogames). Videogames contribute to this also by reiterating certain victories and narratives, and in reinforcing the righteousness of 'high politics' in decision making. Through the distance and obscuring of the pixelated monitor, both videogames and the technological actors the West deploys to fight its contemporary wars hide, obscure, and reduce this messiness to (often literally) black and white images. This functions as a significant aspect of what Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter (2009, 100) see, drawing from Hardt and Negri, as the 'banalization' of war in the West since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, where war becomes interminable, lacks boundaries, and is generative of an ongoing 'state of exception' that persistently erodes civil rights: "In this situation, war becomes part of the culture of everyday life" (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009: 100).

Yet, as war becomes banal and everyday (a phenomena of which the selling of modern warfare as an entertainment videogame product is very much a part of), the embodied, everyday experience of those who live amidst the world's battlefields are obscured. As civilians and 'tangos' alike are reduced to blurry white outlines on a drone's camera, or as enemy combatants are reduced to instances of the one 3D model copied and pasted over and over again on the videogame battlefields conspicuously depopulated of civilians, war becomes distant and virtual. Banal. People reduced to pixels; pixels that don't reproduce people. As Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter say of *Full Spectrum Warrior*:

this is war where no one lies for hours gut-shot and shrieking for his mother; has his testicles blown off; or wakes in the hospital finding he has lost a limb. It is war without mutilation or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is also war without moral dilemmas. And there are almost no civilians. The miracle of [*Full Spectrum Warrior*] is that its streets are deserted and houses empty, apart from the ubiquitous Tangos (who all die instantaneously when hit). Air and artillery strikes do not hit wedding parties. There is no collateral damage. War is peace. (2009: 112-13)

Through videogames as well as popular culture more broadly, war is made banal and everyday by, conversely, the banal and everyday experiences of war being excluded from these representations. Videogames are a powerful cultural force that silence and marginalize voices of those living amid conflict by erasing their presence from those very videogame contexts that claim to represent modern war in all its simulated, virtual complexities.

One common theme that Shulzke rightly observes within games set in conflicts is that

conflicts are largely won through the efforts of special operations forces that use advanced military technologies, conduct operations shrouded in secrecy, and routinely violate international law. These themes combine to produce simulated wars of such intensity that any actions the protagonists take, no matter how extreme, appear necessary and justifiable. (Shulzke 2014)

In *Modern Warfare 2*, part of the Call of Duty franchise, this is seen in the "No Russian" mission, where the player is asked to take part in a massacre of civilians (one of the few missions of the trilogy where civilians exist) in order to get closer to a terrorist leader; or in the mission "Iron Lady" of *Modern Warfare 3* where the player's squad has no choice but to call in an air-strike that will destroy the Eiffel Tower. Melancholic music plays as it falls and the player, successful but bitter, is lifted out on a helicopter. These acts, as extreme as they are, are always justified by the righteous goals of the Western protagonist's fight.

Videogames present an incomplete and damaging view of conflict where the result always justifies the good guys'

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means. The simplified 'empty battlefield' in popular imaginary limits the ability to imagine the Other and why they might be fighting this war. This is seen most ironically in *America's Army*, where everybody plays an American soldier and, for everybody, the 'other' team looks like the evil bad guys. It also reinforces the righteousness of US liberal narratives of liberation and global freedom—at the expense of the lives of those living in conditions of violence and conflict around the world.

Theorizing about war in much of the mainstream of IR has “failed to capture the ‘day-to-day living’ and negotiations in war which can be more insightful about why wars happen and why they continue to be an option for many communities and nations” (Parashar, 2013: 624). Feminist IR theorists argue for attention to be paid to the everydayness of conflict and invite a focus on the “‘practical knowledge’ from people’s everyday lives” (Tickner, 2006: 29). Through studies that link the complexities of daily experiences of violence and war to the structures and systems of power that perpetuate and marginalize, these scholars focus on those who are traditionally rendered marginal or erased entirely (see Parashar 2011, 2013; MacKenzie 2012; Sylvester 2005, 2013; Wibben 2011; d’Costa 2006, 2011, among others). Applying these theoretical lenses to military videogames raises Cynthia Enloe’s enduringly relevant question for IR: “where are the women?” From this, we ask what does the absence of women (and children) and the depiction of battlefields populated solely by combatants tell us about narratives of war in our contemporary world? In asking these questions we are not advocating more ‘hyper-realistic’, gory videogames that ‘better’ depict civilian death; rather, it demands a consideration of how far an analysis of videogames can take us in considering questions of world politics before it reproduces problematic obfuscations and politicized narratives that feed back into popular and political conceptions of conflict.

While such critiques highlight a homogenizing trend among videogame depictions of battlefields, more complex depictions of the messy everyday of conflict have been attempted. *Spec Ops: The Line*, for example, questions the reductive representations of other military shooters with the persistent presence of civilians and the fatal mistakes that often arise from a lack of immediate information and a subversion of benevolent intent explicitly challenging many of the concerns raised above (see Keogh 2012; Keogh 2013; Burns 2012). Elsewhere, beyond the militaristic perspectives of conflict that commercial videogames favor, videogames present opportunities to challenge this hegemonic framing. Political games like Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12th* make explicit statements about civilian deaths and the escalation of conflict. Mollenindustria’s *Unmanned* comments on technologized war and the relation between military shooters and militarism explicitly. Interventionalist performances like Joseph DeLappe’s *dead-in-iraq*, meanwhile, directly interrogate the player’s expected experience as DeLappe enters online games of *America's Army* and – instead of fighting – types the name and dates of death of actual American soldiers who have died in Iraq into the game’s public chat, bringing an unwelcomed sense of reality to the celebratory recruitment portal. These games and performances directly challenge the militarist and reductive depictions of war perpetuated by blockbuster videogames that strive to depict war as simple and everyday by obscuring the everyday complexities of war.

Videogames tell us interesting things about how war is conceived by and produced for Western audiences; the battlefields of blockbuster videogames are reductive playgrounds that hide collateral damage and sidestep questions of war crimes. When considering the depiction of conflict and warfare in videogames, it is important to acknowledge not only what they are depicting but what they are ignoring. The ongoing ‘state of exception’ in the West, where war is sold as righteous, persistent, and normalized, is directly perpetuated by those blockbuster videogames that fail to engage in the real world consequences of conflict, and which make war everyday by ignoring the everyday realities of war.

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