

# Military Videogames, Geopolitics and Methods

Written by Daniel Bos

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/06/01/military-videogames-geopolitics-and-methods/>

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**This article is an excerpt from E-IR's Edited Collection, Popular Culture and World Politics.  
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Military-themed videogames continue to catch the interest of scholars in International Relations and Political Geography (Power 2007, Salter 2011, Huntemann and Payne 2010, and see also the healthy debate emerging from E-IR).[1] While research has explored and problematised the militarised, orientalist, masculinised, geopolitical narratives that encapsulate this genre of games, little research has focused on the individuals who actually play them.

Robbie Cooper's art installation 'Immersion' (2008)[2] shows players engaging with the popular military videogame *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. The subsequent footage offers an innovative and unique insight into understanding what it is to play war and, as such, 'Immersion' offers a point of departure, providing a fascinating glimpse into players' engagements with videogames. What is interesting about this project is that by recording the faces of individuals as they engage with videogames, Cooper's project brings to the forefront the affective, emotive, experiential and immersive capacity of the medium. While scholars are beginning to highlight the role of the media and popular culture in representing and constituting world politics, little work has begun to unpack how audiences actually come to experience and understand the political content and the everyday significance of entering these geopolitical and militarised virtual worlds.

The aim of this contribution is to advance methodological practices and techniques within International Relations and Political Geography. In doing so, I will outline a need to adopt a perspective which considers players and their everyday interactions with military videogames. Methodological approaches need to go beyond academic readings of popular culture and instead focus on the players themselves. While I do not wish to dismiss critical academic scrutiny of the military-themed videogames, more work needs to acknowledge the millions who engage with these games. This is important as players will experience and interpret playing virtual war in a multiplicity of ways which do not necessarily reflect these academic readings. In other words, further research is needed to unpack how players actually connect these political and militaristic virtual worlds to their everyday life.

Drawing on my thesis research, I will discuss the use of a video ethnography, which allowed me to capture the act of playing military-themed videogames in its situated context. As I will outline, this technique extends analysis beyond the screen and focuses on what players actually do in respect to their embodied engagements of playing war. In doing so, this approach sheds methodological light on the connections between everyday life, popular culture and international relations.

### Turning to the Players

Over the last decade, military first-person-shooter videogames, such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, have come to dominate the entertainment landscape. As a result, there is a growing body of scholarship that is taking the videogame medium and military genre seriously. As Power (2007, p. 272) notes, the narratives within these games engender 'a growing desire to mirror "real" world conflict scenarios'. But, as we have seen with the recent release of *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, the producers of games increasingly endeavour to imagine futuristic geopolitical power struggles and the military strategies and technologies to overcome them.

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While scholars have unpacked the significance of the relationship between videogames and the military, and the particular (geo)political narratives and ideologies that are embedded in these virtual worlds, the players themselves have been overlooked. In this respect, studies fail to consider how players interact with videogames and how they are situated in their everyday life. As a consequence, audiences are often explicitly and implicitly rendered as passive dupes to the content with which they engage. However, as Huntemann (2010) has pointed out, players are not unreflective of the political and militarised worlds they virtually inhabit. Instead, they are capable of critically reflecting on the games, as well as the geopolitical and militarised content. Players do not necessarily share the same interpretations, nor do they necessarily subscribe to the producers' intended meanings. As Grayson, Davies and Philpott (2009, p. 159) suggest, we need to acknowledge that

Audiences have repeatedly proven themselves capable of highly sophisticated readings of [videogames], films, songs and politics and are therefore difficult to capture in ways intended by producers of cultural and political products.

Furthermore, the relationship between players and producers is increasingly becoming blurred and players are informing videogame content production. In certain instances, criticism and feedback from players, and the media more generally, have forced producers, in some instances, to modify and alter game content.[3] Yet there remains a disappointing lack of research which has explored how these popular mediations of geopolitics and military violence are actually engaged with, consumed and understood.

One field that has begun to explore these issues of audiences in more detail is popular geopolitics. For Dittmer and Dodds (2008, p. 454), examining audiences is important as popular culture 'provides cultural resources from which audiences construct meaning in their lives, and from which they base geopolitical decisions both large and small'. In order to develop the burgeoning interest between world politics and popular culture, we need to expand the scope to incorporate in-depth, grounded, empirical understandings of how popular culture shapes particular political identities and sensibilities.

In addition to this agenda, it is also important to recognise the affective capacity of these virtual worlds. As demonstrated in Robbie Cooper's project, videogames and play operate beyond the discursive, and involve fast, fleeting, visceral moments of high intensity. It illustrates the experiential and embodied aspects of play. This, as I will go on to suggest, expands on 'more-than-representational' approaches, which are gaining interest within Political Geography and IR.

## **Moving Beyond the Representational**

Studies examining the political significance of popular culture have largely been preoccupied with deconstructing their political and cultural representations. This has been to the detriment of acknowledging the role popular culture has in the everyday. To alleviate this tendency to focus on text, scholars have begun to advocate a need to go beyond representation – to examine the everyday, lived practices, or what Thrift (2000) described as the 'little things'. Allied with the emergence of Non-Representational Theory (NRT) in the social sciences, this agenda has sought to expand analysis that foregrounds the multiple relations, happenings and practices that constitute the everyday. This, as Dittmer and Gray (2010) have suggested, paves the way for examinations of the relationships between geopolitics and the everyday, and is responsive to the ways geopolitical sensibilities are constituted in everyday engagements, practices and performances.

So, what does it mean to play war? Turning to military videogames, we need to consider how the militarised virtual worlds work affectively to 'predispose viewers and players to a culture of militarism' (Dittmer 2010, p. 110). As the work of James Ash (2009, 2010) has illustrated, videogames are a highly affective medium that shape and alter the sensory capacity of users. Various technologies and techniques amplify the affective encounter, whether this is through the force-feedback technology of the videogame controller that vibrates in relation to the game's content, the first-person perspective that permits a particular field of vision, or the thrill of engaging and playing competitively with other individuals and groups in online options of the game. Different videogames possess different affective qualities, and we need to consider how military-themed videogames connect to the embodied experiences of players.

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In this respect, Shaw and Warf (2010) provide an important starting point for moving beyond the consideration of videogame worlds in representational terms. Rather than focusing on the aesthetical qualities of virtual worlds, they suggest that we consider videogames as affective worlds, 'increasingly "spilling out" of the screen to affect the player in banal, exciting, or unexpected ways' (Shaw and Warf 2010, p. 1335). Gameplay produces a variety of corporeal reactions brought on between the relationship of the player(s) and the screen world. This is not to jettison analysis focused on representation completely, but to understand that 'affects are always qualified by on-screen representations' (Shaw and Warf 2010, p. 1341). We need to further account for the visceral thrill and how players experience and connect with the militarised worlds they engage with. Through discussing the embodied and affective states of playing war, we can begin to unpack everyday relations between bodies, technologies and geopolitics. By providing more situated and orientated accounts, we open up new perspectives that have been continually disregarded in current scholarship. A player-centred approach instead considers the ways militarised and political ideologies are *experienced* within the game. However, this new approach requires new and innovative methods and approaches, in order to capture a fuller understanding of the everyday practices that constitute the happenings and experiential elements of what it is to play war.

## Capturing Virtual War

Despite a number of studies emerging concerning audiences, the methods used – including surveys, questionnaires and the analysis of online forum discussions (Dodds 2006) – have been limited in what they reveal. While they do admittedly offer an understanding of verbal afterthoughts concerning the politicised scripting of cultural texts, these methods fail to reveal how popular culture is actually consumed in everyday life. In other words, the attention here is on what audiences say, rather than what audiences actually do. Therefore, we need to consider methods that reveal the everyday, mundane, habitual, embodied and situated practices of playing war.

As part of my own research into players of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, I employed a 'videogame interview' approach (see Bos, in preparation) in order to obtain more detailed accounts of player involvement in these virtual worlds. Initially, this involved speaking to players as they played and using the videogame as a prompt to discuss their reflections on the military and geopolitical content. However, this often proved difficult, as players struggled to comment while engaged in the immediacy of play. Furthermore, I attempted to discuss the experiential elements of play with players, yet participants found it hard to verbalise their understandings of the content. As one participant reflected on the military ideological dimension of the games:

It's not like they've got messages in there saying 'join the army' ... [pause] It's really weird playing them. There is a weird feeling there ... [pause] It does tap into something, but I don't know what it is classed as (Peter, 22-year-old student).

As Müller (forthcoming) suggests, rather than overlooking these kinds of comments, the absence of words or the struggle to articulate is indicative of 'the different, more-than-representational registers at work that disrupt the smooth sheen of meaning production'. These hesitations and difficulties in expression forced me to consider an alternative methodological approach that would capture a more 'unadulterated' moment of play in a familiar setting. This involved gaining consent from participants to record moments of play in the domestic setting. A video camera thus provided an opportunity to capture participants' encounters of playing war.

In my research, I used a video camera to record the six participants in their homes. The video camera was set up to record participants in their homes as they engaged in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series. The video camera and the subsequent recordings presented a number of opportunities to produce grounded and empirically rich insights concerning the everyday relationship between world politics and popular culture.

First, it offered the opportunity to capture the intricacies of playing war. The video camera was able to record the activities of players' interactions with these games. This goes beyond the capacity of other methodological approaches that are more reliant on the researcher's own ability to manually record information by taking notes. However, in adopting such an approach, it is important to also consider the environment and set-up, such as the relationship between the researcher and participant, and the impact the video camera has on the situation. An

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opportunity was given for participants to discuss their interactions. For instance, the recorded footage was useful in providing a visual recording that was used afterwards as an aid to prompt players to discuss in-game moments and practices in further detail. For example, some of my discussions with research participants reflected on their choice of weapons and how this provided different experiences. Indeed, one participant explained how the weapons and their properties escaped the confines of the screen. Here, particular weapons, due to their sounds and the vibrations of the control pad mimicking the guns' recoil, meant the virtual militarised world became 'embodied, felt, experienced, and lived' (Shaw and Warf 2009, p. 9). Video ethnography thus provides a means of exploring the everyday experiences and the affective relationship forged between player and screen world.

Second, the video camera offers a means of understanding the multiple practices and embodied understandings of playing war. It showed moments of high intensity and embodied practices with players leaning forward with arched backs and dodging virtual bullets. When filming with multiple participants, it also captured the sociality of play and how players worked together and discussed the game and its content *in situ*. For example, the footage illustrated how militarised language found expression in players' situated discussions. In the multiplayer mode, players discussed adopting particular strategies, such as ambushing, or detailed discussions concerning military weapons and technologies and their capabilities. The camera highlighted the embodied and social nature of play and the militarisation that extended into the domestic setting.

Third, it revealed 'the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects, and discourses linked to geopolitics' (Dittmer and Gray 2010, p. 1673). The act of playing war involves a complex assemblage of materials, technologies and bodies. While offering players the opportunity to virtually immerse themselves in distant locations, the act of play is always grounded and enacted in specific places. The video footage moved the analysis beyond the screen into the realm of the everyday and provides a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of what it is to play war.

## Conclusion

These points just offer a small glimpse into the offerings and possibilities of video-based methods. However, I want to suggest that incorporating video cameras into research provides a detailed and more complex appreciation of what it actually is to engage with popular forms of geopolitics. In this instance, video ethnography can shed further light on the multi-modal and multi-sensual significance of, and connections between, popular culture, the everyday and International Relations.

This short article has explored a new research and methodological approach that draws attention to audiences and accounts for the virtual experience of playing war. Where previous studies have explored the ways military-themed videogames project particular imaginations based on the geopolitical and the performance of state-sponsored violence, a player-based approach begins to unveil the actual experiences of these videogames. The use of a video camera can therefore offer a creative and grounded approach to a fuller understanding of the complex and contingent role popular culture has in shaping imaginations of world politics in everyday life.

## Notes

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**Daniel Bos** is a PhD candidate based in the Geography Department at Newcastle University, UK. His research interests focus on the intersections between the military, world politics and popular culture. His current research examines the popular geopolitics of military-themed video games. This has involved detailed analysis of the geopolitical and militaristic content of video games, their production, and players' interactions and understandings.