The Procedural Rhetoric of War:

Ideology, Recruitment, and Training in Military Videogames

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Abstract

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In light of the increasing popularity of military-themed videogames, as well as the U.S. military's substantial investment in both the development and consultation of such games, there exist very pertinent questions regarding the effects that this particular media has over its consumers. Although this topic has been previously examined using official military serious games, largely absent in the literature is the study of entertainment-based videogames. In this thesis, I investigate the relationship between the military and videogame culture. In particular, I explore how recruitment, training, and ideology are promoted by the military through the design and production of both educational and recreational games. I apply theories of game/play, procedural rhetoric, and discourse analysis to videogames to determine the precise mechanisms behind the medium's effectiveness as an implement for neomilitarism. I also demonstrate how the videogame industry is both theoretically and aesthetically intertwined with that of the film industry. Using the *America's Army* and *Call of Duty* franchises as case studies, the results show that, while there exists notable procedural differences between serious and entertainment videogames, both categories effectively contribute to the military's mission of fostering potential recruits among the young male demographic.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Captain John Price had been in this situation before. His chopper shot down behind enemy lines, Price and the rest of Bravo team must fight their way through droves of enemy soldiers to get to the extraction point. Fortunately, Price was fearless and indefatigable – everything you could ask for in a soldier. What's more, the rest of his team was as tough as he was, and the only difference between them was that they knew that it was Price who called the shots – and he was never wrong, even when he was being insubordinate.

This time, however, was different. As skilled as Bravo Team was, there was no way that they would survive this mission without the help of some big artillery. Luckily for them, an AC-130 warship was inbound and it was filled with a virtually endless supply of ammunition, along with an accomplished gunner who seemed to have done this very mission dozens of times before. The enemy soldiers (of which the village is exclusively inhabited by) charge Bravo Team like lemmings and ultimately to their death. The camera mounted on the AC-130 display their heat signatures against the grey terrain as they run, then fly through the air from explosions, then quickly dissipate into a barely visible shade of grey, marking the moment of their deaths. Captain Price and his team manage to survive once again and are airlifted to their next mission.

If only it were that simple. For all of its accuracy in military technology and visuals, this mission in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) severely sanitizes massive destruction and all evidence of collateral damage that comes with virtually any large-scale military attack. The question is: why sanitize violence in this

manner? It would be simple enough to argue that the violence has been sanitized as such because, this being a video game, the gaming industry has a duty to avoid the moral corruption of children who are inevitably playing it. This, however, is rendered a moot point: the game itself is "rated 'M' for Mature", that is, only users 16 years old or above are legally permitted to purchase it. What's more, if moral corruption were truly the issue, the game would have omitted such elements as gratuitous profanity or the option to kill wounded enemy soldiers that pose no threat. They clearly did not.

Another possible argument to be made is that limitations in video game technology have forced the developers to avoid dedicating too much of the game engine's efforts towards elements that have no bearing on gameplay functionality. The logic here would be that the more time and energy spent on rendering dismembered bodies, the fewer virtual enemies the player will have to shoot. But despite game developers constantly seeking to provide an increasingly realistic representation of warfare, much of the more complex issues such as politics or the horrors of war are barely glossed over, and even then only as it pertains to fulfilling a particular mission. Therefore, the rhetoric is directly related to the limitations afforded to it by the hardware, software frameworks, and programming language (Bogost 63). This, then, brings up another, related question: how do the developers of military-themed first-person-shooters (FPSs) determine which elements of warfare go into the game and which are left out? In other words, what are the criteria for the elements of gameplay, and hence the enjoyable play of war?

Returning to Captain Price and the AC-130 gunner, it is of note that the visual layout for the player accurately mimics the real-life night vision camera mounted on actual AC-130s, even down to helicopter fly-by patterns and military rules of engagement terminology. In fact, much of the simulated warfare in military FPSs is quite dead on, prompting soldiers involved in the siege of Baghdad to exclaim that the actual warfare was just as impressive and exciting as those found in video games (Penny 191). It would appear then that the mediated artifact has become virtual artifice. To think that such a phenomenon is fostered strictly for economic gain would be ignoring the fact that the companies developing the most popular military FPSs employ military personnel as consultants to ensure both realism and credibility to their videogame franchises. Without the actual military, these games could never narrow the gap between what is real and what is mediated.

This blurring of the real and the virtual raises obvious concerns. The same year that the above videogame was released, an incident occurred in Baghdad where an AC-130 fired upon suspected militants. Soon afterward it was discovered that the suspects were in fact made up of Reuters journalists and Iraqi civilians, with only two of twenty people killed confirmed to have been carrying firearms. None of those attacked by the AC-130 were engaged in warfare at the time, and the recorded audio of the U.S. soldiers involved in the attack further complicated the matter with their callous disregard for human life and the rules of engagement (Gardner). The video of the incident, uncannily resembling that of the AC-130 gunner mission in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, was deemed classified and only released in full to the public after the whistleblowing website *Wikileaks* released an edited version of

it in 2010. Many left-leaning news outlets in the aftermath of the video leak have since questioned the use of drone attacks for their sanitized depiction of an otherwise gruesome reality and the emotionally removed nature of the soldiers involved, who appear to be mimicking the attitude of the videogame player rather than the soldier even down to the interface itself: both player and soldier share similar apparatuses such as headphones and microphones, monitors with interactive graphical user interfaces, and of course, both remain well removed from the physical reality of battle.

Nevertheless, the *Call of Duty* videogames still attempt to include more complex moral issues – not for propagandistic purposes, but rather for entertainment. Here, the franchise pulls a page or two from Hollywood storytelling by adding plot twists and themes of deception and corruption. In fact, in *Modern Warfare 2*, the main antagonist is a rogue U.S. general who machinates behind the scenes to create a war between America and Russia. While this plotline seems to encapsulate the current U.S. sentiment of the celebration of the common soldier in tandem with the distrust of military officers, one could ask: why would the U.S. military would allow its personnel to remain on board as consultants?

One of the most persuasive answers to this question lies in the fact that, according to real-life Colonel Casey Wardynski, such games serve as potent recruitment tools for potential soldiers (Nichols 39). It would seem to be in the U.S. military's best interest not to stifle but rather foster the successful dissemination of military FPSs, regardless of the questionability of content. In truth, any negative visual or narrative rhetoric these games employ seem to bear little upon the

promotion of military life as much as the positive act of playing the soldier encourages military recruitment. In effect, even negative publicity is still publicity.

To this end, Congress increased the U.S. Army's recruiting budget to $2.2 billion at the turn of the 20th century, the bulk of which was dedicated to research, design, development, and support of military videogames (Nichols 40). Because of the Army's direct influence on the videogame industry, many questions arise regarding how FPSs are developed by both videogame designers and experienced by gaming enthusiasts alike, questions that this thesis aims to address. For instance, how do military videogames promote the U.S. Army? How do these games prepare potential soldiers for military life? What is the difference between officially sponsored military games and those designed by corporate developers? This thesis aims to investigate the relationship between the military and videogame culture. More specifically, I will explore how recruitment, training, and ideology are promoted by the military through the design and production of both educational and recreational games.

My thesis will first unpack the relatively new theory of procedural rhetoric, demonstrating how the goals and parameters of these games effectively mirror those of both the individual soldier and military culture at large in an effort to promote neomilitarism, military recruitment and warfare training. Second, my thesis will draw a comparative analysis of military recruitment and training with the U.S. Army's involvement in the development and financing of two popular moving image media of the twentieth century, namely, film and videogames. Finally, using two similar yet polarizing military-themed videogame franchises as case studies, I

will demonstrate how videogame aesthetics, narratives, and procedural rhetoric advance ethnocentric biases that support the dominant pro-American military ideology discourse of the twenty-first century.

My research will focus on videogames that have an overt military theme and have been released since September 11, 2001, clearly limiting the parameters of my thesis to the current U.S. political and military discourse. The particular games to be analyzed will be the *Call of Duty* franchise (arguably the most financially successful commercial military videogames to date and which includes a massive multiplayer online community) and the *America's Army* franchise (the official U.S. Army games designed explicitly as a recruiting tool). Both of these sets of videogames were produced with differing goals in mind, and yet both exist in a digital ecology of videogames that has become a leading area of investment and research for the U.S. military and are therefore essential to understanding the relationship between the military and the videogame industry. To this end, my thesis intends to offer a preliminary study that aims to draw general conclusions about the complicity of gaming and militarism.

Methodology

Because the study of videogames is itself relatively new, the research on military videogames from the perspective of the developer is often limited. Much research focuses instead on military games from the perspective of the player and their phenomenological or cognitive effects. [1] However, there does exist a

considerable body of work that aims to understand the economic, cultural, and rhetorical considerations that influence how military games are designed. Therefore, my thesis will begin by outlining the dominant discourses of videogame theory and define the terms pertinent to my research. I will draw on the works of Ian Bogost and his development of the analytic concept of procedural rhetoric (2007), Gonzalo Frasca's implementation of *paida* and *ludus* ("play" and "game," respectively) to videogame typologies (2003), and Jesper Juul's further contributions with regards to his games of emergence and progression (2005). My thesis will approach videogames primarily from the ludologist's perspective as defined by Robert Brookey in his book, *Hollywood Gamers* (2010), which focuses on videogames as games themselves. This approach is currently the most dominant one in videogame research, as opposed to the more traditional narratological approach which views videogames as narrative texts (Frasca 221). Although I will still devote some discussion towards how narrative devices within military videogames contribute to the promotion of propaganda in the textual analyses of my case studies, I am interested first and foremost in how the procedural rules of military games create virtual spaces that mount rhetorical arguments and support biases that are distinctly pro-military. Thus, I will survey the literature that delineates the various definitions of videogames, and more specifically, instructional games (what Bogost categorizes as "serious games") and for-profit games (a category I develop in juxtaposition to Bogost as "entertainment games"), and how these two conceptions implement procedural rhetoric to promote military recruitment, training, and ideology. This section will also introduce the reader to current debates around

gender and race issues in videogames (Bertozzi, "You Play Like A Girl," 2007, and Neiborg, "Training Recruits and Conditioning Youth," 2010), and determine the link between such issues and the intended phenomenological affect upon the gamer (Myer, *The Nature of Computer Games*, 2003). I will adapt Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to film for a videogame context, comparing the representation of warfare and the viewing experience between military films and military videogames (2003). Using the writings of Michel Foucault (2012), I will then explore how videogames exceed film's ability to provide the illusion of democracy and disseminate military influence and discipline among its users via marketing strategies (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video games*, 2009). The final part of the first section will focus on the theory of ideology as applied to the medium of videogames and lens with which such ideology is applied, namely, discourse analysis.

The second section of my thesis will examine military-themed electronic media and their rhetorical devices, both shared and exclusive. I will explore notions of identification and subjectivity as defined by Laura Mulvey and Christian Metz, and – despite their subsequent critiques – discuss how these film theories can be appropriately integrated into a videogame framework (Lapsley and Westlake, 2006 and Galloway, 2006). This section will also examine how the military has approached film-based promotion in the past and how its efforts have since poured into the videogame industry (Huntemann 2010). I will use several films to demonstrate the evolving nature of military promotion in films, most notably Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh's *Act of Valor* (2012), a film that epitomizes the concept of

media remediation (i.e. how film and video have evolved to the extent of imitating each other and have been developed in tandem). I will also analyze why and how both films and videogames navigate the increasingly collapsing boundaries between real and virtual worlds. Using Galloway's theory of filmic gazes found in videogames (2006), I will demonstrate how FPSs are more effective at using film's subjective shot than film has been traditionally. Lastly, I will analyze the procedural rhetoric found exclusively in military videogames, especially those of FPSs. Finally, this chapter will apply Michel Foucault's concept of discipline via his analogy of the *panopticon* to theorize how videogames are used by the military as a more effective method of enforcing control and disseminating ideological values to its players (2012).

Building upon the research and theories mentioned above, the final section of my thesis will revolve around an analysis of two core texts: the *Call of Duty* and *America's Army* franchises. Each game will be provided with an introductory context to determine its categorical placement. Both *Call of Duty* and *America's Army* franchises take advantage of the FPS game engine that seems to resonate with gamers as the most entertaining and engaging military genre today. While there are many corporate institutions involved in the creation of these – and all – military videogames, this thesis will emphasize the role of the American military per se and treat videogame developers as peripheral collaborators. I will delineate the videogames into either categories of serious games or entertainment games and how the "serious" outcomes of military-themed entertainment games require us to redefine the parameters of each category. Next, I will use textual analysis to explore

their variations in technology and interactive nature, and how these variations relate precisely to their particular motivations for production. I will also analyze the procedural structure of game play for each franchise and how these structures are designed to promote military culture, training, and ideology in their separate ways.

One final note with regards to videogame theory: while the works of Bogost, Frasca, and Juul are especially helpful (if not integral) to the development of videogame studies, none of these address how these theories apply to games that are produced by the military or promote military aims. My thesis will contribute to the media and games studies by applying these theories to the specific framework of particular military videogames. My ultimate goal is to more accurately map the military's involvement in the videogame industry and effectively achieves its desired results with regards to recruitment, training and ideology.

Videogame theory and definitions

The above theories need to be unpacked first before they can be applied to game analysis. Videogame theory and criticism has traditionally gravitated towards a narratological approach (Frasca 221). Such an approach foregrounds videogames as extensions of drama and narrative, a notion that is often contested despite its resilience as the dominant discourse (Espen 129). In contrast, a ludological approach views videogames *as* games, constructed by procedural rules to create virtual spaces (Brookey 25). Within the ludology camp is Ian Bogost, whose theory of procedural rhetoric has become the benchmark for understanding how videogames create meaning and mount arguments. Bogost defines procedural

rhetoric in his seminal work, *Persuasive Games* (2007) as "a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion – to change opinion of action" (29). The classical model he is referring to is Sophistic rhetoric, an oral art form developed in Ancient Greece primarily for the purposes of persuasion in the law court and the public forum. Procedural rhetoric, he argues, has more in common with oral rhetoric than with the visual rhetoric that images employ. Media such as film that employ visual rhetoric mount non-verbal arguments that lack the deeper analysis often afforded by textual interpretation and thus the result is manipulation (rather than rhetoric) that tends towards visceral responses (19-22).

Bogost's dim view of the persuasive powers of film is problematic, as it does not consider the oral rhetoric often applied in documentary films, cinematic montage, or even silent film as a whole for that matter. Further, he seems to apply his theory of procedural rhetoric almost exclusively against a genre of videogames called "serious games", which he defines as videogames designed primarily for the purpose of mounting complex arguments that address policy and management issues, as opposed to games whose primary goal is entertainment (Shiratuddin, Kitchens, and Fletcher 12). By limiting procedural rhetoric to this category, Bogost necessarily ignores "entertainment games", including those that simultaneously act as educational or promotional tools. Military first-person shooters often fall in this category and as a result slip under Bogost's radar.

The term "serious games" is thus both overly obtuse on one hand and extremely restrictive on the other. In actuality, Bogost's theory of procedural

rhetoric can be easily applied to virtually any and all videogames. All games, to one degree or another, mount arguments that confront the preconceived assumptions of the player. Often, these assumptions are largely left unchallenged or perpetuated. For example, much work has been done with regards to the reinforcement of gender roles and cultural stereotypes in videogames, such as Helen Thornham's book, *Ethnographies of the Videogame* (2011), Elena Bertozzi's essay, "You Play Like a Girl" (2011), and Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, and Yee's article, "Looking for Gender" (2009). Even if game developers and players never consciously submit to the notions that capable men must be anatomically superior or that desirable women are buxom and scantily clad, the argument is mounted all the same.

Players versus gamers

In this vein, Frasca responds to Bogost's theory and goes one step further by drawing on Roger Caillois's distinction between *paida* and *ludus*, translated as "play" and "game", respectively. *Paida* games refer to those that are open-ended and not definitively goal-oriented. These games do not produce winners or losers, but rather they allow players to enjoy playing a role in a simulated universe. Non-digital gaming examples include make-believe and construction kits, while videogames that embody the *paida* structure are those like *The Sims,* Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, and to some degree, the first-person shooter online communities. In contrast, *ludus* games contain social rules, commonly follow the Aristotelian structure of the three-act narrative, and ultimately produce winners and losers. *Ludus* games are closed products that invite

the player to participate within its limits while remaining concentrated around the idea of a centralized author. These types of games range from most sports and board games like hockey and chess, to digital games such as single-player campaigns in first-person shooter games where players need to accomplish missions in order to advance the narrative and ultimately 'beat' the game (229-230).

Both *paida* and *ludus* structures provide a rhetorical function, though from the perspective of game developers (or *simauthors*, as Frasca prefers to call them), deciding between either one when designing a game depends on their particular ideological agenda (230). *Ludus* games are more coherent in structure because they present a clear goal and offer limited options to navigate towards that goal. From the perspective of the military, *ludus* most accurately mirrors the life and work of the U.S. Army soldier, who is required to follow the orders of superior officers without question. The real-world soldier may express their autonomy on an extra-diegetic level, but with all matters relating to military orders, there is no official recourse for dissention.

Though military games have traditionally employed the *ludus* structure, there exists a growing trend in first-person shooters that tap into both *paida* and *ludus*. For example, the popular *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* online multiplayer game play (the driving force behind the franchise's financial success) allows players to develop their avatar and engage in simplified missions against other players. Teams are required to capture the flag, destroy headquarters, or simply kill the other team more than they kill you. While each mission is limited to time and point constraints, players are gifted with unlimited respawning, while missions restart

within one minute of the previous one ending. All *ludus* considerations (i.e. winning and losing) are enforced on an immediate narratological level that encourages continuous gameplay, but are otherwise meaningless. Whatever goals there are, such as winning a match or achieving the maximum amount of points for your avatar (known as "prestiging"), all scores subsequently reset and do not factor into any ultimate win/lose structure.

Frasca's use of *paida* and *ludus* are expanded further by Jesper Juul, who makes the distinction between games of emergence and games of progression. Games of progression, like *ludus* games, require the player to follow a precise gameplay procedure in order to reach a goal. Deviating from this procedure will inevitably result in failure (75). Juul visually illustrates this concept as such (fig. 1):

Gameplay Procedure

Begin   **Goal**

Game Over   **Game Over**   **Game Over**
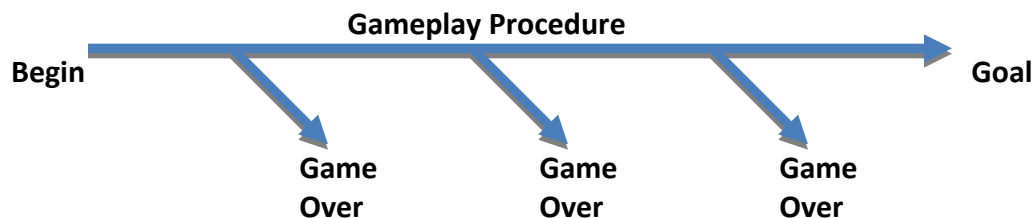
Fig. 1. A visualization of ludus gameplay.

On the other hand, games of emergence (like *paida* games) are those that allow the player to interact with the virtual world without any ultimate goal, regardless of perceived competition between players (see fig. 2). However, games of emergence differ from *paida* games in that smaller missions are often a part of the videogame's design, even if no ultimate goal is ever outlined (87):

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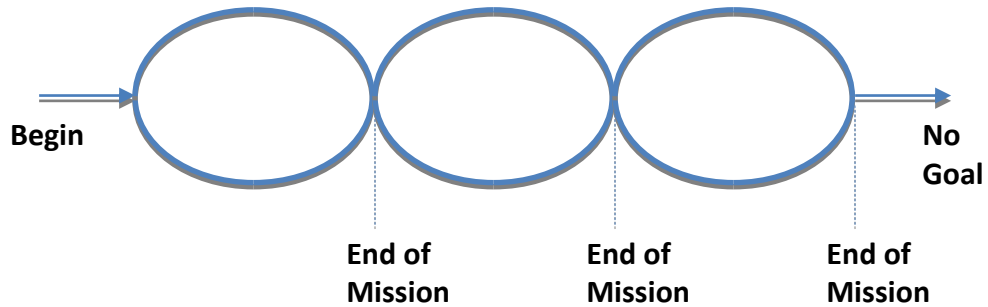
Fig. 2. A visualization of paida gameplay.

Juul's above illustration of emergence games does not take into account the dominant format of online gameplay that has emerged since his work and so an updated graphical representation is required to take into account the procedure that exists between missions and the procedurality of an unsuccessful mission via defeat, disconnection, or 'kick' (i.e. being forcibly ejected from the mission for cheating or blatant disregard for the rules). I thus propose a modification to his illustration of games of emergence (fig. 3):
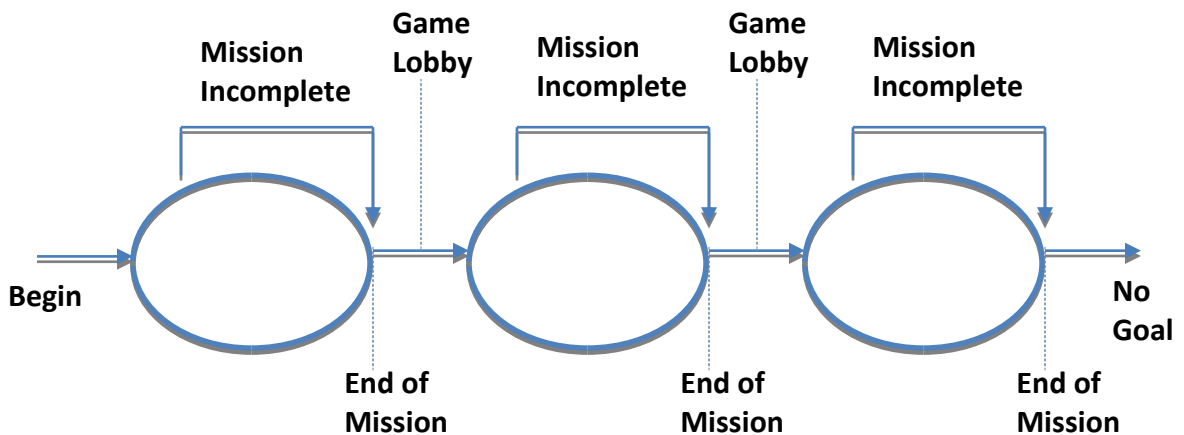
Fig. 3. A visualization of military-themed FPS gameplay.

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The player begins by signing into an online "lobby" where other players convene to begin playing against each other. While this does not constitute gameplay per se, waiting in the lobby allows players to customize weapon kits, discuss strategies with other teammates, vote on the following mission parameters, and engage in relatively anonymous verbal impudence. In effect, the game truly begins here. In between each mission players revert back to the lobby to start the process all over again. In cases where there is a limit to how many respawned lives a player may have, once a player reaches this limit in gameplay, their mission is considered incomplete and they must "sit on the sidelines" until gameplay ceases and everyone returns to the lobby once again (see fig. 4).

Military games today fall into the category of emergence thanks to the rapid rise in popularity of massively multiplayer online gameplay. Despite the fact that players still

Fig 4. The game lobby from *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (Acure).

strive to complete a mission successfully, win/loss results never carry over. Experience points unlock perks such as weapons or uniforms, though this does not depend on winning or losing but merely how many hours a player logs. You may choose to complete the mission any way you like provided that your choices are limited to military conduct. An analogy would be a baseball game that still adhered to all the usual rules save that the number of innings was indefinite. Achieving an

ultimate goal (i.e. "winning" the game) is paradoxically to lose, since it would result in the cessation of the player to immerse him or herself in the virtual character's world (Golumbia 195). The end result is that the gamer is given the opportunity to appreciate the pleasure of playing without end, to immerse him or herself in the illusion that, despite the fact that their choices are very limited and their actions controlled, they may continue to exist in the diegesis as if they were not (Perron 241-242). This consensual entrance into the illusion of freedom harkens back to Marshall McLuhan's astute observation that "a game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time" (238). The same can certainly be said about soldiers in the military machine as well – a parallel that is not at all accidental, as we shall see in the case studies below.

The procedural rhetoric of FPSs

Looking at various types of rhetoric that the military has employed in the past, it is arguable that procedural rhetoric offers the most efficient method of persuading its particular audience. For one, videogames are currently the fastest growing and most consumed electronic media in America ("Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry"). For another, no other medium allows its audience to experience being a part of the military as inclusively as a virtual world might. By tapping into multiple human senses (namely, watching, feeling, and hearing), videogames encourage a heightened visceral response to warfare previously unmatched with other media. But with regards to encouraging players to join the military in the real world, it does not suffice to simply create a virtual world and

hope the enthusiasm spills over all the way to the recruitment office. The military must still address the issue of *why we fight*, even if there is little room for mounting more complex arguments. Military recruitment requires more than base emotions: it needs both a conscious belief (i.e. the military is a moral good) and subsequent action (i.e. to sign up for the military). The interactive nature of videogames bridges the gap between these two provisos by providing an argument (albeit a very simplified one) via game narrative and an opportunity to demonstrate that warfare will prove to be an enjoyable experience.

As the case for enlisting in the military is not easily achieved through simplified arguments in videogames, developers must employ a specific approach to win hearts and minds, as it were. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke argues that in order to achieve rhetorical goals, the one mounting the argument (i.e. the military) and the one receiving the argument (i.e. the potential recruit) must have their interests joined. He calls this phenomenon "identification" rather than "persuasion" because the joining of interests requires finding common ground since to completely change one's mind is not a realistic expectation. Burke uses the term *consubstantiality* to denote the nature of identification, that is, when two natures are joined as one (Bogost 20). This contrasts the idea of *transubstantiality*, which better suits the concept of manipulation in that one nature is completely changed into another. Consubstantiality, or identification, is much more attainable than transubstantiality, and therefore FPSs that allow player identification with its characters are more rhetorically effective than games that offer no opportunity to do so. The more a videogame protagonist contains the physical and character traits that a player

identifies with (or would like to identify with), the more that player will find him or herself enjoined with the videogame's arguments.

Just as film relies on several methods of building meaning (the most obvious ones being oral and visual rhetoric) there are several ways that military FPSs mount arguments and build meaning, some of which being exclusive to the technology and even the genre. First, there is the game engine, which dictates how characters, environments and technologies interact with each other. In other words, *game engines dictate syntax*. According to Bogost, the game engine is one of the primary tools of procedural rhetoric (13), a claim that is indirectly supported by Altman's genre theory that the relationships between semantic elements are what create meaning (219). The game engine has a particular history with FPSs: the term 'game engine' gained traction in the mid-1990s after the popularity of FPS videogame franchises *Doom* (1993) and *Quake* (1996). In an effort to save both time and money, especially for an industry where technology was constantly evolving and thus rendering expensive development projects unfeasible, software development companies Epic and id began licensing their game engines to other developers, who in turn built their own particular semantic elements (Lilly). Thus, game development became delineated between the 'engine' and the 'content' – or in other words, the syntaxes and the semantics.

One of the ultimate goals of FPS game engines is to develop a rich system of game physics, and accurately simulating reality – how a virtual body runs, jumps, dies, explodes, and so on – is the driving aesthetic force behind military videogames. It is telling, then, that while game engines are constantly engaged in creating more

lifelike environments, character movement and appearance nevertheless continue to exhibit larger-than-life characteristics. For example, *America's Army 3* employs the Unreal 3 game engine, which boasts such improvements as fracture effects to static meshes that offers the appearance of destructible environments and greater randomization for large crowd behavior ("Unreal Engine 3"). But in terms of player maneuverability, characters can still jump higher, run faster, and react more quickly than is humanly possible (thus adding complexity to a game engine aptly named "Unreal").[2]

Of equal importance with regards to rhetorical effectivity are the various videogame consoles. Some technological platforms are strictly profit-oriented and thus would poorly serve the military's own marketing strategy of distributing its videogames freely (as the *America's Army* franchise is). As a result, the military has chosen to develop its game solely for the more affordable and universal PC – and not even for Mac computers, which tend to be marketed toward a more fashionable, artistic, and educated demographic, none of which seem to be a particularly desirable trait among the military's target market. Conversely, for-profit games such as the *Call of Duty* franchise have been exclusively available via dedicated videogaming consoles since its inception. These platforms are much more powerful as virtually all of its resources are geared toward maximizing the gaming experience. As a result, these entertainment games have been afforded the opportunity to minimize the gap between virtuality and reality more so that serious games have conventionally done. Graphics are considered more realistic, moving in

the diegetic space is increasingly seamless, and the potential for escapism is perpetually expanded.

On the surface, considerations such as graphics rendering and platform integration seem insignificant with regards to the current theory of procedural rhetoric as developed by Bogost. Under this model, the game engine is only one example of procedural figures that, taken together as procedural forms, develop procedural genres. Only once these genres are established can rhetoric be effectively applied (13-14). Taking this logic one step further, Bogost's work privileges serious games – a curious decision that implies that rhetoric is most effective only when arguments are explicitly mounted. Bogost also views procedural rhetoric as fundamentally authored and necessarily intended, basing the effectiveness of the rhetoric on how well mounted a game's procedurality is (29). Yet arguments are still made by the very presence of semantic combinations injected into a videogame, intended or not. Using character maneuverability as just one example, the mere fact that players assume roles with superior physical attributes carries many implications: the cultivation of nationalism or ethnocentrism; the perpetuation of self-insecurity or self-aggrandizement; cultural values and expectations; the promotion of aggression, braveness, intrepidity; and so on.

If the first device of procedural rhetoric is to be found in a videogame's syntax, then its semantics follow as the second. Semantics here refer to gameplay as it unfolds narratively. It is subservient to syntax in that a videogame's interactive storyline can only create as much meaning as the game engine enables it to. I use the

term "virtuality" to represent this type of interactive fiction: not in opposition to reality, but a tangential model that resists tangibility while both affecting and being affected by reality. In virtuality, a single American soldier can convincingly defeat the entire North Korean army (semantics) only if a player's character is designed as physiologically superior to its enemies by a wide margin (syntax). Further, semantic meaning is more effectively conveyed to the player if the gap between virtuality and reality is increasingly narrowed in the mind of the player via more complex syntaxes.

Although narrative in videogames may only fulfill the category of visual rhetoric (say, when used in conjunction with non-playable cut scenes), when combined with procedural rhetoric found in interactive gameplay, these elements take on a new dimension. For example, depending on which procedural rules the player chooses to follow, varying story arcs and gameplay opportunities are presented. Similar to Choose Your Own Adventure books, these branches can be as broad as win/lose or as minute as choosing a camouflage type or magazine capacity. Regardless of whatever options are presented to the player, no considerations exist that compromise the narrative of military dominance.

Some rules can be "broken" in the sense that the player may choose to perform actions that are counterproductive to completing a particular narrative. These rules can be broken in the game usually because disallowing the player to break the rules would result in a suspension of gameplay physics (and thus emotionally removing the player from gameplay). For example, shooting your own teammate in *America's Army 3* is possible since allowing players to be impervious to

bullets would only serve to foster reckless firearm use. However, if the player breaks these rules, they are often penalized accordingly (a loss of points for an accidental infraction; a temporary ban from online gameplay for repeat offenders). Subverting the rules altogether (i.e. "cheating") is possible by exploiting procedural glitches, a practice that is often considered *not* cheating by players who do so because the game's procedural rhetoric has not accounted for it and thus there is no explicit rule *against* it. Other players (especially those on the receiving end of a cheater's actions) would argue that the rules implicitly suggest otherwise. For example, a player might notice that a portion of a wall had not been rendered correctly and he can hide behind it while still shooting at opposing players who are unable to see where the shooting is coming from. Considering that these worlds are virtual in nature and the physics of reality are often bent, both sides of this argument hold valid points. However, FPSs that support military culture are quick to eliminate these glitches in subsequent updates and often invite players to submit discovered glitches to the developers in an effort to keep gameplay as "real" as possible. Ironically, by restricting players from exploiting glitches, developers end up removing any kind of demiurgic thinking or resourcefulness that a player might be capable of bringing to the virtual experience.

According to Golumbia, FPSs have rigid rules but require very little intellectual skill, resulting in the honing of the player who allows his mind to "wander in the hypnotic state created by absorption into the game's visual (and its sounds), or is intently absorbed in the sensations of playing themselves, whether visualized on screen or imagined" (185). But this assessment is unfair insofar that

intellectual capacity can be employed towards tactics or weapons customization. Rather than a necessary lack of intellectual skill then, FPSs merely allow a player to engage in gameplay at any level of intellect that he chooses (or is capable of). In this sense, the necessary intellectual capacity of FPSs are akin to such activities as sprinting or high jumping: anyone may engage in the act, though higher levels of success can be achieved through an increased intellectual approach, not to mention a development in dexterity and reaction time. Regardless of my misgivings with Golumbia, the true goal of these games is to kill as much as possible, and not even to die as little as possible, since a player who scores the most kills is celebrated regardless of how many times he or she has been killed in the process (see fig. 5). Recorded game statistics revolve around this notion and regardless of what the specific goals of a given mission may be, killing is always available and necessary to achieve the mission. The result is a military videogame genre that hones the player

Slums	Score	Kills	Deaths	Confirms	Denies
Xander756	6355	50	8	37	4
[SOWO]goindolol012	3725	33	15	22	1
[SMOH]Shady002300	3595	28	5	20	0
[SMOH]dietz2215	3475	23	15	17	2
Jawfro3110(1)	775	3	14	4	5
Jawfro3110	25	0	7	0	1
[AGNT]AQUARIUS300	2925	18	29	17	6
[iZaa]eyezayugh	2000	12	23	13	1
[CHI]FLii xNii6uH PR	1680	14	13	7	2
[BEE]BEEWILL	1300	7	28	6	9

Fig. 5. Post-game statistics in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. Note that the player on the red team with the highest score also has the most deaths, though this bears no consequence to his first place ranking (Examiner.com).

to become accustomed to and adept at killing with little regard to being killed, all framed by an absence of intellectual skill that is not a valued attribute for the common military recruit. Although I maintain that I do not adhere to Golumbia's claim that FPSs require very little intellectual skill, I do recognize that the type of intellect required for succeeding in these games is one of kinesis and spatial ability (rather than one that espouses, say, logical reasoning). This particular combination of intelligence and skill could arguably be considered as the archetype for the most capable soldier. Consciously or not, the effect is threefold (as will be evidenced in the case studies found in chapters three and four): first, these games serve to promote the military to the player who enjoys warfare while largely ignoring the greater context and consequences of war itself. Second, and simultaneously, these games encourage the player to abandon certain areas of intellect and focus instead on the thrill of warfare when considering a career in the military. Finally, these games celebrate a certain amount of sociopathic behavior and completely ignore issues such as PTSD or the collateral damage of war, be it political, social, or financial.

In this sense, FPSs differ from serious games because, in the latter, all in-game considerations carry varying degrees of positive and negative outcomes. Serious games are well positioned to analyze the effects of collateral damage by allowing the player to weigh the benefits and consequences or their virtual actions. In contrast, actions or decisions made in entertainment-based FPSs only carry two ultimate consequences: life or death, or in other words, win or lose. Every time a player gets killed, his death either ends his game in defeat or contributes positively

to the opposing team's score. Conversely, every time a player kills, he remains alive and still immersed in the virtual world. Some mission-based multiplayer games have experimented with this concept in recent years by instituting such objectives as *capture the flag* (which requires a team to steal another team's flag in order to succeed in their mission) and *kill confirmed* (where kills only score points if a member of the opposing team collects the dead player's dog tags from its corpse). Here, the total numbers of kills and deaths have no bearing on the game's outcome. Nevertheless, These missions cannot be completed unless players kill each other. Thus, even when killing isn't the explicit objective, it still remains fundamental to achieving objective success.

In addition to syntax and semantics, a third rhetorical device may be found in the elements of gameplay that aim to evoke a visceral or even physiological response. These primarily include sound effects, haptic feedback, and scenery. Such elements may simply be intended to tie in with the narrative, although I am more interested here in how these elements aim to affect the player. For example, in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), the developers have included an extensive one-off gameplay type called Zombies. The player literally kills an infinite number of zombies until he or she dies. The environment is filled with dark corners, dilapidated buildings, and gruesome undead that shriek unnervingly. Again, at first glance these considerations do not seem to provide much by way of procedural rhetoric. However, it is my contention that, by virtue of the player's actions, such considerations are precisely that – procedural. Just as in Bogost's theory of procedurality that a player's decisions open up new options and thus create

meaning and argument, so are various environmental reactions opened up in FPSs as a direct result of a player's decisions. Using audio as one example, the developer's decisions to include or omit certain sounds indirectly point to their intentions: you will find no dark corners or piercing shrieks in the military-funded *America's Army* franchise to induce fear in a player. Conversely, sensory procedures added in entertainment-based FPSs serve to bridge the gap between virtual and real experiences, as well as to add a level of diegetic distraction to the player with the aim of increasing the level of difficulty and excitement. For example, when firing a weapon in the *Call of Duty* games, the controller vibrates to simulate the kick-back of a gun; in the zombies mode for *Call of Duty: Black Ops* series, zombies shriek piercingly in an effort to unnerve the player and throw him or her off his game.

While much of this introduction's rhetorical focus has been on procedure, videogames (especially those not confined by the rigid definition of "serious" games) often employ other types of rhetoric that further advance their arguments. As mentioned earlier, visual rhetoric has been notably employed in videogames, often appropriating the same devices found in film: soundtracks, expositions, cut scenes, archetypes, and so on. Further, videogames also offer the opportunity for literary rhetorical devices. As such, the case studies analyzed in chapters three and four are not an exploration into the theory of procedural rhetoric per se, but rather a close study of how particular game franchises implement various types of rhetoric to achieve military recruitment, ideology, and training.

Simulacra in simulation: A discourse analysis of videogame ideology

Despite ideology being long recognized as a formidable social force worthy of examination in many realms of society that includes politics, art, and media, it is especially curious then as to why academic literature has seen relatively little ideological analysis of entertainment-based videogames. Film studies, for example, has recognized the value in studying major studio productions and have gone well beyond the critical and textual analyses by examining their cultural, historical, psycho-analytical, and even technical contributions to academic discourse. However, perhaps due to its relative infancy, surprisingly little attention is given to the affects and consequences of entertainment-based videogame ideology. Rather than examining whether videogames make kids violent or unintelligent or anti-social (all interesting yet realistically indeterminate or interminable debates), this thesis is much more interested in examining the specific ideologies found among military FPSs and how these ideologies are geared, effectively or otherwise, to its target demographic.[3] This is because, of all the debate that exists over the affects of videogames upon their players, there is little dispute over the notion that ideologies are endowed with crucial political functions, acting as agents of preservation and change, dominance and renewal. What's more, the devices of myth and story are both very enjoyable ways of consuming ideological viewpoints. They offer attractive and imaginative packages for social concepts disguised as mere entertainment (Freeden 119). If we can assume that people to a certain extent are the product of their environment, then we can argue that we must at the very least delve into the

question of how much people can become a product of their virtual environment as well.

Because of the widely contentious and ephemeral nature of ideology, it is important to not only narrow the scope of our conception of ideology, but also to identify what scope we are actually implementing to view this segment of ideology. More specifically, the lens with which this thesis views ideology through is that of discourse analysis – operating on the assumption that language is the medium through which videogames obtain meaning. "Language" in this sense does not refer exclusively to written or spoken elements of videogames (though to be sure they are included), but rather as a broader set of interactions that shape social and cultural beliefs and understandings. This language is what gives virtuality meaning and allow players to identify with fictional characters and worlds. Hence, discourse analysis will provide the avenue that leads us towards the socio-psychological characteristics of those who have the power to control the discourse, as well as a more sensitive attunement for the precise micro-ideologies at play.

The particular reason why discourse analysis is quite an appropriate approach to videogame ideology – and military FPSs in particular – is because it treats language as "a given within which options are barely available to the use caught in the game" (Freeden 109). The study of ideology has come a long way since the Marxist notion that sustaining collective power is an issue of class warfare alone. More recently, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have argued that society is an elusive concept that bears no true reality, but rather is wrapped in signifiers or representative words in order to provide the illusion of stability (141). Taking this

concept one step further, Slavoj Žižek has observed that ideologies are necessary illusions at all facets of our understanding of the world around us, illusions without which would create panic at the sight of the void (225). When applied to military FPSs, such videogames employ (knowingly or otherwise) a particular type of political ideology that depicts Western powers as maintainers of a universal world order against unenlightened nations that wish to disrupt this order for the purposes of either conflicting religious ideology, revenge, or – simpler still – anarchy. In response, videogame protagonists are tasked with using military force to maintain an imagined universal ideology before such ideology has been vanquished and chaos ensues.

Another reason why discourse analysis blends well with the study of videogame ideology is that analysts tend to assume that options within language systems are extremely limited, more so than users in the game are led to believe (Freeden 109). This theory is reminiscent of the frequent claims by videogame developers that their latest release is the most interactive iteration possible. When Electronic Arts Sega released *Battlefield 3* (2011), the internet was abuzz with the game's efforts at a fully destructible environment ("Battlefield 3: Destruction"). In truth, most of the environmental destruction consisted of pock marking walls and breaking windows, with only more complete and unique destruction coming at very specific gameplay points where the developers wanted you to destroy a particular aspect of the environment in order to advance gameplay and narrative.

Finally, discourse analysis tends to gravitate towards questions that military FPSs tend to address more consciously than most other types of games. How

societies perceive themselves, which attributes of society are brought into prominence through narratives, distinctions between 'us' and 'them', and the particular linguistic and metaphorical devise used to increase self-understanding are all at the forefront, consciously or not, of military videogames due to their highly political nature. This can be contrasted with other less politicized games that undoubtedly contain their own ideological grammar as well, though one would not get very far in their attempts at understanding the dichotomy between Middle Eastern and Western cultural relations by examining *Super Mario Bros.* (1985).

To be sure, employing discourse analysis for videogame ideology is not without its own pitfalls. More precisely, "ideology is one form of discourse but it is not entirely containable in the idea of discourse" (Freeden 106). In an effort to unmask the insidious nature of false ideologies while coming to terms with the fact that all belief structures are ideological by nature, it is all too tempting for the discourse analyst to negate the possibility of *any* extant reality. This opens up a conundrum: if all ideologies are a falsehood, but there is no true reality beyond ideologies, then the corruption of truth via ideologies becomes an impossibility (112).

Whether or not there is something behind the proverbial curtain is well beyond the scope of this thesis. However, one truism is that everything is ideological, and yet another is that there are such things as better and worse ideologies. With these aspects in mind, we must acknowledge that ideological forces are undeniably enforced through military FPSs and, by the military's own admission, these games (and by extension, its attached ideology) is used as a promotional tool.

Put another way, the imagined virtual worlds of military FPSs knowingly promotes a false ideology that obscures a more accurate portrayal of warfare and politics. The criticism here is not that these games are advertising on behalf of a necessary institution, but that are using what amounts to lies in order to attract the widest possible berth of recruits to what is in essence a game of real-life killing.

While it is much more clear who owns the discourse in military FPSs, we must turn our attention to what exactly they are saying. In other words, what is the precise ideology imparted in these games? To answer this question we must begin by defining ideology with a broader definition. Certain assumptions are required, namely, that ideology is (among other things) a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that:

- exhibit a recurring pattern

- are held by significant groups

- aim to justify, contest, or change social and political arrangements or processes (Freeden 32).

These criteria are especially applicable to military FPSs on a meta-level. On one hand, the multi-billion dollar videogame industry has consistently churned out military-themed games that extol Western ideology, and have even paired up with the U.S. military to affect a positive change in recruitment (and, as this thesis argues, a promotion of Western military ideology). On a virtual level, these criteria are also apropos: FPS gameplay and story arcs contain recurring procedural rhetoric that enforce the notion of American forces acting in tandem with the large majority of the world to defend vague notions of liberty and justice through last-resort military

means. In fact, virtuality is much more effective at promoting ideological concepts since players are more inclined to overlook the quixotic nature of a utopian society, due in large part to an awareness of a videogame's technological limitations in its portrayal. Louis Althusser acknowledged that the notion of ideology was not an obscuration but a 'new reality' (web); perhaps in regard to videogames we may call such an ideology a 'new virtuality'.

At this point we may take the opportunity to note that, while there are conscious political forces at play with designing virtual ideology, there also exists what philosopher Paul Ricoeur coined a 'surplus of meaning': ideologies necessarily conveyed more information than their ideologues intended to disseminate. Likewise, players of videogames are consumers of ideology that are necessarily and at least in part undetectable to themselves as well (Freeden 47). Such a phenomenon may be made possible ironically from an oversimplification of ideas, something that ideologies are quite good at: by distilling arguments down to beyond their bare essentials, ideologies become more encompassing and appealing to wider audiences who may disagree on the specifics of a particular position but feel united by its broader strokes. The *America's Army* franchise never delves beyond the surface of international relations or politics, only to say that the military is in charge of protecting the innocent from the tyranny of evil forces. The finer details are then left to the players who are united ultimately by their enjoyment in playing these games, individual politics aside. Meanwhile, it is highly doubtful that everyone on the production end of these games is aware that the ideology imparted is an *over*simplification (as opposed to an adequate simplification) of the political

complexities war. Nevertheless, the balance between too much information and too little information is constantly sought in order to effectively appeal to the entertainment and sensibilities of the player, a technique mirrored by ideologues as well.

The importance of analyzing the ideologies found in military games, therefore, cannot be stressed enough. The more intensely emotional one may feel towards an ideology, the less one allows flexibility and compromise to be introduced. "Strong, perhaps violent, emotion acts as the cement that prevents the internal mutation of conceptual meaning within a given ideology" (Freeden 121). Distilling this emotion to viscerality through videogames for inexperienced consumers only serves to further mute the external linguistic controls that permit one to question, challenge, and redefine ideologies beyond the limits or falsifications, if any, that their producers have introduced into their consumption. If society at large truly strives for an amenable culture through self-awareness, wherein the masses consciously acquiesce to a system of beliefs and principles, then ideology must be both cultivated and curbed, and both through consensus and contestation.

Chapter II: Military media convergence

It would be impossible to understand military videogame rhetoric without first examining the history of the military's involvement in another form of entertainment media, namely, film. Even if videogames have proven more effective than films in recent history with regards to recruitment, military FPSs would not resemble anything like they do today if videogame developers had not drawn from military film traditions rooted in Hollywood aesthetics.

Despite long and ongoing involvement in the film industry, the U.S. military has conceded that self-promotion via movies has its limits. Colonel Casey Wardynski, Director of the U.S. Army's Office of Economic and Manpower Analysis (OEMA), noted that in 1999 volunteer recruitment had dropped from three in ten adult males to less than one in ten (Huntemann 178). A renewed effort in military promotion through Hollywood feature films began, though due to the inherent constraints of visual rhetoric mentioned in the previous chapter, these movies revolved primarily around the question of why military efforts are necessary. *Why We Fight* films such as Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Act of Valor* glorify militarism and provide simplified arguments as to U.S. involvement of warfare, but the army's target demographic has not traditionally responded to the film medium as favorably as they have with videogames (Power 200). And while the military has used game-like training scenarios since WWII – Fred Waller's "gunnery training" device to help pilots improve their peripheral and movement vision while in the air being but one example (Crist 65) – these uses of the medium were limited for the most part to men who were already enlisted in the military and as such were

not designed for ideological ends. The development of the *America's Army* franchise was thus an easy decision to make for the U.S. Army, although the rhetoric fundamentally shifted from 'why we fight' to 'how we fight.' With videogames now, arguments are being made to promote military recruitment via simulacra and empathy rather than signs and sympathy.[4]

This shift in military marketing can be explained at least partly by the nature of identification that players experience through videogames. Klimmt, Hefner, et al (2009) combine several concepts of identification, most notably Keith Oatley's literature-based theory that "describes identification as the reader's simulating story content on their personal affective and cognitive processors, which allows them to feel the emotions of a novel's protagonist as a first-hand experience" (324-325). They then analyzed the automatic shift of self-perceptions among FPS players and their findings indicate an increasingly stronger association of military-related concepts among these players the more they engaged in military videogames (323). However, Oatley's theory was originally developed in the context of literary identification and not at all for character identification in videogames. This concept is therefore highly problematic because it assumes that identification is primarily due to videogame narrative (as opposed to identification via procedural rhetoric). Furthermore, Oatley assumes that induced empathy for the reader is the result of an effective literary narrative. This might be true enough for literary identification, though as evidenced historically by military recruitment statistics, filmic narrative might increase sympathy but it is more through the act of playing (*paida*) that empathy is evoked.

Perhaps a more useful and appropriate model of identification can be found in film theory. Christian Metz argues that in order for anyone to function in a social environment, they must have a sense of identity in relation to that society. Therefore, the process of identification must adhere to all social practices, film being one of them (Lapsley and Westlake 82). Mulvey argues that such an identification comes from the viewer identifying with the fictional main character. The basis for this identification is found in pre-existing psychological patterns within the spectator who narcissistically relates to the character on screen, typically a male hero who dictates the narrative progression (78). With regard to videogames, such an identification is precisely at play. Players of military FPSs are overwhelmingly teenage males, often not yet fully developed physiologically or emotionally. Such games take advantage of the fact that, by creating characters with exceptional physical qualities, they appeal to players who still believe that they may achieve this level of exceptionality in reality.

In this sense, Mulvey's theory of identification reaches another level in military videogames. Mulvey argues that films often turn women into fetish objects in an effort to contain the threat of difference through disavowal (78). When applied to FPSs, the fetish object is no longer the woman (as there are virtually no women in these games) but the weapon. Instead of objectifying women with extreme close-ups of their physical anatomy, the player now has extreme close-ups of their rifle, which he gets to personalize with a long list of modifications. The longer a player plays the game, the more weapons and modifications he unlocks. Here, the weapon serves as a phallus (a symbol of the player's power), while simultaneously representing the

emasculating threat (of virtual death and the obliteration of the subject), as the cinematic woman did for Mulvey.

Meanwhile, Metz concedes that Mulvey's version of identification does occur, though it is secondary and requires a pre-constituted identity already in place between the viewer and the character. Metz argues that this primary identification with him or herself is a pure act of perception:

> Conscious always that he is in the cinema, in the presence of something only imaginary and hence, regardless of what happens on screen, unthreatening, the spectator is aware, firstly of himself as absent from the screen, placed outside in in a position of all-seeing mastery; and secondly, of the condition of films being perceived, namely that he exists there in the auditorium as the seeing, hearing subject without which the film would have no point or even existence (83).

When applied to videogames, Metz's theory takes on an even more layered truth. As with the film viewer, the videogame player is doubtlessly aware that his corporeal body is outside of the virtual world and immune to its hazardous environment. Simultaneously, the character and even the game only exist because the player is playing them. By mere virtue of interactivity the player is developing a social relationship with his virtual environment and therefore identifying with his character at a deeper level than can be produced in any other medium.

Regardless of which mechanism produces empathy in videogames, Klimmt, Hefner, et al. determined that the level of identification or self-experience among

FPS players with their virtual character directly correlated to their level of enjoyment. They reference Edward Tory Higgins's theory that the greater the reduction of self-discrepancy, that is, "the perceived difference between one's actual self-perception and one's ideal, preferred self," the more positive experience the player had with the videogame (Klimmt et al. 325). The implication of their findings thus supports the parallel notion that the more appealing a military FPS is, the higher the likelihood of players identifying with military culture.

However, it may be true that where gains are made through a new media form, something is omitted (inherently or by design) in the exchange. Unlike film, military videogames often avoid asking the 'why' questions of war, preferring a morally neutral position on warfare and politics that assumes all recourse to diplomatic means have been exhausted. There is no debate over whether military involvement in the given conflict is necessary or just, as such a debate would complicate the attractive simplicity of the FPS platform. While this leads to an incomplete virtual reality (i.e. one where real-world consequences are muted), there are obvious benefits to promoting militarism to a young male demographic that is presumably more interested in the excitement of war games rather than the complexity of military ethics. Military videogames, "besides primarily serving as an increasingly effective military recruitment tool and as the next generation of wartime propaganda, are a kind of 'shock and awe' display of what the American military is capable of without the consequences of context" (Power 200).

Traditionally, these questions have been more effectively addressed through film, a characteristic that can be best demonstrated using Rick Altman's theory of

semantic/syntactic approaches to film genres (2003). According to Altman, semantics refer to the "building blocks" or "lexical elements" of a film genre (32). For present-day military films then, semantics include common physical settings such as villages in developing nations; common character archetypes such as the fearless war hero; significant props such as high tech weaponry and other equipment that demonstrate American military superiority. In contrast, syntax refers to the "constitutive relationships" among these elements that create more complex meanings (219). For films that fall under the banner of neomilitarism, syntactical elements often include reasons for why we fight, the dialectic between self-sacrifice and suicide, the inevitable American victory, and so on.[5]

Videogames have not been able to mount visual or oral arguments they way films seem to be able to do. In military films, action sequences are employed to ultimately demonstrate why we must engage in war. The rhetoric in these types of films often follow a sequence where a mission is outlined in the first act, increased with tension and moral doubt in the second act, and finally resolved with impressive action and resolution for all doubts in the third. In the first act of *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) is issued orders to extract Private Ryan (Matt Damon), despite Ryan being deeply embedded behind enemy lines. In act two, Miller loses two soldiers in the process of finding Ryan and his subordinates begin doubting the mission's worth. In the beginning of act three, Miller tells his men that the reason he continues to follow through with the mission is because saving Ryan is the most humane endeavor he could ever hope accomplish in the war, and a fantastic battle ensues. Similarly, in *Black Hawk Down*, soldiers

were issued orders in act one; tension is filled in act two with soldiers questioning the reasons for fighting in the first place; the film wraps up with a moral victory (if not an actual victory) and a simplified answer by "Hoot" (Eric Bana) as to "why we fight": "When I go home people'll ask me, 'Hey Hoot, why do you do it man? What, you some kinda war junkie?' You know what I'll say? I won't say a goddamn word. Why? They won't understand. They won't understand why we do it. They won't understand that it's about the men next to you, and that's it. That's all it is."

While film syntax often dictates that action sequences lead up to the meaning of fighting, for military videogames the meaning *is* the fighting. "While meaning is arguably created in a film in the relationship between action sequences and dialogue or other scenes, the meaning in a videogame is created in the action itself… These games exist to create various scenarios that require a certain kind of activity from the player" (Allison 190). The syntax of military videogames is the thrill that players experience when being a part of warfare, or in other words, the relationship between the acts of killing or being killed and a soldier's physiological response to it. Videogames provide a virtual representation of lexical elements that differ fundamentally from film's visual representation in that any emotional response is rendered very much secondary to the foregrounded visceral reaction. All extensions of the videogame media align with this observation: vibration controls, interactive environments, and button layout are just several considerations that provide the maximum opportunities possible to respond to the medium. This response is narrowed by the rules of the game, which can only be successfully completed with a mastery of mechanical and instinctual cognitive skills.

These unique lexical elements are the primary difference between videogame syntax and any other media. Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that language is a game whose rules "both permit and constrain; they may be general or highly specific" (Freeden 43). The meaning and communicative importance only takes shape through grammar coupled with their social context. Flipping Wittgenstein's observation on language games to bear rather on the language *of* games, we may argue that videogames are languages that also permit and constrain. They may be general, though with military FPSs they tend to be highly specific. These environments only make sense to the player who understands the grammar (or the fundamental structures and patterns that videogames employ), coupled with its social and cultural contexts, which serve to anchor the game's ideology within a particular time and space (e.g. twenty-first Century neo-imperialism), regardless of the developer's efforts to employ a ideological language of universalism and abstraction.

Despite these differences, videogames have undoubtedly taken several pages from film to develop the military FPS genre. This ease in which they do this is due in large part to the fact that videogames are themselves still indebted to film. Thus, the semantics that have been used time and again in military films have found their way into military videogames – so much so, in fact, that it is not uncommon for entire scenes or battles from films to be recreated virtually (Allison 184). The storming of Normandy during WWII as filmed in *Saving Private Ryan* has been replicated time and again (see fig. 6), complete with documentary-style handheld camera, de-saturated colors, and even simulated high frame-rate shutter speed. Allison has

outlined three dominant semantics shared between historical military films and videogames: iconography (weapons, uniforms, etc.), generic characters with their stereotypical personalities based on which American state they hail from, and historical references as strategies of authentication (88). Since current military videogames used for recruitment purposes are set in the present or the near future, historical references have been replaced with the semantics of topicality. The opposition is no longer a now-defunct enemy such as the Nazis or the Japanese, but rather a mix of anti-Western nations or organizations that currently remains suspect: The Chinese, the Russians, the Iranians, and especially hyper-suicidal Jihadists (as evidenced in virtually all military videogames today).

Fig. 6a (top): *Saving Private Ryan* (1998); fig. 6b (middle): *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002); fig. 6c (bottom): *Call of Duty 2* (2005)

Topicality notwithstanding, the likeness between military videogame semantics and those of military films are such that scholar Will Brooker noted that "the 'realism' these games aspire to is a mediated truth – the experience not of being at war, but being in a war film" (126). This is further accentuated by the cinematic-style title sequences, letterboxing, and exposition cut scenes. Even the voice actors

in military FPSs have been littered with recognizable film actors, often those who've played in military movies before. For example, Keith David, who's portrayed a soldier in many military films and television shows (Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, 1986, and James Dodson's *Behind Enemy Lines II: Axis of Evil*, 2006, to name but two), now plays the character Sergeant Foley in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.

This imitation of a mediated reality is quite similar to sports videogames, where the player's point of view is often not from the first-person athlete, but a third-person camera that habitually attempts to emulate cameras used for television broadcasts (King and Krzywinska 136). Despite claims by developers that such games are increasingly mimicking real life as known by the professional athlete, the precise 'reality' being recreated in videogames is the spectator's subjective gaze watching the real athlete. The spectator may become the gamer in an attempt to fulfill a desire to be the athlete. But, while the player does assume control of the virtual athlete's kinetic functions, such interactivity does little to allow the player an increased understanding of what it is like to holistically assume the role of the real-world athlete. To put another way, what is being mimicked in videogames is the *desire* to be the real athlete.

This desire to be the virtual character in the real world is the driving force behind the widely used marketing device of a claim for authentic experience. One might quickly attribute this desire for either escapism or diversion. However, this argument is more applicable for games that make an effort to recreate a virtuality that intentionally breaks away from the appearance of reality (*World of Warcraft* and *Mario Kart* being but two examples of escapism and diversion, respectively).

However, military-themed FPSs largely fall outside of these categories. Rather, they encourage the player to idealize the virtual character and the result is an identification with the real-world soldier. This identification is born of a pre-constituted identity of the gamer who is encouraged to fetishize signified elements. Players progressively identify their own selves with the characters they emulate and their desire to be more assertive or aggressive is perpetuated through the constant playing of these characters. While this identification might be best suited for the interactive medium of videogames due to its unique syntax, videogames still largely borrow semantic elements from the silver screen, a medium that has been encouraging audiences to identify with war heroes for decades prior. As we shall see in the next section, there seems to be a new emergence of military film culture, one that now has filmmakers drawing from lessons learned by military videogame aesthetics.

The subjective gaze of videogames

One primary reason why videogames have been more successful at inducing empathy than film is because of the first-person point of view (FPPOV) that all FPS videogames have come to embrace. According to Galloway, the FPPOV perspective in film is "marginalized and used primarily to effect a sense of alienation, detachment, fear, or violence, while in games the subjective perspective is quite common and used to achieve an intuitive sense of motion and action in gameplay" (40). In classic Hollywood, the FPPOV shot is problematic and therefore largely avoided. Such a shot constitutes a "grand axis that extends outward from the

viewer's eyes, pierces the screen, enters the diegesis of the film, and backs out again" (41). The FPPOV shot merely privileges the character's angle of vision while excluding the character's direct subjectivity. This is necessarily differentiated from the subjective shot, where the audience may see approximately through the eyes of the character, but the accuracy of the camera position is secondary; rather, the audience views a scene from the psychological and emotional vantage point of the character. The result here is a shot that compromises between the audience's view and the character's view, one that does not force the audience to uncomfortably submit their point of view to that of the character while still allowing the audience to understand what said character is looking at.

Though FPPOV shots offer plenty of creative opportunities, due to the limitations of film, overuse of the technique can become gimmicky and tiresome. The most fitting and famous example of this is Robert Montgomery's film *Lady in the Lake* (1947), in which the camera follows main character Philip Marlowe almost incessantly (fig. 7a). The ensuing hour and a half becomes an exercise in how clever the camera can be at representing Marlowe's vision, psyche, emotions, and physiology. This experiment was ultimately deemed a failure as a regularly used filmic device and future use was relegated to necessity only. For example, science fiction television shows have used the FPPOV shot to suggest that a character is being controlled against their will by a parasitic organism or through hypnosis, or else does not have its own will at all (such as the computerized first-person gaze in James Cameron's *The Terminator*, 1984). The effect is quite clever: capitalizing on the fact that FPPOV shots are precisely the opposite of subjective shots and thus

Fig. 7a (top): *Lady in the Lake* (1947); fig. 7b (bottom): *Inglorious Basterds* (Tarantino 2009). The top image demonstrates how awkward and abstract a film is when the FPPOV shot is overused. However, the director in the bottom image cleverly and humourously uses the FPPOV shot to speak directly to the audience on a meta-textual level.

abstract, its implementation in cases like these foster a feeling of being trapped and not in control of one's own faculties. Also, many postmodern films have experimented with the FPPOV shot, largely for comic relief and as a means to draw attention to the medium itself (fig. 7b). For an extreme example of this, Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999) works particularly well as a film that uses the FPPOV shot both to draw attention to the nature of the film medium as well as to alienate the viewer through the eyes of Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), who is in turn looking through the eyes of John Malkovich (himself).

However, this detachment and distance felt by the viewer in film becomes transmuted when used in videogames. While it is obvious that the FPPOV shot in FPS games is not native to games themselves but in film, it is the videogame that has managed to successfully appropriate it more so than film ever could. This is because the FPPOV shot is less about *seeing* and more about *moving*. When a film audience is forced to watch a FPPOV shot for any length of time they may often get tired and even dizzy because they are subjected to motion through a space that they cannot control. They cannot anticipate which way the camera will turn next. With videogames, the player is now the one who determines the motion of the camera

and thus avoids motion sickness. Moreover, FPS games have expanded the concept of the FPPOV shot by understanding what such a gaze could potentially be subject *to*: while FPPOV shots in film are almost exclusively attached to characters alone (or perhaps the occasional security camera or handheld video camera), FPS videogames often use FPPOV shots to represent the environment (such as mechanized turrets, drones, projectiles, and the like). What's more, with the addition of peripheral technology, the physiology of a character in a game is more accurately mimicked. When the player shoots at another player through a scoped rifle, he will hear his heart beating, the field of vision will sway in tandem, his gun will kick back when he fires, and the controller will vibrate slightly to mimic kickback. When a character gets blown up by a grenade, the player may see the vision of the character thrown into the air, the screen will fill with red splotches to represent blood, and the player will feel a sharp vibration in the controller. This physiological response shocks the player into acting as would a soldier, with increased instinct and speed without the contemplation of action – similar to the military's boot camp obstacle course tactics of acclimating cadets to loud explosions, strewn internal organs, and the stress of ammunition whizzing by. This relatively recent yet already commonplace technological advancement contributes to the theory that ideologies require clever packaging to "penetrate the literacy barrier that would deter many people from paying attention to a more detailed text" and to trigger "primitive emotional reactions… that get translated into action more quickly, without being distilled through the medium of reflective evaluation" (Freeden 117).[6]

Both film and videogames continually borrow and trade aesthetic considerations as the media progress, which is a natural phenomenon in the development for both. Allison believes then that the borrowed film semantics in military FPSs are "merely window dressing", but this would imply that semantics serve no real purpose, which they certainly do. In fact, military FPS semantics borrowed from film allow the player to enter into a virtual world that he believes to be credible and realistic, as his knowledge of "being" a soldier may be limited the films he's previously watched. By developing an ecology of similar military media, players, audiences, and soldiers engage in a very familiar sense of warfare and military culture. This military media ecology has already begun manifesting itself in several notable ways: with regard to entertainment media, the relationship between military films and videogames is no longer in one direction only.

The military videogame-style film

Nowhere is this phenomenon better represented than with the film *Act of Valor.* The film marks a turning point in the military media ecology in that no other military film before it has borrowed as heavily from the videogame aesthetic, joining the growing list of "videogame-style films" that incorporate game conventions while not explicitly adapting a

Fig. 8a (top): Exposition scenes from the film *Act of Valor* (2012); fig. 8b (bottom): the videogame *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009).

specific game (Brooker 123). The film's narrative more closely mirrors that of military FPSs rather than other films: the antagonist is an evil mastermind named Abu Shabal (played by American actor Jason Cottle), who introduces himself by committing a calculatedly heinous act by blowing up an ice cream truck and murdering an innocent American ambassador and a schoolyard of children. Abu Shabal orchestrates the terrorist act firsthand, but escapes before the explosion occurs. Within minutes SEAL Team Seven is briefed on their upcoming mission, the details of which are not clearly explained, though the mission objectives are. The entire exposition scene lasts less than a minute, its goal being to usher in the action sequences as quickly as possible. The scene employs a brief conversation between the soldiers discussing the mission with overlapping computer graphics that show animated maps and photos of targets, weapons and objectives (fig. 8a). The look virtually mimics the exposition scenes of military FPSs (fig. 8b). Ironically, FPSs use these exposition scenes as segues to the action primarily to keep the player involved in the gameplay while the software loads. But what was once used in videogames to kill time is now used in film to compress it.

The missions continue in this fashion throughout the film: soldiers engage the enemies, new and increasingly difficult threats appear throughout the mission, and the soldiers succeed in suppressing the threats before they get ferried to their next mission. Each battle begins with videogame-style exposition and each brings the soldiers closer to Shabal until he is ultimately killed. The final battle sequence (incidentally, in a smuggling tunnel underneath the Mexico-U.S. border) even has U.S. soldier Chief Dave (the last names of all SEAL characters and actors are never

identified) critically wounded and about to be killed by Abu Shabal before Shabal is killed at the last possible moment by another U.S. soldier. Dave's vision is severely impaired from his wounds and the first-person camera appears blurry and in slow motion. The entire sequence strikingly resembles the final action sequence in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, where Captain "Soap" McTavish is also critically wounded by the evil mastermind, Lieutenant General Shepard and is about to be executed until a fellow U.S. soldier rescues him at the last possible moment. Soap's vision, like Chief Dave's after him, is blurred and in slow motion.

Act of Valor's use of videogame-style film aesthetic serves more than contributing to a new and increasingly popular film genre. The film's most celebrated concept is its perceived authenticity. Just as videogames claim to achieve an increasing realism, *Act of Valor* makes the same assertion by blending real soldiers among its actors and stuntmen. The result is a claim to authenticity that no other film before it ever had. Indeed, one tagline for its poster reads: "Real heroes. Real tactics. Real action. This is no game." Incidentally, the film was poorly received by U.S. critics for its arguably subpar acting, generic plot and one-dimensional characters. There are virtually no factual events in the entire film and the action sequences are not very believable, with U.S. soldiers fighting an incredibly inept and morally bankrupt terrorist organization. Nevertheless, there is a notable perception among American audiences that the film's level of authenticity is without question. According to the popular film rating website rottentomatoes.com, as of November 2012 74% of filmgoers gave *act of Valor* a favorable rating despite only 25% of critics agreeing with them.

This is where Altman's theory of pragmatics comes into play. In his updated theory of film genre, Altman describes pragmatics as "the way that audiences, critics, and fans use and redefine genres through discourse over time" (Allison 186).
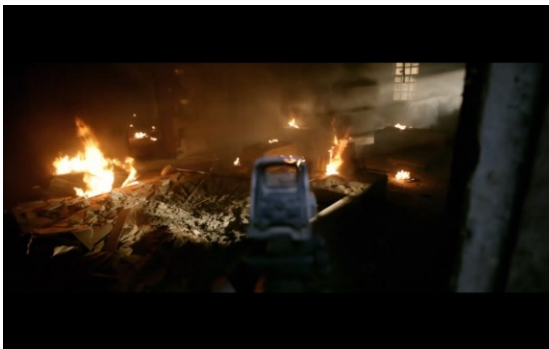

The syntax of a given film or videogame becomes perpetually redefined, depending on social, cultural, or historical contexts. As such, *Act of Valor*'s strategy of authentication is as successful as it is because its audience has never yet experienced a military film that used active-duty soldiers to this extent. Furthermore, the film has perpetuated the military media ecology by working alongside military FPSs to create a cross-platform familiarity, all of which place emphasis on realism. Finally, the film's authenticity (just like military FPSs) is enforced with topical references (Islamic fundamentalists, terrorist acts, Mexican drug lords) that are very much in the realm of public concern in the present era.

Fig. 9a (top): First person action sequence from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*; fig. 9b (bottom): *Act of Valor*.

The irony with regards to strategies of authentication is that, just like videogames, *Act of Valor* claims to offer an experience rooted in reality. And yet, just like videogames, the film is not imitating real life so much as it is another mediated reality – videogames. It seems as if the greater the level of convergence between the two media, the greater the claim for authenticity. Thus, despite the film's claim that

"this is no game", games are precisely what *Act of Valor* unwittingly strives to emulate (see fig. 9).

To be fair, videogame-style military films have not entirely abandoned the grammar of film. Indeed, *Act of Valor* still employs sequences of the pregnant wife waiting at home for her husband killed in action, the camaraderie between soldiers as they surf together during their military leave, and a melodramatic military funeral, enforcing the notion that U.S. military operations are vital to the safeguard of American way-of-life and the security of its citizens. These scenes evoke an emotional response that videogames cannot yet duplicate, the reason being that films necessarily leave audiences as helpless witnesses. Videogames on the other hand thrust the audience into the action, who no longer act as witnesses to the highly emotional content of a funeral, but as players experiencing the death more directly via emulating the character itself. The result is not sympathy for the dead and those affected by it, but often frustration, renewed aggression, or exhilaration.

From the point of view of the military, the value in this type of sympathetic emotional response lies in its ability to rally support from the general public, while its limitations lie in an inability to promote military recruitment (Power 200). It will be interesting to determine if and how videogame-style military films will be effective recruitment tools. Nevertheless, as the U.S. military continues to enhance film and videogames into a harmonized media ecology, a likely prediction is to expect a media convergence that implements the benefits of both media (and others) to create the most effective recruitment campaign possible.

Discipline and Democracy

In this section I turn to Michel Foucault, who offers an applicable method for analyzing the economy of military recruitment. In particular, his concept of the *panopticon*, a physical edifice that allows for wide-ranging one-way monitoring, can be applied to the videogame industry as an economic exercise of power. This will allow us to compare military-themed videogames against other types of media and their varying levels of effectiveness with regards to recruiting methods.

There is one other notable area where videogames are imitating and even superseding films are in the "event" phenomenon – and by that I mean the allure of participating in a premiere where viewers can be in the presence of other fans who share in their interest for a particular film franchise, actor, or director. This allure rests on the concept that audience members not only get to be among the first to witness an alleged milestone moment in film history, but that they get to participate in solidarity as a member of an elite audience group. This community-based desire has translated very well into the videogame industry, where preordering games in a popular franchise has become the norm. This successful marketing strategy is buttressed by adding exclusive in-game incentives for preordering and timing releases for November to catch the initial Christmas shopping season, but the main allure to preordering is to become a part of the gaming community as early as possible. This may have to do somewhat with getting a head start on developing one's character, though this can ultimately be done regardless of when the game is purchased. More crucially, there exists an online wealth of player content – walk-throughs, critical reception, glitch hunters, forum posts, replay videographers,

statistic accumulation, and so on – that players rush to get out to the greater gaming community, most of which serve primarily as a form of bragging rights or virtual attention aimed at accumulating "likes" on Facebook or YouTube.

It is also my contention that, with the advent of MMO gameplay, the social function of film – that is, the "event" phenomenon that films once provided by way of watching films as a group in theatres, especially on opening nights – is being superseded by the social function of videogames: if being immersed in a like-minded community is central to both videogame events and film events alike, then videogames manage to outdo film in that the community of players is larger than the community of audience members in any given theatre. Players are now immersed in a truly international community that not only witness the event together but also interact with each other via both diegesis and exegesis. This is further enabled by the relative ease in turning on a television and gaming console in place of leaving one's home to attend a screening – something that appeals to parents who are uncomfortable with their children being outside the house and unattended, yet nevertheless want to occupy their children's time with something that doesn't require parents to keep an eye on them.

While such a phenomenon seems inconsequential at first glance, each of these elements are calculated marketing strategies in order to increase participation – and, in turn, to militarize the player. According to Michel Foucault, a turning point during industrialization was epitomized with the invention of the *panopticon*: a prison designed in circular fashion with the center used as a monitoring station so that the prisoners could be watched at all times by a single guard. The result was the

induction of "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (303). Foucault goes on to define the relationship between discipline and the tactics of power in three sections:

1. To obtain the exercise of power at the lowest cost;

2. To bring the effects of this social power to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval;

3. To link this 'economic' growth of power with the output of the apparatuses within which it is exercised; "in short, the increase both the docility and the utility of all the elements of a system" (305).

Applying this definition of power through discipline, military videogames carry the ability to enforce its power over its users in very specific ways. With regards to Foucault's first tenet of power, a wide swath of players is exposed to military culture and virtual experience (while this may true for other military-themed media, videogames more accurately reflect this tenet in that, unlike, say, television advertising, it is the player and not the military itself that pays for exposure to military discipline). Secondly, the massive popularity in FPSs has produced hundreds of military-themed videogames, all played primarily by the military's desired demographic. Finally, the military has explicitly linked this economic growth to the output of its apparatus by developing its own official videogame franchise complete with in-game marketing, promotion of military ideology, and exercises in military procedure.

It is far too easy to argue that discipline in this regard is merely providing the player with a desire for authenticity (though to be sure, it does). True, FPS players seek out the opportunity for a virtual reality that stretches the boundaries of realism while still allowing them to suspend disbelief. But discipline serves a higher function than that of experience:

> Discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated groupings. It must also master all the forces that are formed from the very constitution of an organized multiplicity; it must neutralize the effects of the counter-power that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions – anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions. (Foucault 306)

The discipline taught in military videogames, then, contains the potential to exert control and limit dissention on a virtual (and by extension, real) level. This is the where the relationship of discipline and power in military-themed videogames become more than mere organization or entertainment. However, videogames represent a new milestone in the implementation of power through discipline, more so than film has ever been capable of achieving: whereas Foucault's power was through a state of conscious and permanent visibility, videogames foster precisely the opposite – a power through a state of *unconscious* and permanent *invisibility*. While it may be a given that twenty-first century videogames are all connected

online to game servers that aggregate player statistics, players are often unaware to what extent that their data and performance are being recorded; players suspend disbelief to more fully appreciate the immersion into a virtual reality; players willfully display their personal user information onto servers rather than protect them from those that may want to take advantage of them for gain. In other words, this is a power that not only disciplines effectively, but with much less resistance than with previous media. Players often no longer give meaningful thought to the institutions that exert control over them, provided that they receive the perceived rewards that go hand in hand with submission: inclusion into a wider virtual community, a point system, and the like. "To substitute for a power that is manifested through the brilliance of those who exercise it, a power that insidiously objectifies those on whom it is applied… whether a workshop or a nation, an army or a school, reaches the threshold of a discipline when the relation of the one to the other becomes favourable" (306-7).

Regarding Foucault's model of democracy, gamers are more directly involved in the process of developing videogames than any other media's consumers to date. They play them and give feedback of what they like and don't like, which serves as a sort of voice of the masses, not just for the direction of a franchise's future games but even for future updates. They are often the ones who discover glitches or cheats that need to be patched. Videogames, then, provide an illusion of a democratic media process that at once allows for a sense of anonymity while removing it entirely. The illusion is the players' sense of being unknown in a virtual world, known only by an avatar and a call sign. The reality is that a player's virtual habits

and gaming abilities create a composite sketch of the player's real habits and real abilities. The player believes to have the opportunity to communicate with other players through text or microphone without repercussion or identification, though all text is transcribed onto a database and users can be reported for uttering profanity or threats. In terms of videogames that have no overt political agenda, the possible consequences are mitigated to purely financial ends: developing a player profile allows companies of all kinds to tailor their marketing strategies to individual tastes – strategies that sites like Google and Facebook have already begun capitalizing upon. In terms of games that do carry a political agenda, the stakes are much higher.

If we continue along the logic that more effective surveillance is used to the end of more effective marketing and thus more effective discipline, then we are entering an era where videogames have dethroned film and television as the most effective ideological tool.[7] Videogames continue to develop marketing strategies that capitalize upon the player's desire for perceived social interaction and interactivity, more so than film or television have been previously capable of. Videogames also encourage an illusion of democracy, whereas the reality is that the producers of the media are the ones who exercise power through both disseminating militarism as well as colleting data. Finally, military videogames prepare its players to submit to discipline, often unconsciously and often invisibly. Returning now to the marketing strategies outlined at the beginning of this section, it is easily conceivable that there are ulterior ideological motives for the promotion of military videogames. Anyone who denies the dubious nature of videogame marketing must at the very least

recognize that the illusory nature of authenticity and democracy creates a false sense of security at best and a calculated, politicized rerouting of sensibilities at worst.

Chapter III: *America's Army*

     The *America's Army* franchise represents a unique phenomenon in the videogame industry. While there have been many cases of state sponsored videogames for years, the *America's Army* franchise is the first time a military power anywhere has developed their own official platform. Previous sponsored projects were developed for educational or training purposes, but an unprecedented $2.2 billion from the U.S. military budget was dedicated to recruitment efforts, the bulk of which was specifically earmarked towards the research, development, marketing, and maintenance of their very own videogame (Nichols 40). Perhaps just as interesting is its targeted audience: while most other military videogames have a demographic that the videogame industry has dubbed "the hard core" – i.e. 18-25 year old males who are, among other factors, literate with regards to genres and conventions, read gaming magazines, and form opinions about games and machines (Dyer-Witheford 80) – the *America's Army* videogames carry a "Teen" rating, meaning players as young as 13 years old are permitted to download and play the game without parental consent. While this might be the unintended result of a game that limits the portrayal of violence and gore, it is more likely that the sanitized virtual reality was a calculated decision on the developer's part to both depict a more palatable military experience while also ensuring that the very individuals whom they wish to convince with regards to recruitment are being reached (Bogost 79). The game purported to offer the most accurate military experience possible ("America's Army Brand"), and the marketing tactic worked. After only six months, over a million users had registered to play the game online and more than half of

them had already passed basic combat training (Zyda 28). Considering its diegetic and exegetic marketing strategies, as well as its virtual training requirements, the *America's Army* franchise is an appropriate study for the ways in which ideology, recruitment, and training are inculcated among its players, respectively.

The rules and mechanics of gameplay in *America's Army 3* are outlined in the first level where the player begins his campaign at the rank of Private and must complete basic training in order to understand how to manipulate his or her avatar. The Drill Sergeant barks at the player in military nomenclature and comes with a trite but encouraging Midwestern accent. Players are given increasing freedom to maneuver, such as running, jumping, or shooting when they are either required to do so or when it does not impede narrative progression. If the player does not complete the required task or they disobey commands (by, say, shooting a fellow soldier), they are admonished and must return to the last saved position. Completing levels successfully provides the player with medals and positive encouragement.

The player is given the experience of a wide arsenal of weapons, each with options for modification depending on preference. *America's Army 3* takes every opportunity to offer the semblance of individualization in this regard. An avatar can be designed with preset facial structures, clothing, and equipment that allow the player to build a character that is equal parts likeness and aggrandizement. The player must begin a campaign by choosing to be a medic, a machine gunner, or a reconnaissance soldier. Each come with their own set of skills, weapons, and functionality. For instance, by choosing to be a machine gunner, the player has more

firepower disposal while maneuverability and speed are sacrificed. The player is given control over how much ammunition and gear to carry into a mission, though more weight limits the player's speed until it becomes expended. The player also becomes immersed in the subtleties of various types of warfare and what he believes he would be best suited for: urban assault, jungle, reconnaissance, sniper, and hostage rescue all have their share. In these regards, the game serves as a training tool demonstrating the various facets and considerations of military warfare, as well as a propagation of the notion that the U.S. Army affords plenty of options for soldiers to achieve their full potential – in effect, being all that he or she can be.[8]

Training the twenty-first century virtual soldier for real war

The *America's Army* franchise promotes itself as a training tool for potential recruits thanks in large part to its emphasis on a level of procedural realism not common in other FPS videogames (though the U.S. Army still values its game's competitors for their contributions to military promotion and hence provides plenty of consultation for these games). One may see this level of realism as more limiting in gameplay and promotion because of the discouraging truth of accrued injuries, the lack of unlimited lives, or less firing accuracy compared to other first-person shooters. However, *America's Army* serves as the most capable training platform precisely because of these structural rules. Rather than viewing more lifelike functionality as limitations, they in fact serve a greater purpose in preparing the potential recruit for realistic military life. According to David Myers, "Since the most

critical component of any semiotic system is neither signified nor signifier but the relationship between the two, it is this relationship that simulations must signify. Simulations can then signify semiotic relationships within the other semiotic system either denotatively or connotatively" (31). Applied to military games, developers are less concerned with realism of the created space than the manipulations of the soldier's functionality and the real-world considerations he or she may be confronted with during warfare. Thus, *America's Army* is not fundamentally distinguished by its graphics or narrative, but by its subjective "feel" of functioning as both a soldier and as a squad. This feel is the true test of the realism mettle.

Perhaps the most notable improvement within the franchise is the addition of popular team-based multiplayer battles alongside its single player campaign missions. This phenomenon is an indication that developers are beginning to recognize the benefits in designing a game that incorporates both *paida* and *ludus*, or emergence and progression. By doing so, *America's Army 3* is able to extol the virtues of teamwork and camaraderie while also appealing to the desires of the gaming community. By creating perpetual missions with outcomes that bear no real consequence, the game allows the player to remain in the military culture and community for extended periods of time.

It is no surprise that a game produced by the U.S. military prohibits players to side with specific enemies of the state, although teams playing against each other would result in Americans killing other Americans. *America's Army 3* negotiates this conundrum by allowing each player to view their own team as US Army soldiers while their opponents are represented as a generic, non-nation-specific opposition

force (in a sense, no one has to play the Indian; everyone gets to be a cowboy).

Although this is a clever way to bypass the issue of killing Americans while at the

same time allowing everyone playing to *be* American (one that is also unique to the

medium of videogames), this is ultimately symptomatic of the popular Western

assumption that matters of military conflict are commutative, where both sides of a

military conflict are guided by a singular, transcendental objective. According to

Bogost:

> Perceptual equivalence reinforces the notion that military conflicts
>
> affirm a singular truth, one that is literally 'seen' as identical from
>
> both vantage points. This line of thinking accurately represents
>
> contemporary U.S. attitudes about military conflict. Our perspective is
>
> not only right, but there is no explanation for the opposition's
>
> behavior save wickedness… The possibility of legitimate grievance on
>
> the part of the enemy – or even a coherent historical circumstance
>
> that underwrites opposing action – is ruled out of army conflicts. (78)

In line with this sanitization and simplification of warfare is the videogame's

attempt at creating a political context. The background storyline has no bearing on

gameplay other than providing narratological context for multiplayer maps and was

likely created after the franchise was criticized for decontextualizing war. In

response, the *America's Army 3* virtual world revolves around the fictional nation of

Czervenia, a Soviet state that became independent in the 70's and eventually

splintered, creating the independent state of Odporzhia (the RDO). The RDO

government prospered economically while the Czervenian government (the PKC

party) came into power after years of economic strife. The PKC blamed their woes on its various ethnic communities, the RDO, and their Western allies.

According to *America's Army 3*, The PKC has all the markings of an oppressive and tyrannical government worthy of international intervention, while the RDO have been subjected entirely to undue violence despite their altruistic aims. When the PKC failed to fulfill promises of economic prosperity, they began persecuting their own citizens (collectively called the *indetrejan*, or the "unwanted") and many refugees were welcomed into the RDO, who made a formal complaint with the UN instead of resorting to militaristic means. The PKC party leader Kazimir Adzic responded to the formal complaint by offering a reply of unbreakable resolve: "My message to them is, not in two weeks, not in two months, not in two years, never! We must be clear that we will not surrender and we will not turn Czervenia over to the invaders and those who support them in the south." When Czervenian rebels bombed a national PKC oil refinery, the PKC promptly blamed the RDO military and declared war. The Czervenian military (more precisely the Czervenian Nocza Militami zo ta Ekspedi, or the unfortunate acronym "NME") invaded the poorly militarized RDO, and after requesting assistance from the world community the United States has offered to intervene.

This narrative is demonstrated through a clever amalgamation of video, text, and sketches of other media: television news bulletins, photos, radio waves, and found footage. It is fitting that such a mediated truth is represented through a mediated media. The images and sound mirror various identifiable media representations of enemies of the state in the twenty-first century. One clip has

Adzic speaking over a microphone during a military parade, a common scene played out over American news outlets for former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, deceased former president Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and Chairman Kim Jong-un of North Korea (see fig. 10). Adzic's short monologue also harkens back to the resolute rhetoric expressed by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi (son of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi) in Libya and more recently by President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Czervenian troops are drawn wearing all black fatigues and black facemasks while they monitor the expulsion of somber women and

Fig. 10. Adzic affirms his resoluteness during a military parade, as does the rest of the axis of evil (*The Darkroom*, *Minnpost*).

children. British correspondents are used to report on the latest developments in Czervenia in an attempt to offer a truly international perspective and allied solidarity for the RPO (although American anchormen are also figured, one strikingly similar in appearance to Lou Dobbs). This attempt to contextualize military intervention remains visibly one-sided and offers no counterpoint or any of the more complex arguments for or against war that inevitably exist with all military conflict. The game distills the reasons for intervention down to a small handful of clear and simple key concepts, a strategy that is essential for garnering military support by a large group of people. U.S. motivations for war are not

mentioned other than implying a humanitarian duty to the greater good. This short background contains the oft-employed narrative trope of America coming to the aid of an overpowered ethnic ally that relies on the American forces to save them against an oppressive, one-dimensional, and ultra-nationalist state. The UN makes an appearance as recourse to diplomacy but is ultimately impotent. Overall, military intervention with Czervenia is the most just war since WWII.

Writing about the Gulf War, Brian Massumi remarked that the legitimation of state violence operates primarily in "an affective register, through the mass media" ("Requiem" 44). This affect requires on one hand the enemy's combined attributes of despot, thug, terrorist, and religious fanatic, while on the other hand, there exists and identification between U.S. soldiers and media audiences, and foreign populations aided by American philanthropic altruism. According to Massumi, "All you need do is feel – a oneness with the prospective dead hero, and, based on that, hostility for the hypothetical enemy" ("Requiem" 45, qtd. in Dyer-Witheford 80). It may seem rather shameful that the game resorts to such propagandistic devices as these, yet it ultimately succeeds as believable due to the fact that they are not representing reality as such, but a mediated reality through news outlets and recognizable imagery. The visual rhetoric offers up a sense of recognition and familiarization, turning to a narrative that the American people are already well versed in. Had the game attempted to display the same events via non-mediated imagery (i.e. representing oppression and violence directly and not through news outlets), the effect would be less convincing, more subjective, and more fictitious. In

this sense, the more layers of media involved, the more real we perceive something to be.

The differences between *America's Army* and other entertainment-based military FPSs extend beyond perception, especially with regard to gameplay and objectives, which I would like to briefly outline here. These differences highlight the procedural rhetoric with which the state-sponsored videogame franchise intends to communicate to its potential recruits:

- **Multiplayer rules:** Unlike *Call of Duty's* highly popular *Deathmatch* multiplayer format where the winning team is the one that finishes the game with the most kills, *America's Army 3* multiplayer formats are all specific-goal-oriented to promote the notion of teamwork and codependency. Players who focus solely on killing their opponents leave their own team susceptible to losing the overall mission (Ocampo). Unlimited respawning is not an option either, which now results in less reckless behavior and more reliance on and support for the rest of the team. There also exists a gaming community where players can join 'clans' to regularly compete alongside other players as a unit, furthering notions of teamwork and team building that are essential to successful military operations in the real world.

- **Rules of engagement (R.O.E.):** R.O.E. certainly apply here and consequences for breaking them are weighted accordingly. For example, if an enemy is injured, a player would be heavily penalized on points for shooting him or her dead before he can be revived by a teammate. However, shooting an injured enemy still removes that opponent from the game and thus facilitates

the initial player's team's ability to defeat the enemy. The procedural rhetoric here suggests that breaking the rules of engagement are not encouraged but in doing so you are not truly punished other than losing potential merit. Rather, doing so would actually be akin to 'taking one for the team,' which is precisely the mindset that *America's Army 3* attempts to foster. It is more grievous to allow American soldiers to die than to kill an incapacitated and unthreatening opponent.

- **Reward system:** As if the aforementioned gaming aspects weren't clear enough, *America's Army* makes explicit attempts to link its code of ethics with its moral imperative. The more expertly a player completes a mission, the more "honor" points he collects. Honor points go towards seven different categories (divided into the acronym LDRSHIP: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage). The goal of the player is to reach 100% of the points offered in each category, although there is no extrinsic value for accomplishing this other than for the sake of 100% of something. Conversely, violations of the rules of engagement result in the loss of hard-earned honor points and therefore the player's placement on web-based global statistics boards. Bogost points out that the correlation of honor with performance might seem contrived at first glance, but this very system of reward bears much semblance to the actual practice of military decoration (77). In place of honor points, real soldiers are rewarded with medals and ribbons for mission completion, bravery, getting wounded in

battle, and so on. In this sense, *America's Army* successfully incentivizes its players in a manner similar to the way the military does its soldiers.

- **Sensory perception:** Aurally, the sounds of *America's Army 3* are quite bare. There are no loud explosions, no ambient noise, no impertinent chatter. Every word uttered by the player's character or another character has to do necessarily with the mission objectives. Players have hotkeys for common phrases (e.g. "enemy sighted"), but otherwise all freeform conversation must be typed, which can be very inconvenient during gameplay and thus infrequently used. The resulting gameplay is a very focused and professional experience without any distractions or opportunities for inappropriate humor or out-of-line questioning. The only nonessential audio is the music played during the menu screen – uplifting orchestral music with heroic undertones that plays over a screenshot of a virtual army recruitment office. This contrasts with other online FPSs, which allow players to speak quite candidly to each other. By keeping dialogue to a bare minimum, players are given no option to deviate from the archetypal soldier's behavior that the military expects, nor does it allow other players to hear how profane a soldier could be. On another, deeper level, the limited opportunity for dialogue aligns with the military imperative to keep dissent and cynicism to a virtually non-existent level.

However, regardless of how effective this virtual military mirrors the mechanisms of the real one, the version of reality that *America's Army 3* offers is an idealized and romanticized one. Training sessions in *America's Army* are only for

firearms and other related weapons, ignoring more mundane or complex topics. There are no training sessions on medical procedure, battlefield tactics, or communication procedure. There are no considerations for poor weather, patrol missions without incident, or military careers that are less glamorous, such as engineers, heavy artillery, or intelligence officers. Medics can heal any injury in order to immediately return the player to the front. Killed soldiers are sanitized, with very little blood splatter and absolutely no dismemberment. Corpses lay on the ground in a fetal position and after several seconds disappear altogether. Rules of engagement are lopsided in favor of American forces and without any independent monitoring body to hold soldiers accountable for breaking them.

This then is the most sinister element of the franchise's ideology. The player is encouraged to be an apolitical and sociopathic being that operates within a field where war and death are decontextualized. There is simply no recourse in this virtual world for dissent, doubt, politics, or empathy. These videogames have, if effect, managed to accomplish an ideological machine of panopticonal proportions. Since classical antiquity, military institutions in Western civilization have attempted to persuade the masses towards militarism to one degree or another. The Sophist Gorgias might have likened the type of rhetoric found in military-sponsored videogames as a method of communicating expertise, one that Plato criticizes as a means of deceit among ignorant masses. Plato likens such rhetoric as cookery, which mitigates the undesirability of unhealthy food by making it more tasteful (46). Thus, by blending Sophistic rhetoric within procedural rhetoric, the game

mounts an impression of military life that is more appealing and simpler to understand than the real world.

Mission accomplished?

While there exists no qualitative data regarding the effectiveness of *America's Army 3* in terms of recruitment or training, there is no doubt it fosters an overall favorable impression of military culture among its players who often feel as if they are experiencing what it's like to actually be a soldier and tend to commend these games for their perceived historical and technical accuracy. Many players profess that they have gained knowledge about historical battles and weapons according to military games, despite their awareness that such information varies from game to game and even within game franchises (Penney 196). Faced with this truth, military videogames do not actually increase correct learning or knowledge to a significant level; rather, they are first and foremost intended to pique the player's interest in military life outside of the virtual reality. Indeed, there are no extensive explanations of historical battles or military technology in *America's Army 3*; there is, however, an option in the menu screen that links to the U.S. Army recruitment webpage for those who want to continue playing into the real world. In fact, the virtual recruitment center in *America's Army 3* is one of the more interesting aspects of the game. At any time during the game, players may click their way to a virtual edifice where they can speak with administrative soldiers regarding the recruitment process for the U.S. Army, watch video clips of real war heroes and their military exploits, or simply spend time watching other young, generic, virtual men ponder

the decision to enlist (see fig. 11). This permeability of in-game and out-of-game recruitment further deepens the development of the military media ecology: instead of recruiters handing out brochures with phone numbers, the military is distributing videogames with web links.

Beyond recruitment, approaching the videogame as a "training tool" works insofar as soldiers are not learning how to assemble their rifle faster or shoot more effectively. There would be too many considerations for procedures like these to be accurately portrayed, and in any case, more complex simulators are already being used exclusively by the military for training purposes (Nichols 39). What is being instructed instead is military culture and conduct – players are awarded points based on their demonstration of representing the ideal combatant.

As the U.S. military continues to develop the *America's Army* franchise, players continue to be exposed to an idealized military culture that foregrounds *how* we fight over *why* we fight. But to consider such arguments as deceitful or
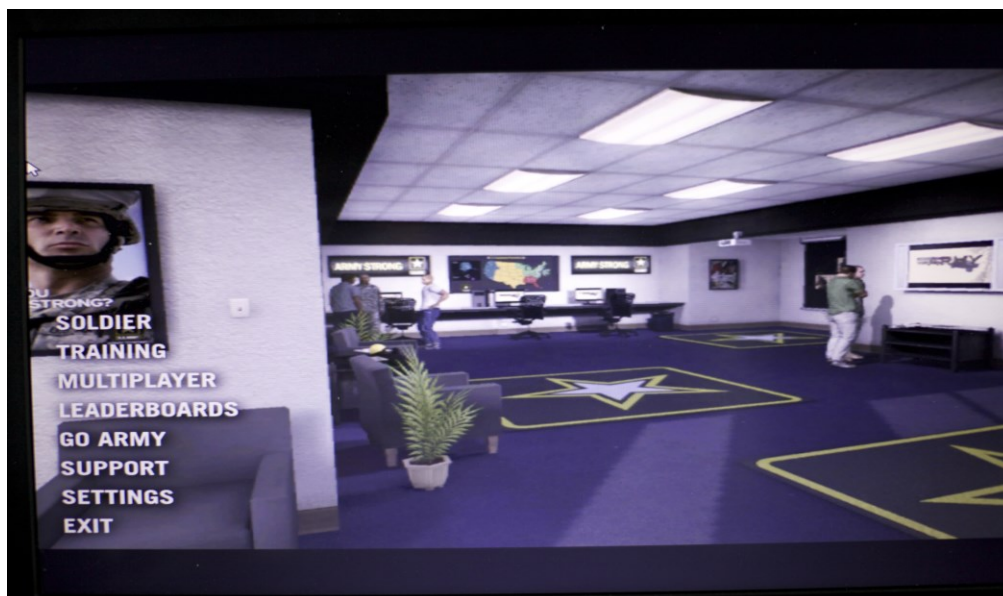

Fig. 11. The game lobby also doubles as an Army Recruiting Station lobby in *America's Army 3*.

entrapment is in turn an oversimplified position against the videogame's procedural rhetoric. After all, the U.S. Army's secondary goal (the first being promotion) is that the generation of young men enlisting in the Army already know what they're getting into. As Col. Wardynski explicitly states, "If a [young adult who played the game] signs up to be in the Army, odds are he's going to be happy… The game can help level the playing field so that the customer, the kid, is much better experienced – which is better for the kid, better for the country, better for the Army in the long run" (Huntemann 184).

Regardless of what is actually being imparted among the players, it is significant to note that enlistment numbers have spiked 200 percent since the *America's Army* franchise began in 2002 (178). Statistics have demonstrated that around 30 percent of players are more likely to consider a career in the military than those who have not played the game, a figure that is on par with children of military families (185). With statistics like these, it is a safe bet that the videogame franchise will continue for years to come.

Chapter IV: *Call of Duty*

Despite its importance for analysis, we should note that *America's Army* has received a disproportionate amount of academic attention, whereas other military-themed videogames – many much more popular – have been relatively overlooked. Indeed, such a platform is ripe for analysis, though it tends to come at the expense of exploring a corner of the military videogame industry that boasts the large majority of players: entertainment-based military FPSs. Such games have flown under the radar of academics because of their seemingly little contribution to the discourse of ideology and educational games. Bogost does not even mention it in his essay of procedural rhetoric because of its apparent lack of rhetorical argument and (to borrow Metz's terminology) its emphasis on an economy of money over an economy of arguments.

Yet there is absolutely no doubt that such games – all games, really – are political, intended or not. On one level, the very notion of a military-based game produced for financial profit is in itself a product of a capitalist ideology. Extending this discourse analysis to entertainment-based videogames, we can clearly demonstrate on a deeper level how these very games disseminate Western ideology. Further still, an analysis of procedural rhetoric uncovers a psychological link between the identification between pleasure and the American soldier, and that procedural considerations are designed to mimic psychoanalytic and physiologic training that actual soldiers undergo in order to prepare them for war.

The *Call of Duty* franchise is arguably the most popular military FPS in the world to date. They boast upwards of 20 million online players and have become the

benchmark upon which other FPS games attempt to emulate. The *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops* series fall under the same franchise, although both are made by separate developers in order to develop the game during a two-year span while maintaining a yearly release. While this fact might seem inconsequential to the occasional gamer who would be hard pressed to note any difference between them besides narrative, their slight differences and (even more interesting) their glaring similarities speak volumes as to their motivations for gameplay design and the demographic which plays them.

The *Modern Warfare* series, developed by Infinity Ward, is narratologically centered around several characters, most notably U.S. Capt. John "Soap" McTavish and British SAS Captain Price (from the introduction of this thesis), an extremely competent soldier who is predictably cynical and jaded by war. Throughout the series Price completes arduous missions (often singlehandedly), though he often does so grudgingly, never fully trusting his superiors. His suspicions are eventually proven right, as the gamer discovers throughout the series that a Russian terrorist and a rogue American general together orchestrate World War III. Eventually Price manages to save the world, although the series is presently ongoing. The gamer also gets the opportunity to play several missions as other soldiers around the world – American, British, and even Russian. One particularly controversial mission in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* has the gamer playing as an undercover U.S. soldier trying to infiltrate a Russian terrorist organization by participating in a civilian massacre at a Russian international airport. Although the mission itself is optional for the gamer, the option to play is left up to the player and not to parental consent

measures. This apparent oversight conveniently allows any player, regardless of age, to engage in a relatively shocking and morally bankrupt mission that is framed in the context of "the greater good", an argument that does not stand up often in the real world but nevertheless is employed time and again to argue for military involvement.

A Very Grand Narrative

The narrative itself is largely – to use film vernacular – a MacGuffin: a plot device used to advance the storyline but is otherwise meaningless. Though the Hitchcockian term originated in the medium of film, nowhere else is a MacGuffin more extensively used than in the videogame industry. The bulk of the *Call of Duty* series plays out its narrative in cut scenes, used solely as exposition, and any in-game story advancement is minimal and non-interactive. Each scene is used to segue into the next mission objective and any complexity to the storyline can be attributed to the increasingly convoluted plot that makes little sense but is largely ignored since its goal is to usher in the gameplay as quickly as possible.

As the franchise has progressed, it must be noted that the amount of mature content has increased noticeably. The most recent addition to the franchise, *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* contains a narrative littered with gratuitous profanity, violence and gore. It is clear from this development that the game developers are more concerned with appealing to the sensibilities of its demographic than promoting the virtues and ideology of the U.S. military. Indeed, the *Call of Duty* franchise has adopted the current trend of action films, namely, a celebration of the soldier on the

ground with a simultaneous distrust of high-level military administrators and political motivations. These themes, found in such films as Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables* (2010), Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* (2008) and the recent incarnation of the *James Bond* films (Campbell, Forster, and Mendes 2006-2012) to name only a few, are mimicked very well in the *Call of Duty* games. Here, generals on all sides are corrupt and politicians are easily duped into starting World War III. Of course, such a storyline enables the player to fight enemy forces in a variety of environments, including a suburban American neighborhood, where most players likely reside and perhaps often wondered what war would look like in their own backyard. It is a far cry from *America's Army*, where the fight is always on foreign soil and the rules of engagement are always just and appropriate.

However, most military films that require elaborate and realistic battle scenes are still respectful of the military's high command. This is precisely where games like the *Call of Duty* franchise set themselves apart, by seeming to be critical of the military. This flagrancy can be understood better through the historical relationship between the U.S. military and the U.S. film industry. In *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*, David L. Robb chronicles the countless anecdotes of how the military would be more than willing to lend their aircraft, armored vehicles, and even military personnel, provided that they allow the military to approve the script and all subsequent edits. If the military did not approve of the material (often due to a negative portrayal of one or more soldiers, regardless of its veracity), the military would routinely withhold their equipment, knowing full well that the film would no longer be authentic, as

entertaining, or simply feasible (107). But this phenomenon does not apply to videogames, where military equipment is completely unnecessary to recreate them in the virtual world; the only military assistance videogame developers use (and, even then, it is unessential) is that of consultants with intimate knowledge of military procedure, equipment, or events. They need not even be active-duty servicemen, which has resulted in the military having much less creative control over the vast majority of military-themed videogames than they would prefer (D. Martin).[9]

Of course, entertainment-based military games are clearly not liberated from military ideology that *America's Army* 3 and the film industry are largely subjected to. Despite its portrayal of military elite as untrustworthy, the *Call of Duty* franchise (and most others like it) never questions the ideological subtext (or even main text) of militarism. As if to prove the point, Hank Keirsey, an army veteran, was hired as a consultant for the development of the *Call of Duty* series. Not only did the army allow him to discuss very specific details about military operations and technology, but they also granted him permission to conduct interviews with active-duty servicemen in Iraq to capture the *feel* of modern day warfare (Thier). What's more, one must consider the self-censoring and ethnocentrism (unconscious or otherwise) that occurs in any body of work that caters to a particular demographic for financial gain. Case in point: while one might find intriguing the gamer's gaze as a Russian soldier or even a U.S. soldier engaged in a murderous act of terrorism, what is perhaps more interesting is whose gaze the gamer is not permitted to peer through. Playing as a Russian is apparently permitted only when not engaging American

forces or their allies. And while many of the missions are placed in Brazil, Northern Africa and the Middle East, never once does the player experience the gaze of the favela gangster or the Islamist rebel. It is curious that the developers thought it acceptable for the player to participate in mass murder of Russian civilians but to participate in the death of Allied soldiers or to see through the eyes ever so empathetically of modern-day enemies of the state is where the line is drawn. One might quickly point out that the question of gaze is answered by the fact that the developers wished to provide a virtual experience that their target market (i.e. Westernized teenage boys) would relate to, although this argument is mitigated by the gamer assuming the role of Russian ultra-nationalists or participating in murdering Russian civilians.

In actuality, these creative considerations are inherently designed to appeal to the political sensibilities of their demographic, which are indelibly linked to the current American political discourse. The player virtually resists terrorism and corruption harboured in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, China, Russia, and their satellite 3rd World allied nations. Outside of the U.S. military branches, the games prominently display the military prowess of the British Special Air Service (a real-world ally in the U.S. invasion of Iraq), while ignoring other militarily allied nations that have not stood in arms with the U.S. The games even continue the military film tradition of using France (who was critical of the Iraqi invasion) as a virtual whipping boy: just as in Stephen Sommers's film *G.I. Joe* (2009), the Eiffel Tower plays victim to yet another terrorist attack in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*.

Where opposing forces are concerned, the enemy is ruthless while simultaneously idiotic. At their best, military-trained enemies are predictable, and at their worst, Taliban fighters and African militiamen are downright inept. Suicide bombers are portrayed as mindless terrorists who run in droves towards American soldiers without any covert effort or religious motivations. The franchise has even begun to include suicide dogs. Ironically, while Iraqi insurgents did, in fact, attempt – and fail – to use dogs with explosives strapped to their bodies against U.S. soldiers, explosive dogs were first conceived by Russian and American forces during WWII (Lemish 89).

When Simply Following Procedures Carries Complex Implications

The dichotomy between American military might and foreign ineptitude is accentuated further via procedural considerations. As with all military FPSs, procedurality leaves no wiggle room for digressing from the mission – a fact that ensures the games' soldiers will complete its missions by employing superhuman heroics at regular intervals. The games' iD Tech 3 Game Engine (the same engines used for the highly stylized *Quake* franchise) ensures that players can maneuver in ways that transcend the human body's limitations. Soldiers can jump, crouch, aim, run, and shoot more efficiently than soldiers in the *America's Army* franchise (not to mention in real life as well). Such a consideration might appear at first glance to be detrimental to real world military recruitment, where human mechanics are not even closely attainable. However, the self-aggrandizement that players often inherit through these games quickly negates this otherwise obvious fact. Instead, players

are now more ready to accept the potential of self-glorification attained in the arena of warfare, if only temporarily.

But perhaps the most effective aspect of the *Call of Duty* franchise that furthers its goals of ideological dissemination and military promotion is the various structures of its online gameplay. In the first 15 days of its launch, *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* logged 150 million hours of gameplay via Xbox Live and PlayStation Network. This record supersedes the previous one for online multiplayer games, held by *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, launched only a year before (Thurrott). The franchise has developed a sound strategy to keep players coming back for more. It especially helps that the game engine allows for phenomenal virtual kinesis – that is, the character's superhuman response to the player's stimulus via hand controllers. Players enjoy staying in the virtual world partly for this reason; they get to be more mechanically adept than many of them truly are, especially at a pubescent stage of life where the human physiology is constantly changing and awkward mobility is often the norm. Instead of being able to run and jump effectively, the only mechanical skill involved in mastering these movements now reside in their fingertips.

To be sure, this phenomenon extends beyond kinesiology. The characters are intrepid and unflinching, but even more interestingly, they are conspicuously insolent. They distrust their commanders and consistently don't play by the rules. This is surely not the ideal soldier, and yet this trait appeals so well with teenage boys who appreciate the notion of not having to follow rules after doing just that at school and at home. Players are now virtually living out a fantasy whereby they get

to not only give a proverbial middle finger to authoritarian figures, but get rewarded for it as well.

Both the single player and multiplayer modes are designed to keep the player immersed in the virtual world without much downtime in between gameplay. In single player mode, as soon as a player dies, he is immediately transported to the previous checkpoint. Exposition scenes in between missions last no longer than a minute, which is only necessary in the first place for the hardware to load the data. In multiplayer, game lobbies last roughly one minute, giving players adequate time to join the game, choose a map, make adjustments to weapon kits. While in the game itself, most options have players immediately respawning once they die so that they can return to the gameplay quicker than they can get tired of playing. Respawning, a concept entirely eschewed by the *America's Army* franchise, is soundly embraced in *Call of Duty*. While the procedurality for dying and coming back to life does not mimic real life in any way, it does encourage intrepidity. If a player attempts to run across a field and gets mowed down by a machine gunner, he simply returns back to the spawn point in the map and gets to try again. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the number of times a player dies has no bearing on the outcome of the game, only the number of times the player kills does. The *Call of Duty* franchise continues to develop new procedures for multiplayer gameplay that exemplify this very concept. In *Call of Duty: Ghosts* (2013), a new multiplayer mode called *cranked* requires the player to kill another player within 45 seconds of his initial kill or else his own character will spontaneously combust (L. Martin).

The result is a more effective consubstantiality between the player and the character, which positively correlates with the amount of the character's traits that the player identifies with or wishes to identify with. Considering that the level of identification or self-experience among FPS players with their virtual character directly correlated to their level of enjoyment and that entertainment-based military FPSs are extremely popular among young males, we may infer that a player's identification ultimately rests in the character's militarized and ethnocentric Euro-American ideology.

This particular ideology can be especially evidenced via the procedural rhetoric employed, both inherent in the medium and as design considerations alike. Despite the fact that a foundationalist approach to cultural theory has been routinely criticized since deconstructionists have exposed this theory as myth (Massumi, *Parables* 68), the very existence of procedurality in a videogame (as well as real life) depends upon the individual. From the programmer who codes the procedures for videogames to function and be won or lost, to the player whose existence in the virtual world is what gives the world itself existence, procedures order actions that qualify and introduce value. Prior to the individual, procedures cannot exist. In that case, any order of actions would be truly random and thus devoid of *any* value whatsoever. The formal rules of any game, and FPSs in particular, contain any variation that the player might attempt to make, on the field (or in this case, the virtual war zone). But, to appropriate Massumi, without the virtual environment, the rules lose all power (*Parables* 72).

The implication here is that virtual worlds in videogames can only exist via preconceived and qualitative rules, inherently ideological procedures that advance gameplay to an arbitrary end. Points are intangible commodities that are worthless unless a system is in place that honors them. Likewise, goals are simply a game's version of a MacGuffin, used to advance the gameplay and narrative. Players kill each other in an effort to gain more points, though while players are the ones who follow procedures that gain points, but the points themselves are what cause the displacement of the players. In effect, the player is the object of the points (Brown 96). When a game unfetters the player from the fetishism of points, the result can be distinctively contra military ideology. No longer with an incentive to achieve a universally accepted goal, players would then be faced with options to exist in the virtual world without having to kill. But *Call of Duty*'s virtual world does not exist outside of the mission at hand. Just as military culture dictates that soldiers are required to fulfill the mission without digression or dissention, the player is required to play the game in the precise order and manner that the developers demand. This is surely not a limitation of videogame technology, as there exist many games (notably action role-playing games, or ARPGs) where open-ended environments are the norm and players have the option to fulfill a mission or otherwise follow their own whim. These action role-playing games (ARPGs) tend to privilege the concept of *paida*, leaving room for closed-ended missions and narrative but ultimately allowing the player to simply appreciate the mere existence in virtuality. *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) capitalize on this type of play very successfully. But for military-based FPSs in general and the

Call of Duty franchise in particular, privileging the concept of *ludus*– i.e. closed-ended missions, ever governed by ideological procedures– is what drives the gameplay. Without ideological procedurality, war – virtual or real – cannot exist.

Grand narrative through self-idealization

One very important reason as to why video games are as effective as they are in appealing to its players (and therefore increasing the reach of neomilitarism) is the relationship between procedurality and the player's self-perception. Returning to the concept of the player as object, it is simple enough to equate the videogamer as an actor on a stage – a player improvising in a play, if you will – who wants to transcend, to be someone else. Our archetypal young man (archetypal in conjunction with the military's target demographic for recruitment) who plays videogames often chooses to do so because his options are limited in the real world. His parents, his school, the figures of authority in his community, all contribute to the young man's cultural restraints. He also feels shackled by his own bodily limitations: not yet fully grown, not yet muscularly developed to his full genotypic potential. He feels as if he has the ability to be something great, though it is not yet realized. He wants to be extraordinary. He wants to be a hero. Entertainment-based military videogames allow players to engage in a militarized culture while simultaneously allowing them to remain uncompromising in their individualistic and self-centered values. Without the virtual, it is sobering for the player to strike the pose of a war hero and still see himself or herself reflected back in the mirror. Videogames have emancipated this physical limit. Whereas before when players on

a stage could only cross over a minimal distance between himself and his compliment, videogames now allow others in the virtual realm to view the player as he wishes to be seen. And perhaps even more importantly, the player can now affect the other players both virtually and by extension in real life. For when a player uses his virtual medium to shoot and kill another player, that other player's medium sends haptic feedback in the form of a shock to the player's hands via his controller.

These military games attempt to bridge the disparity between the player's real and virtual self-perceptions – and by extension, increasing the likelihood of the player's desire to become a virtual soldier crossing over into reality – by employing a first-person perspective that removes any viewpoint of the player's own avatar (which in virtually all cases looks nothing like the real player). Being "all that you can be" is the natural progression in the player's search for completion. The player now ironically yearns to become his compliment – in this case, a virtual soldier with an aggrandized version of himself and very identifiable character traits that include qualities valued by the military. It is now reality that attempts to mimic the virtual.

The entertainment-based FPS then is more disposed to promote the military machine than any government-sanctioned iteration of it. Military ideology is most appealing when it is promoted not only as altruistic and entertaining, but also and especially as a solution to the limitations of the player's reality. The ability to create and experience affect, a culture where the real self and its aggrandized image are one, and the breaking of cultural boundaries are celebrated; these are the selling points for a militarized lifestyle. Whether or not such goals ever become actualized is not important. Military institutions can afford to allow itself to be misrepresented

in order to get its foot in the proverbial door, for in truth, how the military is narrativized in videogames matters quite little; the veritable essence of these games – the very reason why they are played for millions of hours by millions of people – is its procedural rhetoric.

Chapter V: Conclusion

As this conclusion is being written, the next installment for *Call of Duty* has already been released and is currently the top selling videogame title in North America (Prescott). *America's Army 4* is currently in beta testing. And somewhere young boys are chattering away with each other via microphone headsets while they wait impatiently for the next *multiplayer hardcore deathmatch* to begin. And then someone will inevitably utter it, or something to the same effect, and no one listening even reacts to it since they've heard it hundreds of times before.

"You're gonna get fucked so hard up your ass in the next game, little bitch!"

And therein lies the brilliance of these games. Before the soldier ever has to kill his first human being, before they have to be conditioned to and desensitized of the horrors of war, before they even have to consider signing up, videogames have successfully mimicked a crucial military process for soldierization. These games have the capacity to turn players into Pavlovian dogs, salivating at the thought of the kill, equating a violent act with a moment of intense physical pleasure and release.

But we still have our morals. *Medal of Honor* (2010) initially selected online players to play as Taliban soldiers fighting against Americans. There were many who objected. Mothers of dead American soldiers, combat veterans, and even the Canadian and British governments have all called for the game to be banned. Their argument was that it would be inappropriate to allow people to play as real bad guys killing real good guys. In the developer's defense, publisher Electronic Arts said that someone always has to be the bad guy, whether it's *cops and robbers*, *cowboys and Indians*, or *Medal of Honor* ("Gamers Can 'Play' as Taliban"). But the pressure

was too great and the developers inevitably changed all references of the Taliban to the "Opposing Force". Never mind that they still resembled the Taliban and fighting took place in Afghanistan.

Strange that so many people assume the precarious nature of videogames as tools for losing the hearts and minds of the people. Could it be that winning said hearts and minds might also be at play?

Thankfully, American videogame developers no longer allow players to be part of a true opposition still in existence in the present world. Now there is no irony when Western nations point the propaganda finger at countries that have followed suit. China has recently released its own state-sponsored videogame titled *Glorious Mission Online* (2013), where players get to fight alongside Chinese soldiers against Japan for control of the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands (Taylor). The game does not even bother to create a fictional enemy, a consideration that immediately brings to light the notion of the videogame medium as a formidable ideological tool. As this thesis has suggested, the time has come for us to embrace the seriousness of thinking about military videogames.

What then shall the study of FPS videogames look like? Connecting the field to film and television studies has its obvious benefits. Mulvey's gaze has clear implications with videogames and reexamining the theory may even lead to a revival of it. Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric is a unique field of study currently exclusive to videogames but needs to be expanded greatly to non-serious games. Frasca's appropriation of Caillois's distinction between *paida* and *ludus* provide a necessary categorization of videogames, though FPSs are increasingly

converging the two and soon a third term might be needed – perhaps we could call it *lusionis*, both Latin for 'gameplay' and Catalan for 'allusions'.

What all of the above theories have in common is that they are all necessary to the study of FPS theory while simultaneously being outdated. They rely on a condition of relationality, dependent on a previous medium to make sense of the current one. There should be no doubt that videogames are born of the stage (actors improvising in a play), the written word (narrative still reigns supreme in any single-player mode), film (aesthetics), television (hardware), and even radio (audial communication between players). But in this age of remediation it has become imperative to avoid privileging the origins. Videogames, like any other artistic medium, require its own semantics and syntax. It is a field of constant flux, both in its nature and in its development, and cannot be positioned on a grid. We would be prudent to glean from previous media, but wiser still to readily discard any theories that condition videogames strictly as a subset of anything else.[10]

Certainly Foucault and Massumi are our allies here. Foucault's *panopticon* as an omnipotent institution that maintains order and keeps a watchful eye on its inhabitants is quite an appropriate analogy for the current state of online videogaming, while Massumi's eschewal of positionality prevents us from falling into the trappings of a foundational approach to the videogame medium. Massumi's concept of intensity embodied in autonomic reactions should also be examined, for it is this very kind of intensity that is being stirred up among FPS players. This is an intensity begins indeterminately and becomes qualified in the game. The intensity may be happiness or sadness; it does not matter. But once the intensity is given

form in a fulfillment of ideological virtue, it becomes an enjoyable sensation (*Parables* 25). This is why we love to hate, why we order boxing pay-per-views for fighters we want to see get beat up, why juvenile delinquents constantly make little distinction between positive and negative attention, and why an act of violence repeated over and over can feel liberating.

The Object of our Affectation

I am now going to ignore my own advice and reference a tangential medium to prove a videogame point. *Jarhead* (Mendes 2005) is a film about marines deployed in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm. The soldiers march for months through the desert but never chance upon any opportunity to ever fire their weapons. They constantly live in anticipation of the kill, but then the war suddenly ends and they go home. To further the discomfort of unfulfilled climax, Swofford (Jake Gyllenhaal) suffers from constipation throughout the film.

Critics were largely divided over the worth of the film. Most of the criticism rested with the fact that there were no payoff or action sequences. The film was too detached, too emotionally removed, didn't have a statement to make. Paul Clinton of cnn.com went so far as to complain that the film was "a war movie with no war." Is it a case of irony that these people are guilty of the very criticism that Mendes is trying to make about military ideology, or is their boredom and discomfort with a lack of violence precisely what Mendes was attempting to reflect back upon them in the first place? It seems as if the critics and a lot of moviegoers all got the point without realizing it.

This unconscious desire for mediated warfare has been cultivated through a military media ecology that has fed consumers of electronic media for almost a century. Videogames may have appropriated in large part its syntactical and semantic language from film, but it is videogames that are well positioned to take over as the dominant medium of neo-militarism. Thanks in large part to its panopticon-like exercise of power, videogames both disseminate military ideology while collecting data on its consumers at a level and rate never seen before. What's more, military-themed FPSs are designed in such a way that gameplay prepares players for the military training via a soldier-like discipline required to complete in-game goals and to even exist in the virtual environment. The procedurality in these games truly denies any recourse to non-military means of problem solving. The very choice *not* to shoot your weapon will result in inevitable failure. If we take these implications further, then we must admit to ourselves that these games are capable, if not of duping its players to join the military, then at the very least of giving players who fully embrace or submit to militarization a sense of confidence in transitioning from the virtual soldier to the real one. Regardless of whether a player becomes a soldier or not, these games prepare its consumers for militarization and the concession that warfare is more than an inevitability; it is a moral good.

Perhaps one day there will be an entertainment-based military FPS that will have Captain John Price going through the virtual motions of recruitment, Basic Training, and then the monotony of no warfare. Players would be always at the ready to kill, yet always denied the opportunity. And perhaps its self-reflective sequel would feature a retired Price once again, in meetings with videogame

consultants as he advises them on how to provide a more authentic virtual experience. And to complete the trilogy, the third installment of the franchise might be a flashback narrative of Price's short stint as a black op marine who witnesses the all the horrors that war can provide. The game would alternate between Price's past involvement in morally ambiguous scenarios and the present day, when Price speaks with military psychologists as he grapples with PTSD. There would also be a diegetic option that allows the character to donate money in real life to various non-profit organizations that highlight the tragedies that befall many soldiers.

Such games would be the most effective anti-war films made to date. These environments would be rich with cultural detail and open-ended, but without any ultimate goal. Players in the virtual would be waiting futilely for a payoff that never comes. It would leave them in a constant state of emotional constipation. Yet for-profit developers would balk at this concept for the sole reason that very few consumers would pay $60 for such an experience. Few players would be willing to accept a virtual world where the battle is already over and where the uncomfortable consequences of war run so deep. Reality is not nearly as palatable. Rather, players would be much more content to exist in the military-themed FPS environment, which would have you believe that the cost of losing is literally no price to pay for the chance to feel the exhilaration and intensity that come with the potentiality of winning. It truly does not matter, then, whether you win or lose. How the game is played – and how the game plays you – is why we're attracted to the virtual.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Anderson and Bavelier (2011), and Sommerseth (2007).

2. Despite this contradiction with regards to reality, the FBI has purchased licensing for the Unreal Development Kit to produce simulator-training software (Makuch). This is probably due to the fact that the engine is relatively simple to modify, but the irony is still worth noting.

3. To date, there is no definitive research identifying violent gameplay as a primary factor for aggression (Jenkins). The latest findings indicate that playing violent videogames for more than three hours every day is linked with moral immaturity (Coughlan), though this does not apply to the vast majority of players, who exercise a greater temperance with their game time. In fact, a recent joint study performed by the University of Oxford and the University of Rochester demonstrated that levels of aggression among gamers depended more upon incompetence when playing a game than on the level of violence contained in the game (Lee).

4. The theory of simulacra figures prominently in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Incidentally, it was Baudrillard who stated, "power belongs to the one who can give and *cannot be repaid*" (281). In the case of *America's Army 3*, Baudrillard's statement takes on a very real dimension in that the game is completely free to download.

5. It is worth noting here that there exist war films that do not necessarily fall under the banner of neo-militarism, i.e. anti-war films. Such films privilege the

horrors of war over arguments for "why we fight", although this particular sub-genre is paradoxical in the sense that, despite offering a critical perspective of a given war at large, most of these films still glorify the act of warfare. For example, *Platoon* (Stone 1986) is critical of the military machine while at the same time making every effort to heighten the emotional tension of the soldier in the heat of battle. This concurs with François Truffaut's claim that creating an anti-war film is impossible since war is necessarily portrayed as exciting even if you were against it (Ebert). This is doubly true for videogames, as this particular medium privileges empathy of the soldier via gameplay rather than any semantic argument against war. Case in point: The *Metal Gear* franchise (1987-2014) is known for having one of the most anti-war narratives found in videogames, though such arguments are reduced to mere cut-scenes that serve only to advance the narrative, while the gameplay itself requires the player to shoot his way to the game's conclusion.

6. Incidentally, it is this very reason why I focus my paper on military – themed FPSs and not real-time tactical (RTT) games. Stylistically, RTTs have a bird's-eye view of the action and the player assumed the role of a commander who organizes his troops across a battlefield. Using the latest in the series as an example, in *Close Combat: Panthers in the Fog* (2012), the player is not subject to the physiological effects that a subjective shot affords him. Rather, the player is told by the graphical interface whether his troops are suffering injury or death, low morale, and the like. While such a game may offer a greater opportunity for providing procedural rhetoric from a "serious games" perspective, in terms of propagating military culture, at its best it can only increase the player's considerations for war. It

does nothing towards training a potential soldier to withstand the emotional shock of battle, nor does it provide training that is useful for the soldier on the front lines. With regards to recruitment, the result may be the opposite of what the military would hope for: once a player witnesses the level of emotional detachment a commanding officer might have as he sends countless expendable troops into battle, he may think twice about visiting his local recruitment office. The effect is a sort of 'pulling back the curtain': a player is now witness to the considerations that the military must account for in order to win a war, considerations that are at once objectifying and underhanded. The awareness that someone is trying to boost your morale so that you will be more willing to fight is self-defeating.

7. Interestingly enough, film is not capable of recreating the illusion of democracy to the same extent of videogames since, at its essence, watching a movie at home has the arguable potential to alienate the viewer from the greater community. Tempering this argument are film communities built around discussion of cinematic experiences; however, the collection of user data is far more advanced and sophisticated with gamers than with film viewers. Due to the interactive nature of videogames overshadowing the largely one-way communication mechanism of film, gamer data is thus the truer organization of power. While the viewer is an essential part of the film experience, it largely rests on the side of reception and its influence on the film itself is only economic: good reviews and attendance might lengthen a film's theatre run and reviews will inform production companies the direction they should go with future films. But the viewer's contribution is extremely limited to the film as a self-contained work of art: once the film is

released, very rarely is the product altered or updated. DVD and Blu-ray releases offer some opportunity to add supplemental footage or extra features, but for the most part, a film's theatrical release is considered the final product. Regardless of how many film blogs, group screenings, or director Q-and-A's take place, there is yet to exist a tangible and systematic level of two-way communication between the masses and the filmmaker.

8. Even with a necessarily strong emphasis on weaponry, *America's Army 3* does not encourage a fetishization of guns, as is the case in entertainment-based military videogames. While the weapon is visibly central during gameplay, a player does not get to choose any weapon they wish to use; rather, the weapon given to them is based on the type of soldier they choose to be. Weapons, then, are thought of as specialized tools before they become objects of desire. While this still contains an obvious amount of phallic symbolism, it is nowhere near the level found in games like the *Call of Duty* franchise.

9. The most recent event to transpire from the military's lack of control over the videogame industry has been the disciplining of seven Navy SEALs for revealing classified material while hired as paid consultants by Electronic Arts regarding an attack on a pirate's den in Somalia and details of the Osama bin Laden raid (Kerr). While the reprimand will stunt their military careers, the group have since continued their lucrative forays into videogame consulting, as well as Hollywood consulting, political activism, and even writing best-selling novels about their experiences on Seal Team Six.

10. Even the military seems to understand that videogames are no longer subservient to earlier media. The U.S. Air Force has produced a new series of television commercials with montages of videogame-style aesthetics and then revealing that the clips are actually taken from the real, not the virtual. Their new catch phrase is quite telling: "It's not science fiction, it's what we do everyday" (Franz).

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