
PLAYING WAR
Military Video Games after 9/11
MATTHEW THOMAS PAYNE

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For Sophie & Jackson

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Introduction

Welcome to Ludic War

Space Invaders Meets 9/11 (or, Why Gameplay Matters)

Standing side by side, the World Trade Center (WTC) towers were again under aerial attack. But this time the world-famous buildings were not in lower Manhattan. And these were not the morning hours of September 11, 2001 (9/11). Most notably, the assailants were not international terrorists armed with hijacked passenger planes. The threat from above instead came from two-dimensional rows of pixilated space invaders armed with overwhelming numbers and firepower. At the 2008 Leipzig Games Convention in Germany, new media artist Douglas Edric Stanley's interactive installation *Invaders!* beckoned players to defend the WTC against the iconic "space invaders" ported from the 1978 eponymously titled arcade classic (figure I.1).[1] Following three days of virulent public criticism, Stanley permitted convention officials to terminate the installation, bringing an end to the aliens' relentless digital offensive on the twin monuments of western civilization and global capitalism.

Playing War critically examines "military shooter" video games produced during the early years of the twenty-first century with the goal of understanding the technological, cultural, and social factors that contribute to these games' pleasurable gameplay experiences. The systematic inquiry into the engineering of media pleasure carries with it vexing questions about how such feelings are created and how they are situated within broader cultural fields. One reason why the *Invaders!* piece is emotionally jarring is that it only *seemingly* provides the opportunity to save the Twin Towers. Stanley's "game" cannot be won; there is no way for players to save the landmarks from the descending alien horde. In lieu of offering escapist fun or experiencing some revisionist or alternative history, the installation critiques the mediated pleasures that commercial war games typically trade in. This book assumes a less

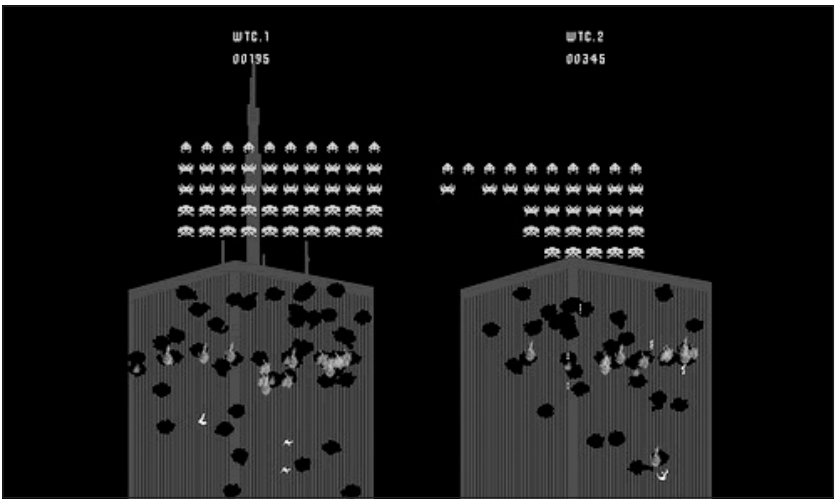


Figure I.1. The WTC is under alien attack in Douglas Edric Stanley's art piece *Invaders!*

polemical but no less a critical position when it interrogates the multimodal strategies by which popular military shooters cultivate their distinct gameplay[2] pleasures in the shadow of the U.S.-led War on Terror (2001–2014*).[3] *Playing War* treats gameplay seriously because the driving research presumption—which is evident in Stanley's provocative artwork, just as it is in the everyday play practices of millions of gamers—is simple: Gameplay matters.

If gameplay matters for digital games generally, then it certainly matters in the case of military-themed video games. War games frequently engage and conspicuously elide some of the most challenging political issues of the day: the efficacy and moral status of using torture to extract intelligence or of drone-aided assassinations to disrupt terrorist networks; the questionable justness of preemptive war policies; and the existential horrors of collateral damage and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to name but a few. Moreover, there is no entertainment genre that more vividly and viscerally explores the cultural values central to the United States's political imaginary than the "military shooter" produced after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

As a critical examination of American war culture's most popular playthings after 9/11, *Playing War* finds itself at the intersection of game stud-

ies and interdisciplinary research concerning the military-entertainment complex's cultural output. It is in some ways surprising that a book-length scholarly project about military shooters has not been written before now, given their global popularity and the press's incessant heralding of their marketplace achievements. The relative vacancy in the critical scholarship is likely owed, in part, to the newness of these research areas, and to video gaming's generational divide within the academy—between older scholars who came to games as researchers, and those who came to research having grown up with video games.[4] Filling this void are two anthologies—*Joystick Soldiers*, edited by Nina B. Huntemann and myself, and *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts*, edited by Gerald Voorhees, Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock—which signal that there is considerable academic interest in shooters in general, and military shooters in particular. But while *Playing War*'s subject matter may be fairly novel, its approach and its methodology are in considerable debt to a range of critical media scholarship that takes seriously the processes by which cultural politics are embodied as cultural practice, and how those cultural practices reproduce politics as play. What follows is a snapshot genealogy that situates this book in the (thankfully) as yet uncolonized field of game studies.

Playing War critically examines the interactive pleasures of military shooters produced, marketed, and played during the Global War on Terror, yet this is neither a "military history of games" nor is it a "video game history." This project does not, for instance, narrate the overlapping histories of the armed forces and video games in the way that Ed Halter's *From Sun Tzu to Xbox* does, or chronicle the military's use of games as learning technologies as in Corey Mead's *War Play*. I also do not discuss shooters en route to mapping out larger networks of militarized cultural production in the manner of James Der Derian's *Virtuous War*, Nick Turse's *The Complex*, or Roger Stahl's excellent *Militainment, Inc*. Conversely, *Playing War* is not a discrete video game history that interrogates a single gaming platform, like Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost's *Racing the Beam*, or an exploration of the cultural legacy of a single title, such as those books in Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron's "Landmark Game Series." Finally, *Playing War* is neither a historical reclamation project like Carly Kocurek's *Coin-Operated Americans*, nor does it grapple with the challenges of conducting gaming historiography, as does Raiford Guins's *Game After*.

Instead, my project engages in—what I am calling—a "critical gameplay analysis" that systematically assesses historicized social practices of game design, marketing, and play to reveal how social power and interactive pleasures are embedded in video games and enacted by/as gaming culture. With regard to its topic, scope, and case study design, *Playing War* is more akin to Patrick Crogan's *Gameplay Mode* and to Nick Dyer-Witheford's and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire*. Both of these ambitious works bring the critical commitments of political economy and cultural studies to bear on the structures and attractions of gameplay, and how it is that virtual realms cannot help but to reproduce the worldly power structures that brought them to life.

As a gamer-scholar, I hold as an article of faith that gameplay matters—a belief that is echoed in the aforementioned scholarship and in the foundational research I will recite shortly. But *Playing War* is more circumspect and deliberate in its assertions because it also wants to make its case to those outside of game studies. That is, video gameplay and its careful scrutiny *should* matter to non-gamers and to non-game researchers precisely because the matters of gameplay are never restricted to their ephemeral play sessions. The virtual realms of games and the physical world exist in a complex but coevolving dialectic. If we want to understand what makes playing war fun or to appreciate why such a question even matters, then we must expand our analytic scope beyond games proper. *Playing War*'s multi-methodological design aspires to contribute to *and* to challenge game studies. This project uses multiple critical tools and qualitative methods with the goal of being empirical without being overly empiricist, and seeks to avoid the reactionary and protectionist rhetoric that too frequently emerges when military shooters are discussed. For game studies to grow and mature as a field, and if its research is to matter to cognate disciplines, then gamer-scholars need to make sense of all those complementary practices—those happening inside *and* outside of virtual gamespaces—that make these playthings resonate with players.

Taking Aim at the "Military Shooter"

Playing War argues that gaming culture emerges from overlapping processes of production, marketing, and play and that users' gaming

experiences are shaped as much by the titles they play as they are by the historical contexts in which their gameplay happens. Given these textual variables and situational contingencies, gameplay experiences are rarely qualitatively equivalent events. The focus of *Playing War* is on commercially successful "military shooter" games played from first- and third-person perspectives that immerse gamers in virtual firefights. But "military shooter" is a term of convenience adopted from game industry discourse, and it is not without its conceptual shortcomings and discursive baggage.

The admittedly loose "military-themed" and "military shooter" descriptors that have been invoked thus far, and will continue to be used, illustrate the definitional challenges of categorizing a diverse set of entertainment media that change over time. "Military-themed," for instance, is often used to distinguish between war games that represent real or near-real conflicts from fantastic genres like science fiction or survival/action horror. In the former, the player must eliminate human threats on behalf of his or her country. In the latter, the gamer must eliminate monstrous or alien threats in a fictional world, even if that world is an overtly militarized one; consider the space marines in the sci-fi shooters *Doom* (1993), *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), and *Gears of War* (2006), or the special operations team that combats supernatural baddies in the survival horror game *F.E.A.R.* (2006). These are not mere cosmetic distinctions. Rather, these differences determine how games are understood as relating to reality or not—a critically important point of "media modality" that is taken up in Chapter 1. To be clear: Sci-fi, horror, and other "nonrealistic" games *can* engender allegorically rich experiences by drawing on war media's shared symbolic reservoir; that is, a game does not have to explicitly reproduce our world to comment on it. For example, the run and gun, side-scrolling arcade classics *Rush'n Attack* (1985) and *Contra* (1987)—inspired by 1980s action films like *Commando* (1985), *Aliens* (1986), and *Predator* (1987)—can engender their own fantastic ludic war experiences. However, the more creative license games take in depicting their fictional worlds at war and the more tenuous their connections to a gamer's reality, the more difficult it is for them to meaningfully connect with current events by accessing a shared political imaginary.

Another definitional complexity for the "military shooter" label is that it does not denote additional meaningful design and hardware dif-

ferences. For example, the Tom Clancy–brand video games examined in Chapter 3 encompass a range of shooter subgenres including stealth action games starring a single operative (*Splinter Cell: Conviction*, 2009) and squad-based shooters (*Rainbow Six: Vegas*, 2006). Furthermore, the same military shooter may be produced for diverse platforms. One can play *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), discussed in Chapter 2, on the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles, on a PC or Mac, and on mobile devices such as the Nintendo DS and cell phones. Not surprisingly, the *Call of Duty* experience varies considerably across these devices. Furthermore, military shooters may represent conflicts across time, from the trenches of World War II (*Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, 2002), to modern-day Iraq (*Kuma\War*, 2004), to near-future battlefields (*Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, 2012).

Finally, military shooters are not necessarily "military brand" games.[5] The government takes a central and public role in the production of its branded games since these titles carry their imprimatur and are used for recruitment or training purposes. The best-known examples of U.S. Defense Department games are *America's Army* (2002) and *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004).[6] Posed differently: All military brand games are military-themed, but not all military-themed games are militarily branded. And while the armed forces may benefit considerably from having positive depictions of its fighting men and women on computer and television screens, the American government sanctions and directly oversees the production of few commercial games.[7] Far more often, game studios hire subject matter experts to advise them on proper tactics, protocols, and battlefield behaviors with the aim of engendering "authentic" military experiences without having to submit their design choices to the scrutiny of the government's exacting review processes.

Thus, a variety of "shooter" games, played from first- and third-person perspectives, powered by technologies young and old, located in disparate play sites, concerning real and fictional conflicts across human history can generate any number of pleasurable virtual combat experiences, or what I am calling *ludic war* experiences. Ludic war's experiential variability is a research opportunity and a potential liability. The sheer diversity of games that deal with realistic or near-realistic war scenarios and the overwhelming number of gaming platforms that have facilitated electronic combat since MIT students first started blasting one another on

the PDP-1's *Spacewar!* in 1962 underscore a guiding premise of this book: Namely, if we want to understand what gaming pleasures mean at any one moment, we must read games critically as texts, understand their popular discourse, and make sense of their play sites. One can easily imagine how feeding quarters into an arcade version of the Cold War-inspired city defense game *Missile Command* (1980) is a markedly different experience from play-training with soldiers on the modified *Marine Doom* (1996) on networked computers in Quantico, Virginia, during the mid-1990s. These battles are, in turn, different from the frenetic, high-definition battles taking place on home consoles in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014).

The question of what *exactly* constitutes a military shooter is a consequential one because, as a practical research matter, it brackets off the titles that will be examined from those that will not. Such definitional wrangling also reminds us that gaming experiences enjoy their own historically distinct resonances. That is, the pleasures of playing post-9/11 military shooters are in consequential ways commensurate with and different from the attractions of playing war games in previous eras. The methodological challenge lies in designing a research framework that can systematically track the moving target that is ludic war culture by heuristically deconstructing gaming fantasies and their interactive pleasures.

Militainment's Political Imaginary

Nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson reminds us that the stories we tell one another about our nations and their intertwined histories shape how we view our place in the world and the constituency of our "imagined communities."[8] According to Anderson, a nation is necessarily imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[9] Cultural historians and theorists like Anderson pay special attention to the power of narrating a national history and the manifold ways that media technologies calcify ideas of the nation.[10]

A nation's collective identity and its mythological destiny find powerful expression across media, old and new. Commenting on the ontological power of the moving image's single-frame ancestor, Anderson remarks:

> The photograph, fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction, is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be "remembered" must be narrated.[11]

Photographs, films, radio programs, comic books, web sites, and—yes—video games are the disparate forensic evidence and cultural building blocks for our collective national memory, unifying disparate cultural groups across vast distances and eras.[12] The cultural industries' twentieth- and twenty-first-century entertainments are especially powerful vessels for communicating a national identity because they tell us what is worth commemorating, and they invite us to empathize with others' sacrifices on behalf of the state. As cultural historian George Lipsitz observes:

> Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where electronic mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection.[13]

As manifestly constructed as entertainment commodities about military endeavors are—be they depicted on cinema's flickering celluloid, TV's interlaced fields, comic books' paper panels, or in video games' computational code—they explain how men and women should understand state-sponsored violence, and justify why they would ever sacrifice themselves for fellow citizens whom they can only hope to imagine. Political economist Vincent Mosco reminds us of the credibility and persuasive powers wielded by popular myths, stating that "myths are not just a distortion of the reality that requires debunking; they are a form of reality. They give meaning to life, particularly by helping us to understand the seemingly incomprehensible, to cope with the problems that are overwhelmingly intractable, and to create in vision or dream what

cannot be realized in practice."[14] Military entertainments, or "militainments," are commodities that proselytize on behalf of a state mythology. These wares differ considerably, however, with how they preach their nationalistic gospels.

Militainments are not only rich objects of study for examining how popular culture envisions what martial power looks and feels like at a textual level; they also reveal how defense and entertainment interests collaborate, and gauge the public's attitude about the commodification of conflict. Rhetoric and war scholar Roger Stahl defines militainment as "state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption. Beyond this, it also suggests that this state violence is not of the abstract, distant, or historical variety but rather an impending or current use of force, one directly relevant to the citizen's current political life."[15] For Stahl, the various instantiations of militainment (such as sports, reality TV, games, toys) transform the citizen-soldier, who gains political legitimacy from national service and sacrifice, into the citizen-spectator, who gains legitimacy through the consumption of war spectacle. But this is not the whole picture either. Or, at the very least, it is becoming *less* the case in recent years.

Stahl argues that we are transitioning from an epoch of war spectatorship to one of interactive war, wherein the citizen-spectator is giving way to the "virtual citizen-soldier" who actively engages in the coproduction of interactive conflict. Observing that spectacle and interactive war "feature distinct pleasures. The spectacle offers those of distraction, bedazzlement, and voyeurism, pleasures driven by a kind of alienated looking. In contrast, the pleasures of the interactive war are predicated on participatory play, not simply watching the machine in motion but wiring oneself into a fantasy of a first-person, authorial kinetics of war."[16] And herein lies the greatest insight of Stahl's work for this project: Rather than deactivating and depoliticizing the citizen through distraction, interactive war engages the citizen-consumer by creating play opportunities that absorb the "citizen identity into the military-entertainment matrix."[17] This is not the top-down power of war spectacle that is thought to overwhelm viewers but is instead a series of personalized interpellations that call citizens to virtual action.

In a similar vein, media and game scholars Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter see the video game as a powerful embodiment of Em-

pire's reigning global techno-capitalist logic even as its basic form carries within it possibilities for radically reimagining existing power hierarchies and social relations.[18] Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note:

> Just as the eighteenth-century novel was a textual apparatus generating the bourgeois personality required by mercantile colonialism (but also capable of criticizing it), and just as twentieth-century cinema and television were integral to industrial consumerism (yet screened some of its darkest depictions), so virtual games are media constitutive of twenty-first-century global hypercapitalism and, perhaps, also of lines of exodus from it.[19]

Like Stahl, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter see war games as occupying one critical node of Empire's cultural and economic networks of power. And, yet, as paradigmatic as they are, war games are but a single piece of these scholars' larger arguments. My project extends these superlative studies by examining in sustained detail how game design choices, advertising campaigns, and gameplay communities overdetermine a ludic war culture that brings the hegemonically fun "virtual citizen-soldier" subject position into being—a playful subjectivity I am calling the "ludic soldier."

In reconfiguring unforgettable and unalterable televisual images of terror into play prompts, and by transforming fear into fun, the military shooter is the perfect platform for post-9/11 military power fantasies. Imagine its primary interface: The player views a war-ravaged world from a first-person (or less frequently third-person) point of view, which has as its focal point an aiming reticule or weapon sights. Consider, too, the shooter's standard imperative: The primary call to action is to exercise deadly force repeatedly without fear of moral or legal repercussions. It is for these reasons, and others to follow, that the military shooter functions as a kind of ludic antidote to the meditated "shock and awe" of the 9/11 attacks.

Although this project focuses on first- and third-person military shooters, ludic war culture is not necessarily coterminous with or limited to any specific genre or subgenre of combat games (such as shooter, flight simulator, real-time or turn-based strategy), or gaming platform (console, PC, mobile, and so on) for all the reasons listed previously.

Rather, this project views commercial gaming culture as an interconnected techno-cultural field of social practices structured around video gameplay in and out of mediated gamespaces. As a result, the pleasures of video games are never dictated solely by users' interactions with these "algorithmic cultural objects"—to borrow Alexander Galloway's nifty phrase[20]—but are likewise shaped by elements and forces extrinsic to games' programming code and play mechanics.

As I explore in the book's latter chapters, becoming knowledgeable about video games generates techno-cultural capital that avid users deploy to mark themselves as experts within their play communities. Thus, instead of standing apart from society in the oft-lauded experiential remove of the "magic circle," the act of gaming is always inextricably connected to extant, material forces. Ludic war culture is a singular techno-cultural formation embedded within larger spheres of late capitalism and technologically mediated play, but it is one that nevertheless possesses uniquely politicized medium- and content-specific traits that provide insights on how a shared national mythology gains interactive expression. We *know* that simulated wars are nothing like actual battles and that their over-the-top narratives and hyperbolic action sequences are categorically not reality. But this obvious and tired observation misses a bigger point. As Mosco notes, myth is "a political term that inflects human value with ideology" and "the accuracy of a myth is not its major test. Rather, myths sustain themselves when they are embraced by power."[21] Let us begin working toward unpacking these questions of mythology, pleasure, and power by first defining *Playing War*'s main concept.

Defining "Ludic War"

This book defines "ludic war" as *the pleasurable experience of playing military-themed video games alone or with others*. "Ludic war/warring" is a better term for my current purposes than the more common war "game/ing" for several reasons. First, "ludic," which comes from the Latin word *ludus* meaning "game" or "play," emphasizes the foundational player-game relationship as well as the liminal and bifurcated quality of the gaming experience. A gamer's experiences unfold concurrently in both off- and on-screen worlds, and the play spirit that bridges

these worlds is *and* is not what it purports to be. Or, as narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan observes, "While one body slays dragons, flirts with a used-car salesman who poses as a hooker, or explores an enchanted forest, the other one types on a keyboard or squeezes a joystick."[22] The playful leap of faith that brings these realms into experiential alignment, identified as the "lusory attitude" by philosopher Bernard Suits,[23] is a prerequisite for enjoying any gameplay activity. This is the reason why, despite its ostensibly combat-oriented content, the engineering of displeasure in *Invaders!* and similar "countergames" disqualifies them from contributing to a true ludic war experience (although they certainly mount necessary critiques of that experience).[24]

Finally, I am opting to use *ludus*, or the rule-based notion of play, and not *paidia*, the unbounded and frolicsome idea of play, because the experience of playing digital war games is at all times mediated by rules.[25] By rewarding certain actions and prohibiting others, rules productively constrain the game's "possibility space" into actionable fields that engender gameplay pleasures.[26] Ludic war play is thus a multilayered exploration, which includes playing within the shooter's rules of combat; exploring the emergent possibility spaces of its virtual battlefield; and, as this book argues, experiencing the cultural meanings arising from war games' explicit and implicit connections to America's dominant political myths and symbolic regimes after 9/11.

Given these differing emphases, it is perhaps not surprising that ludic war owes its conceptual genesis to two markedly different works—one in game studies, the other in war studies. The first is game scholar Jesper Juul's thesis that video games enjoy a "half-real" state of being because they engender an experiential liminality that combines real rules with a fictional universe.[27] Truly engrossing games, according to Juul, are usually those where the fictional diegesis and/or representational strategies efface the game's operational rules. Fictional, in this case, does not mean that games operate in unreal or fantastic genres but that the game experience is itself a manufactured fiction (as with Mosco's definition of myth, for example). Indeed, the players interviewed for Chapters 6 find shooters to be compelling *precisely* because they sport photorealistic imagery and physics engines that faithfully replicate worldly items and model real processes.

Ludic war's other inspirational building block is Robin Luckham's concept of "armament culture."[28] According to Luckham, this cultural

complex is based "on the fetishism of the advanced weapons system," and it "arises out of interlinked developments in advanced capitalism, the state and the modern war system."[29] Weapon systems, which Luckham defines broadly, are not merely represented in or by popular culture but are imbricated in all manner of cultural production—as product *and* as producer. Armament culture is conceived of as an ideological apparatus that not only interpellates consumers as sympathetic comrades-in-arms, but also transforms civilians into "passive targets" in such a way as to "stress their isolation and powerlessness."[30] If armament culture rings familiar, it is because it predates the more fashionable "military-entertainment complex" critique that gained traction in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This economic and cultural matrix (which enjoys no shortage of hyphenated titles in the critical literature) describes the web of technological, aesthetic, ideological, and professional associations connecting defense interests with entertainment firms.[31]

Luckham's concept is a generative one because it encourages us to consider how leisure pursuits might conform to a military logic even when there are no strong production ties linking entertainment goods with the government or defense firms. Moreover, armament culture (or something like ludic war culture) is worth studying precisely because these goods only seemingly operate autonomously within public discourse and popular culture. Again, Luckham: "Like other ideologies, [that of armament culture] can be viewed as a series of 'interpellations' or appeals to individuals and social groups to identify themselves as subjects or conscious participants in social roles with inclusive symbols of identity or authority. Armament culture, like any ideology, sets in motion a constant dissolution and reconstitution of identities."[32] It is my hope that by moving the focus away from militainment-as-spectacle to militainment-as-play, we might arrive at a more nuanced view of how ludic war's interactive solicitations create, in the words of communication scholars Les Levidow and Kevin Robins, their own "attractions as well as [their own] horrors."[33]

Ludic war combines gameplay's "half-real" ontology with armament culture's symbolic regime. The analytic utility of ludic war is that it takes seriously the active production of a shared fiction by gamers, while recognizing that outside defense and entertainment interests wield considerable power in circulating images, messages, and stories that support

their agendas. The ludic war experience is hence a co-creation of gamer and text, of user and industry. But this is not the whole picture either. Games are played in real-world spaces, and in specific techno-social configurations as well: moving cards around in *FreeCell* (1995) on a work computer during a lunch break; submitting a new word on the *Words with Friends* (2009) phone app while stuck in traffic; shooting at deer in the *Big Buck Hunter* (2000) arcade machine while waiting for friends at the local megaplex. Expanding the analysis discloses how the experiential "magic circle" is animated not by sorcery, but by historically situated human practices.

Studying "Ludic War"

Thinking of ludic war as overlapping social practices draws broadly on the media convergence literature[34] and critical audience research that sees meaning-making as extending well beyond the borders of theater, television, and computer screens.[35] A key proponent of this approach is public intellectual and media scholar Henry Jenkins, who notes: "Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we makes sense of our everyday lives."[36] Like the ludic war experience, media convergence is simultaneously a global and personal phenomenon that is difficult to pin down because it represents a dynamic and momentary nexus of technologies and actions; convergence is "a process, not an endpoint."[37]

Other communication scholars have argued similarly that critical media analyses need not begin or end with the text, or with the cultural industries' structural economies. Taking its cues from the sociology of knowledge tradition, Nick Couldry's practice-based research offers one useful guide for avoiding the "cultural studies versus political economy" pitfall. Instead, Couldry "starts not with media texts or media institutions, but with practice—not necessarily the practice of audiences, but media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness. What, quite simply, are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?"[38] Studying what ludic war *means* demands

studying what players *do* with shooters before, during, and after gameplay.[39] Or, as Galloway puts it, "If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then *video games are actions*. Let this be word one for video game theory."[40] Viewing games as practice highlights how players build their gaming communities, complete with their value systems and norms of conduct (a point I take up in Chapter 6), and the way these activities are related, or not, to other media practices.[41]

It bears emphasizing that the examination of media practices does not mean abandoning texts and textuality, as some might suggest. Antoni Roig and his colleagues, for example, contend that media practice means scrutinizing what people do with games instead of pursuing textual readings of the games proper. But this recommendation is predicated on an overly circumscribed definition of practice. The authors note: "We must analyze public observable activities instead of searching for meanings 'in the text' or in the video game as an object itself."[42] This is an over-correction that results in two problems: First, it unnecessarily limits the parameters of media practice; and second, it forecloses the critic's ability to stake knowledge claims based on his or her critical training. To the first point, if gameplay falls under the definitional umbrella of media practice, why are the researcher's own activities off-limits to careful reflection? There is a rich tradition of textual analysis in media studies, and auto-ethnographic work in anthropology. There is no compelling reason why game researchers should be prohibited from reporting on their own gaming practices. Second, the critical analysis of gaming ideology and the hegemonic pleasures of gameplay, narratives, marketing ephemera, and so on demands critics who have been trained to apprehend those elements. It is unreasonable to expect gamers to include such criticisms in their reports, or that these insights will necessarily emerge from the study of "observable activities." Media practices should not mean setting aside the textual meanings of games. Rather, the point of focusing on media practices *writ large* is to emphasize how similar and divergent activities initiated by a host of actors and social forces produce varied states of play. Because the game's textual machinery demands inputs to produce outputs, the critical analyst *must* be free to analyze his or her own gameplay as well as the practices of others.

This book's overarching design logic is in considerable debt to the "circuitry of interactivity" concept introduced by Stephen Kline, Nick

Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter in their superlative *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*.[43] The scholars' circuitry of interactivity schema fuses a critical political economic sensitivity to market forces and institutional history with cultural studies' insights about audiences' interpretive abilities in order to present a holistic framework for thinking about how gaming culture comes into being, despite the challenges in bridging cultural studies and political economic approaches that may have differing epistemological foundations and critical commitments.[44] The current investigation follows in this tradition by conceiving of military gaming pleasures as a consequence of engaging with commercialized ludic war culture inside *and* outside of military shooters.[45]

There are, of course, numerous ways of conducting critical gameplay analysis. *Playing War*'s approach is to outline the mutually constitutive (and highly contingent) circuits of cultural practice that culminate in an overtly politicized gaming subculture.[46] It is my hope that this project not only expands our shared understanding of mediated war play, but that its methodology might be adopted by others wishing to conduct their own sustained examinations of gaming pleasures and subcultures. A benefit of this tripartite model is that it can accommodate contradictions within and between forms of cultural practice (figure I.2). That is, because there are numerous stakeholders with differing interests, the human actors and technological agents that contribute to a state of mediated play do not always work in unison; in fact, they sometimes work at cross-purposes (a point I explore in Chapters 4 and 5). Moreover, *Playing War*'s emphasis on modality—or media's connection to shared notions of reality—will hopefully embolden scholars to emphasize the political stakes of their play-based research, and explore the eclectic forms of cultural, rhetorical, and ideological work performed by gameplay generally.[47]

The Trouble with Pleasure and Interactivity

One of the guiding rationales for taking a case study approach to researching contemporary gaming culture arises from the uneven ways that communication and media studies have handled the question of user pleasure over the years.[48] Scholars have assessed audience pleasure from a number of perspectives, with no systematic approach dominating

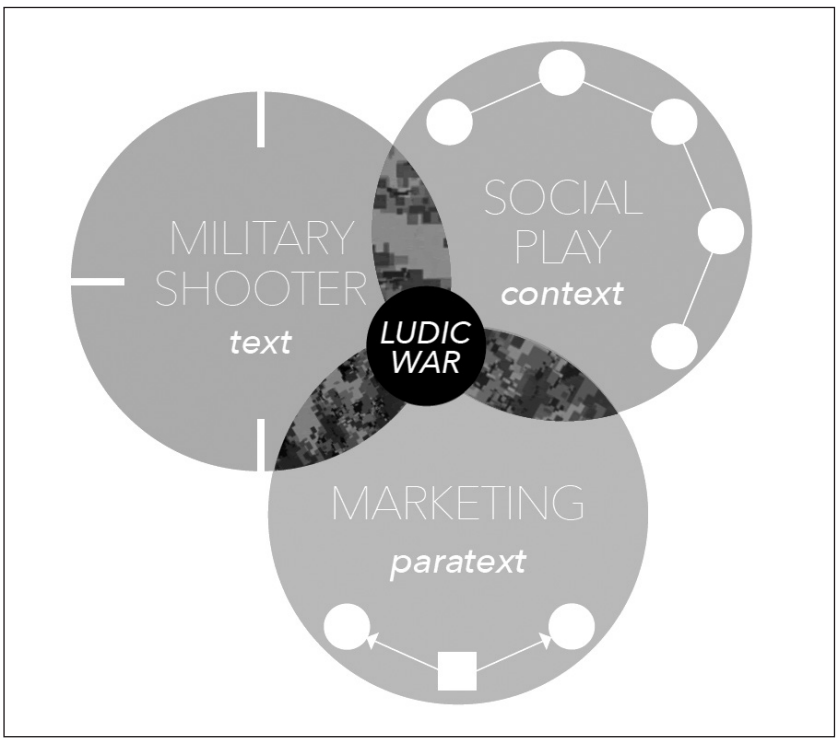


Figure I.2. Interacting circuits of ludic war culture.

the literature. Media-related pleasure has meant different things to different discourses,[49] mirroring in effect how human play has been conceptualized and studied by various research traditions.[50] It is, in all likelihood, impossible to reduce pleasure to a singular, all-encompassing theory because, as Simon Frith observes, it is a socially embedded concept that "refers to too disparate a set of events, individual and collective, active and passive, defined against different situations of displeasure/pain/reality. Pleasure, in turn, is *not just a psychological effect but refers to a set of experiences* rooted in the social relations of production." [51] It is no surprise, then, that competing definitions of media pleasure reveal diverging discipline-based beliefs about its implications, such as which stimuli give rise to pleasurable affect—elements like "control, immersion, performance, intertextuality, and narrative"—and which do not.[52]

The careful reader may note that, prior to the previous sentence, I have largely avoided using the terms "affect" or "affective." This choice stems from my desire to avoid locating this work within or adjacent to affect studies, not because the "affective turn" has nothing to teach critical gameplay analysis or game studies generally (I'd hazard the guess that the opposite is true), but because *Playing War* is concerned primarily with the creation (design), amplification (marketing), and socialization (play) of a particular type of mediated pleasure. This work neither takes on the problematic mind-body dualism that is central to affect studies, nor does it perform any phenomenological readings or author any auto-ethnographic reports—modes of analysis that tend to dominate affect studies.[53] Instead, this book's case study design is an inductive, grounded attempt at theorizing ludic war's interactive pleasures in situ rather than mapping critical theory over ludic war's gaming practices. Media pleasures are experienced subjectively, but they are produced socially.[54] The video game's affordances, working in concert with the user's personal habitus, determine how personally gratifying or meaningful a ludic war experience may be or may become. Attending to the everyday practices of those designing, selling, and playing post-9/11 shooters opens our eyes to how ludic pleasures are created in a way that a top-down theorization might not reveal.

This project adopts what John Fiske calls "hegemonic pleasures" when discussing the appeal of mainstream military shooters.[55] The TV scholar and cultural critic distinguishes between two prevailing forms of pleasure. There exist "popular pleasures" which "arise from the social allegiances formed by subordinated people" and "are bottom-up and thus must exist in some relationship of opposition to power (social, moral, textual, aesthetic, and so on) that attempts to discipline and control them."[56] But "popular pleasures," by and large, are not the pleasures of commercial military shooters. These games instead reward players for following strict mission guidelines and successfully eliminating threats. Fiske would label the exercise of disciplinary power over oneself and others in military games as being hegemonic in nature, as expressing a "conformity by which power and its disciplinary thrust are internalized" and "are widely experienced."[57] The ideology critique posed by countergames like *Invaders!* thus makes sense only if one first appreciates how mainstream shooters cultivate their hegemonically satisfying interactions, bringing us to one of communication scholarship's most contested and elusive terms.

There is arguably no single term in the new media lexicon more pervasive nor more vague than "interactivity." Communication researchers have long attempted concept explications of interactivity, hoping to arrive at operationalizable definitions for empirical research concerning the many disparate uses and effects of new media technologies.[58] Game and media studies scholars have similarly wrestled with the slippery term, though their analyses have been more squarely aimed at understanding how the video game's formal properties shape its interactions with its users, and what this interplay means for the industry and broader debates about gaming's merits or ills (in terms of violence/aggression, representations of gender, race, and sexuality, the educational potential of games, and so on).[59]

Despite the term's contested history in the literature and its clumsy and hyperbolic deployment by technological utopianists in the press,[60] this project uses "interactive" in two ways. First, "interactive" refers to the play mechanics that, once acted upon, structure and guide the gamer's ludic experiences. And, second, "interactive" is used to describe the industry's techniques for designing and selling the digital wares that appear on store shelves and establish the contours of gaming culture, which then coalesce in public venues and in private living rooms. That is, interactivity describes both the cybernetic or "ergodic" machinations of the video game as a "textual machine," as game scholar Espen Aarseth describes it,[61] *and* the complex intertextuality that connects video gaming to a wide web of extant cultural forms, genres, and narratives. This duality of form and cultural positioning permits us to make sense of new media and video games by referencing older media—a point made through P. David Marshall's concept of "intertextual commodity."[62] Placed in dialogue, the "textual machine" and "intertextual commodity" concepts demonstrate how games engender a potential wealth of interactive *and* interacting practices.[63]

In one of the first sustained examinations of the formal elements of interactive fiction, Espen Aarseth uses the term "ergodic intrigue" to illuminate how the textual machinery operates in an adventure game versus that of a mystery novel.[64] He states:

> The difference between dramatic and ergodic intrigue is that the dramatic intrigue takes place on a diegetic, intrafictional level as a plot within the

> plot and, usually, with the audience's full knowledge, while ergodic intrigue is directed against the user, who must figure out for herself what is going on. Also, ergodic intrigue must have more than one explicit outcome and cannot, therefore, be successful or unsuccessful; this attribute here depends on the player.[65]

The player's position within ergodic intrigue is that of the "intriguee" (a parallel to narrative's "narratee"). It is a transcendental position that "depends on the strategic identification or merger between the player and the puppet."[66] This merger of player and character is a popular point of focus in the game studies literature not only because of what it means for identification and learning,[67] but also because of what it means with respect to the pleasures of user choice and/or control. Aarseth notes: "The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent. The cybertext reader on the other hand, is not safe, and therefore, it can be argued, she is not a reader. The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection."[68] This state of uncertainty gifts players some control over the ergodic work, positioning ludic soldiers to derive pleasures absent from non-ergodic militainment like films and TV programs.

Moving outside the game's formal textual operations, P. David Marshall draws our attention to the innumerable ways that advertisers and communities of practice like media fandoms figure into audiences' interpretations of media products. His "intertextual commodity" concept highlights how audiences are encouraged to playfully interact with texts across technological platforms. Interactivity and play are as critical to the cultivation of user pleasure as they are to producers' techniques of product design and marketing. Marshall rightly notes that this has long been standard operating procedure for the cultural industries (take, for example, P.T. Barnum's publicity stunts). However, digital technologies and user-created content like social media have amplified the complexity of these intertextual matrixes while institutionalizing play as a commercial strategy. Marshall notes: "The new intertextual commodity identifies the attempt by an industry to provide the rules of the game, while recognizing that the pleasure of the game is that rules are made and remade, transformed and shifted by the players."[69] When interactivity is understood as a complex web of user actions and textual affordances

shared between producers and consumers, texts and marketing materials, the concept productively complicates static or technologically deterministic conceptualizations of the author-text-audience relationship,[70] even if it invites exhausted (and exhausting) debates about (inter)active audiences.

Interactivity's essential ontology makes possible the states of play within *and* around popular ludic spaces. Game designer and scholar Ian Bogost argues as much, adopting fellow game designer-theorists Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's definition of play as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure."[71] Of course, this playful "movement" neither requires a literal space nor interactive technologies. Rather, the "movement within a more rigid structure" might very well be the movement of imagination within a word puzzle. Conversely, the presence of technologies alone will not necessarily produce interactive states of play. An elevator button is not a plaything for a lawyer running late for a meeting. But that same button (or rows of buttons) could be an enticing plaything for that lawyer's precocious twin daughters. There is nothing inherently playful about elevator buttons; but they do not foreclose the possibility of play so long as there are those willing to adopt the lusory attitude and take an imaginative leap. These complexities explain why scholars have employed novel titles when reconceptualizing the new media user as something other than a viewer or reader, be it a "player,"[72] a "viewser,"[73] an "intriguee,[74]" a "virtual citizen-solider,"[75] or some other neologism (like "button-pushers" in the case of the lawyer's daughters). Whatever terminology one selects, it is essential to remember that humans play with games just as they play with culture because *games are culture*. The playful exploration of ludic war's possibility spaces means negotiating the computational rules of play and the cultural imaginary of post-9/11's magic circles.

Invaders!, Ludic Displeasure, and Politicizing the Magic Circle

The Dutch sociologist and veritable patron saint of game studies, Johan Huizinga, is one of the first to consider the cultural elements of human play, coining the term "magic circle" to describe the social membrane that envelops those engaged in play.[76] The magic circle, which occurs in sanctioned spaces and for allotted times, has ritualistic qualities such

as role-playing and rules of order that separate it from non-ludic activities. A common criticism of Huizinga's concept, though, is that it is too idealized and Platonic. The magic circle is not a metaphysical shield that insulates players from the world. Rather, the magic circle is a permeable social barrier that filters out certain elements, while allowing others through. That is, after all, why any virtual world or play space is culturally meaningful. The magic circle is penetrable for the same reason that culture is dynamic: it is people who breathe life into it, not some codified rule set. Game scholars have since qualified and updated Huizinga's influential concept, and it remains a productive keyword for connecting play practices to broader cultural concerns.

The commercial shooter facilitates interactive states of play for militarized magic circles while forging the relationships among its primary agents: the game and player, the game and its industry, and the player and the game industry (as in the overlapping sections of the ludic war Venn diagram shown in figure I.2). The give and take of the interactive gaming apparatus characterize the internal logic of the video game as well as the industrial, economic, and cultural pressures that studios negotiate when producing games. That is, there are textual freedoms and constraints to any rule-based video game, just as there are for the industry that produces those games. These interacting circuits invite gamers to play and replay a game, just as it enables the industry to recycle and remediate the popular imaginary of conflict for a range of ludic war experiences.

But not all games are designed to engender user pleasure, as Stanley's *Invaders!* usefully illustrates. Interventions by artists and activists are powerful reminders that popular culture remains a negotiated terrain, and that military games have their fair share of fans and critics. Given the emotive power of the 9/11 attacks, it is not surprising that *Invaders!* was criticized for daring to embed a recent tragedy within a fictionalized gamespace. After all, the art piece *literally* invited participants to play with protecting the WTC. Mixing what is arguably the most traumatic and central image of the 9/11 attacks with coin-operated playthings from yesteryear was simply too much for some to bear. Yet for those attendees who actually played the game, there was an additional layer of frustration that may have escaped those who only heard about the installation.

In Stanley's motion-sensitive art piece, players return fire at the incoming horde by waving their hands at the projection screen; contrary

to some initial inaccurate reports, players are most certainly trying to protect the Towers.[77] But because the aliens never cease their descent—emptying one screen of aliens begets another wave of assailants—the game sets the player up for inevitable failure. *Invaders!* is a "game" that cannot be won. It has no ending other than leaving players exhausted and frustrated. And therein, according to the project's artist and its apologists, lies its embodied critique of the United States's post-9/11 war policy.

On his blog, Stanley offered this response to those who attacked his installation without having experienced it, quipping: "For me at least, a video game is at some point always going to be about its gameplay."[78] He continued in that same post:

> Sure, there is something definitely ambiguous about defending the towers in a game, and some complex emotions that, indeed, might be a little too raw, or odd, for some, even in an 8-bit representation that is highly stylized and presents itself immediately as such. But whatever one decides in the end, I have heard many a cry within the gaming world that we need to take into account the internal logic of games, and that means actually understanding the mechanics of its gameplay, and respecting its figurative tropes.[79]

Stanley's reflection echoes a central concern in media and game studies over how to interpret the complex meanings arising from these curiously interactive playthings. I agree with Stanley: Competent game analyses should not attend to representational strategies without also asking questions about the game's rule structures and its social play context. For instance: What *does* it mean to play an arcade-style game in which the WTC cannot be saved, one where your eventual loss leaves you on display, breathless and defeated, before the other convention attendees?

Invaders! is a uniquely provocative countergame, though it is neither alone in its sentiment nor in its preferred medium of expression. Modern warfare's commercial representations are critiqued in a wide range of antiwar game projects—from original digital games, to game modifications, to machinima (short films made with repurposed video gameplay content), to in-game protests. For example, Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* (2003) makes it impossible to eradicate scrambling terrorists with-

out causing collateral damage that spawns more radicals.[80] Jon Griggs's *Deviation* (2005), a short machinima movie made with the first-person shooter *Counter-Strike* (1999), examines the unquestioned protocols and cyclical violence of the genre. The Velvet-Strike art team also made use of *Counter-Strike* to craft antiwar spray paint signs that players could use to inject political commentary into their virtual combat zones. And as part of his "dead-in-iraq" protest, digital artist and scholar Joseph DeLappe tirelessly types the names of U.S. soldiers killed in action into the public chat screens of the military's best-known recruitment game, *America's Army*.[81] These interventions are clearly antithetical to the mainstream shooters' commercial design practices. *Invaders!* and works of its ilk destabilize the ostensibly safe parameters of the video game's magic circle by denying to gamers the escapist pleasures typically found in shooters.[82]

From Mediated Despair to (Pre)mediated Renewal: A Ludic Structure of Feeling

Although game companies have enjoyed more commercial successes than other militainment producers, selling contemporary conflict remains a challenging task across media because the Global War on Terror is characterized by its conspicuous absence of a transcendent and principled political agenda.[83] The U.S. public's widely held suspicion of military interventions began at the conclusion of World War II, became increasingly evident throughout the Vietnam War, and was patently obvious by the end of the Cold War. In *The End of Victory Culture*, public intellectual and cultural historian Tom Engelhardt observes how "it is now practically a cliché that, with the end of the Cold War and the 'loss of the enemy,' American culture has entered a period of crisis that raises profound questions about national purpose and identity."[84] But the political challenges that attend to today's conflicts did not begin with the end of the Cold War.

The decline of America's "victory culture" that Engelhardt chronicles as spanning from the end of World War II in 1945 to the extraction of U.S. personnel from Vietnam in 1975, is a cultural symptom of total war's obsolescence as the primary mode of national defense during the twentieth century. Total war, or a nation-state's mobilization of all (or nearly

all) of its resources for conflict, ended as a viable defense strategy with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These nuclear strikes proved that the use of atomic weapons by multiple nations engaged in a total war scenario would make it all but impossible to distinguish war's winners from its losers. Symmetrical war, which had long been the idealized form of conflict for war-gaming and military strategists, became a strategic impossibility in a world teeming with nuclear arms.

Popular representations of war and baby boomers' war play changed with the end of total war since it foreclosed the possibility of a lasting, American total victory and foretold an atomic age of potential nuclear horrors. According to Engelhardt,

> So those children of the 1950s grasped the pleasures of victory culture as an act of faith, and the horrors of nuclear culture as an act of faithless mockery, and held both the triumph and the mocking horror close without necessarily experiencing them as contraries. In this way, they caught the essence of the adult culture of that time, which—despite America's dominant economic and military position in the world—was one not of triumph, but triumphalist despair.[85]

This state of "triumphalist despair" continued unabated as nuclear proliferation accelerated and the United States and the Soviet Union ratcheted up their atomic arms production, effectively solidifying a Cold War stalemate that would last nearly half a century. And because the United States and the Soviet Union could not attack one another directly without risking escalation that might end in mutually assured destruction, their political interests were expressed through proxy conflicts like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the CIA's support of Augusto Pinochet's murderous regime in Chile, and the Soviet-Afghan War. However, none of these altercations left as deep a scar on the American psyche as the Vietnam War.

In the years following the United States's defeat in Vietnam, American entertainment coped with this unexpected and unprecedented military loss by reestablishing the modern warrior cult, or what sociologist and historian James William Gibson calls the "New War." Gibson argues that this New War culture attempted to "fix" the nation through numerous cultural goods including pulp novels, live-action war games,

and revisionist Hollywood films that would give American soldiers a second chance to solve the problems caused by feminists, peace activists, and meddling and spineless politicians.[86] Foremost among these New War cultural playthings are combat films that fantasize a return to Vietnam and the consequences of failing to respond to national threats with deadly force. Yet many of these movies are more than nationalistic fantasies—they are veritable para-programmatic guides for how decisive warriors might fix the broken social order. Gibson notes: "America has always celebrated war and the warrior. Our long, unbroken record of military victories has been crucially important both to the national identity and to the personal identity of many Americans—particularly men."[87] The militainment playthings of Gibson's New War, like those of Engelhardt's "Victory Culture," are similar insofar as they are collective responses to national traumas during an era of postmodern warfare. The loss in Vietnam (despite the United States's overwhelming technological and financial resources) and the United States's vulnerability to nuclear attacks (despite being the first nation to engineer the atomic bomb) are both situations that asked: "If Americans were no longer winners, then who were they?"[88] Or, as Engelhardt inquires: "Is there an imaginable 'America' without enemies and without the story of their slaughter and our triumph?"[89] These questions of triumphalist despair that began after World War II and matured during the Vietnam quagmire and the Cold War and post–Cold War years would all but *seemingly* dissolve into air on a sunny Tuesday morning in lower Manhattan.

Media pundits were all too quick to opine that "9/11 changed everything." Yet the terrorist attacks tapped into deep-seated fears of reprisal and fractured the national myth of post–Cold War invulnerability. (Remember: We were told by political theorists like Francis Fukuyama that Western liberal market-driven economies had delivered us to a final state of social evolution—it was our "end of history."[90]) The seeds of guilt and future comeuppance had actually been sown with the final twin strikes of World War II. In this instance, what is past is truly prologue. Engelhardt reflects:

> If the 9/11 attacks were a traumatic shock to Americans, at a deeper level we had known they were coming. Not, as conspiracy theorists imagine, just a few of the top officials among us, but all of us—and not for weeks

> or months, but for over fifty years. That's why, for all the shock, what came to mind was, in a sense, so familiar. . . . Americans were already imagining versions of September 11th soon after the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. That event set the American imagination boiling. Within months of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all the familiar signs of nuclear fear were already in place—newspapers were drawing concentric circles of atomic destruction outward from fantasy Ground Zeroes in American cities, and magazines were offering visions of our country as a vaporized wasteland, while imagining millions of Americans dead.[91]

The knee-jerk American response to this national wound was not to investigate the roots of this psychological and political trauma but to affirm reactionary and conservative ideals in popular discourse and mass media culture. Susan Faludi documents how we Americans ran to insulate "ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood."[92] Like Engelhardt, Faludi sees the gendered and sexist responses to 9/11 as being symptomatic of a general and generational unwillingness to interrogate the material causes underlying the attacks. Rather than asking questions about *why* America's technology might be turned against it by well-funded, non-state terrorists, the response was to laud cultural artifacts from a "simpler time" that reproduced ideals from supposedly halcyon days gone by.[93] Americans quickly embraced fantastic entertainment that promised Manichaean moral universes and frontiersman heroes, which could reaffirm our national mythology as the world's lone and righteous military superpower.

Taken as a whole, the attacks of that day and their cultural fallout—understood broadly as the tragedy's discursive legacy, its psychic trauma, and innumerable media representations—have since concretized as a distinct cultural formation. In *9/11 Culture*, Jeffery Melnick asserts that "9/11 is a language. It has its own vocabulary, grammar, and tonalities."[94] Following the lead of cultural studies, Melnick defines a cultural formation as "a site where important social and political institutions, rhetorical practices, and personal behaviors overlap and combine to create a threshold level of cultural energy that comes to define its historical moment in some significant manner."[95] In addition to presenting researchers with novel artifacts for examining how terror-

ism and counterterrorism are commemorated and packaged for sale, shooters also demonstrate how this expressive medium has transmogrified the cultural energy of a historical formation into pleasurable play opportunities.

The majority of post-9/11 military shooters are among Faludi's throng of reactionary media as they facilitate interactive opportunities for striking back at virtual "evil-doers" with extreme martial prejudice. In fact, shooters stand ready to manufacture, negotiate, and maintain the American warrior identity in the early twenty-first century, as Hollywood's post-Vietnam and Reaganite films did for the New War culture during the 1980s. Moreover, because military shooters offer a pleasurable means of experiencing American exceptionalism generally and the "Bush Doctrine" of foreign policy specifically (see Chapter 3), these games perpetuate the historical conflation between the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor with al-Qaeda's assault on the World Trade Center to make the War on Terror and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq as morally defensible as the America's involvement in World War II.[96] Echoing much of the political commentary issued in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, military shooters often short-circuit historic fact; they attempt to elide a half century of interventionist foreign policy and numerous proxy wars to access the moral capital of a "just war" (Chapter 2 delves into this textual "slight of hand").

But shooters do not only "play games" with the past. These proleptic titles[97] "premediate" future catastrophes to foreclose the possibility of experiencing another trauma like 9/11.[98] Richard Grusin coins the term "premediation" to complement his and Jay David Bolter's earlier concept of "remediation."[99] But whereas remediation is new media's rearticulation and updating of previous communicative expressions for new forms and formats, premediation is about modeling potential, future states. Regarding the two terms' point of intersection, Grusin states:

> Premediating the future involves remediating the past. Premediation is actively engaged in the process of reconstructing history, particularly the history of 9/11 in its incessant remediation of the future. Thus the historical event of 9/11 continues to live and make itself felt in the present as an event that both overshadows other recent historical events and that continues to justify and make possible certain governmental and medial practices of securitization.[100]

Remediating World War II's multiple theaters of war into complex board games like *Axis & Allies*, the U.S. government's computer-aided simulations of potential conflicts during the Cold War,[101] or the off-the-shelf modification of *Doom II* (1994) by Marines for tactical training purposes are all examples of game systems attempting to recreate decision-making moments with the goal of gaining an accurate preview of things to come, or conversely, to create alternative histories of what might have been. But this is not the primary goal of premediation.

Like human play and political mythology, premediation is not bound to any factual state of affairs but is more closely aligned with cultivating sentimental affect that overwhelms and short-circuits reason.[102] "Premediation is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11."[103] Military shooters reinscribe 9/11's cultural memory into their ludic wars not for the sake of predictive accuracy, but to give players hope that these reimagined 9/11s can have different outcomes than their horrific ur-text. This explains why so many shooters possess fearful narratives that take place immediately before or directly after attacks on the United States. Take, for example, the violence depicted in figure I.3. This was one of the central marketing images for *Modern Warfare 3* (2011), and it was the first instance of *Time* authorizing the use of its signature border and nameplate on a commercial product. *Time*'s publisher, Kim Kelleher, justified the unprecedented move, saying, "This is where the boys are," adding that this collaboration with the video game's publisher, Activision, was "a great way to connect with millions of people we might not have otherwise connected with."[104]

These games resonate with players not only because they narratively premediate the trauma of 9/11, but also—and as importantly—because they give players ways of striking back against the titles' varied foes and crises. Such performative responses are unavailable while watching the original attacks on TV, or in fictional films that trade in similar themes and imagery. This is another way in which *Playing War* parts ways with previous treatises on war games. Whereas wide-ranging cultural histories like Martin Van Creveld's *Wargames* or Phillip von Hilgers's *War Games* examine the cultural and practical utility of multimedia gaming

Figure I.3. A promotional poster for *Modern Warfare 3* (2011) depicts a decimated New York City on the iconic *Time* magazine cover.

exercises—tabletop, live-action, electronic—to model possible futures for military strategists and government policymakers, *Playing War* is more interested in examining how cultural mythology is expressed as gameplay during an era of political unease. Furthermore, unlike the cold remove of strategy games that demand dispassionate planning, military shooters enjoin their players to get caught up in the emotional intimacy of their hectic firefights. It is this investment in gameplay that is critical for reanimating the bygone myth of victory culture in shooters when that myth fails to gain traction in other militainment.

Playing War's interest in how pleasure is produced by gaming's interacting commercial processes and social circuitry begs a thornier question about military gameplay's relationship to national identity: In particular, what do these ludic pleasures mean, or what does this form of war play say, about post-9/11 American culture? Answering this question

is this book's endgame, and it will be taken up most fully and forcefully in the Conclusion. For now, it is useful to preview how ludic war's hegemonic pleasures reflect more deeply held cultural beliefs.

The ludic war experience represents a mediated "structure of feeling," to borrow Raymond Williams's term, which expresses concerns particular to a historical moment while also making public the material processes that bring that cultural formation into being. Over the course of his influential career, Williams never explicitly defined this structure of feeling, though some critics argue his reluctance to do so was strategic.[105] In what is perhaps his most definitive articulation, Williams explains the structure of feeling as a broad experiential process that contains specific "internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension," which generate social values and meanings that are "actively lived and felt."[106] The structure of feeling is, in effect, a "cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence."[107] Like Williams's more popular but similarly under-theorized concept of televisual "flow,"[108] the structure of feeling is less a robust theoretical construct than it is a critical provocation that challenges scholars to better connect the cultural with the economic, and to connect one's pleasures with mass media's structures and its commercial imperatives during a given historical moment.[109]

Commercial military shooters simulate combat scenarios between U.S. soldiers and enemies of the state for gamers' entertainment. This book's goal over the following chapters is to disclose how military gameplay's interacting circuitry works toward (mainly) engendering hegemonic pleasures—or to paraphrase Williams, how the interacting structures produce that "ludic war feeling"—that make these games commercial successes, and how ludic warring attempts to resurrect a virile, militarized national identity that rises phoenix-like from the ashes of the Twin Towers.

Previewing *Playing War*

Playing War follows the call by Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson to critically analyze gameplay as an important experiential phenomenon, while trekking beyond the formal player-game interactions to

understand how gaming pleasures are coproduced by extratextual forces.[110] Accordingly, this project pursues a multiple case study design because it is a comprehensive research strategy[111] for understanding how game producers, marketers, and players negotiate the major commercial and cultural concerns of military gaming in real life contexts—including representing conflict and tactics (text), commoditizing socially acceptable depictions of state-sponsored violence (paratext), and negotiating the social environment of mediated gameplay (context). By attending carefully to these multiple sites of practice, we can begin to understand how video games cast, as Judd Ruggill and Ken McAllister note, their ineffable, magical spell.[112]

Chapter 1 employs "gameplay modality" to explain how the military shooter format makes virtual conflict pleasurable by granting players intimate battlefield views and performative liberties that counteract the perspectival distances and political anxieties that hound other militainment.[113] These games seek to have it both ways: They wish to be read as "realistic" by connecting symbolically and thematically to worldly strife, while making available to players medium-specific affordances that make for pleasurable play experiences. By attending to the gameplay similarities and differences of popular war games produced decades apart, media scholars can appraise how generational changes in gaming technologies and play mechanics shape virtual war experiences in foundational ways. This chapter argues that the game industry's movement toward producing increasingly immersive and narrative-based military gameplay is an attempt to ameliorate postmodern war's crisis of meaning by having it neatly packaged, sold, and played.

Chapter 2 examines the first-person gameplay modality that dominates the best-selling *Modern Warfare* trilogy—*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), and *Modern Warfare 3* (2011). These titles are noteworthy for placing players in different war theaters as soldiers *and* civilians who fight and die. These shifting points of view engender a paradoxical subjectivity that is situated in individual battles and that also transcends space and time. This interpersonal modality of play models the "sacrificial citizenship" that characterizes post-9/11 American political identity—one that hails all citizens as de facto conscripts for a war that may demand, at any moment, the greatest of personal sacrifices.[114]

Chapter 3 analyzes how two Tom Clancy–brand shooter franchises transform the author's prosaic technothriller fiction into ludic form, giving players an interactive means of playing through the discourse of American exceptionalism. This chapter argues that these titles support the Bush administration's policies of preemptive military force after 9/11. By remaining attentive to what these games ask us to do and how they represent U.S. soldiers in light of the critical commentary around Clancy's commercial empire, we can evaluate the pleasures of becoming a technowarrior who embraces the tenets of American exceptionalism in the new century.

Chapter 4 examines differing depictions of unmanned ground and aerial vehicles, or "drones," in a sampling of military shooters produced during the Obama administration, near the end of the Global War on Terror. Unlike the more jingoistic titles examined in previous chapters, Chapter 4's shooters frame drones as disruptive technologies that pose challenges to reigning cultural mythologies. For instance, in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* (2012), drones disrupt the mythology of the United States's unassailable military might. In *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), the questionable use of aerial force disturbs the mythology of the drone's objective viewing capabilities. And in *Unmanned* (2012), the boring and repetitive work of drone piloting dethrones the mythology of the noble warfighter. Not only are basic cultural beliefs about the U.S. military challenged in these games, but so too are the conventional shooter's interactive pleasures.

Chapter 5 shifts the book's focus away from gameplay to the extratextual marketing forces that shape ludic war culture. This chapter examines how paratexts such as production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video game advertisements prefigure how "military realism" is ideally understood for the best-selling military shooter of 2007, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. This *Call of Duty* installment presents a valuable case study because it is the first of the storied franchise to be set in the twenty-first century, and its commercial success served as a proof of concept for the publisher's decisive pivot away from the Second World War to the Cold War's proxy conflicts and near-future entanglements. The paratexts that circulate around *Call of Duty 4* not only generate excitement for the game and work to drive sales, but also suggest particular reading strategies over others, hoping to inoculate the pleasures of their publicized ludic wars from threats of public backlash.

Chapter 6 examines the social pleasures of playing ludic war with others in a commercial gaming center, and the challenges and fun of maintaining one's identity as a "hardcore" gamer in this space. Combining data drawn from my field notes of a gaming center's all-night play marathons, semistructured interviews with the center's customers and management, and a focus group with its most devoted patrons, this chapter is part outsider/etic account of a localized play culture, and part insider/emic account of these players' practices in their own words. This chapter finds that the ludic war experience often escapes its mediated bounds, with the rules and relationships founded on virtual battlefields finding charged expression in the physical gaming space. Moreover, gamers must regularly negotiate the modalities of ludic war play to grow their levels of gaming capital within their play community.

The Conclusion is a coda arguing that the military shooter is not only the quintessential post-9/11 video game genre, but that it is the apotheosis of contemporary militainment. These final remarks theorize how ludic war's structure of feeling stands ready to save postmodern war's legacy from its own technical and moral shortcomings. In short, these mediated battles hope to "reset" the victory culture mythology by making virtual war fun and pleasurable. *Playing War* is about how that playful campaign for gamers' "hearts and minds" is waged in and around video games' virtual battlefields, and what these mediated conflicts say about American identity and gaming culture after 9/11.

1

Nintendo War 2.0

Toward a New Modality of Ludic War Play

It is a great irony
that a child
tortured by fears
of nuclear holocaust
should take such delight
in a game
that gave its own
programmer
nightmares
of the apocalypse;
the mushroom cloud
rising as a splash
of red pixels,
the dream maker
tortured
by his own creations.

Meanwhile,
I lose the last base:
blew my missiles too early,
panicked; couldn't
pace myself "My God, we're
all going to die," I thought,
and we did.

The Game Over screen comes up
and, with sweaty palms
I whisper one word, standing
in awe of the end
of life as we know it:
"heavy . . ."

fun game.

—The "Missile Command" entry in Seth Barkan's creative writing collection about video games, *Blue Wizard Is about to Die*[1]

Introduction

Audiences for contemporary war films have been diminishing steadily over the course of the protracted U.S.-led military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. The conspicuously empty theater seats have been matched in living rooms by a similarly anemic viewership of war-oriented television programming. Media and war scholar Susan Carruthers rightly observes that along with fictionalized combat films, documentaries about the recent conflicts—whether they focus on the military, media, or civilian populations—have not fared much better, and that war entertainment's absent audiences represent a clarion call for media and war scholars to contextualize and historicize this "attenuation of attention."[2] In his *Time* magazine column, "Where Are the War Movies?," Richard Corliss speculates that Hollywood's lack of interest in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars could be attributable to several factors: possibly a want of political consensus and of battles that can be dramatized easily; possibly the fact that these wars have touched relatively few American households; perhaps even cinema's waning influence as a cultural form.[3] Even the perennially popular World War II genre has not fared as well over this same period, as only a few major war films produced after 9/11 have enjoyed the box office success of similar period films produced several years earlier—films like *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Pearl Harbor* (2001), which grossed globally $98 million, $482 million, and $450 million, respectively.[4]

Curiously, popular observations heralding the decline, if not the commercial death, of moving-image war entertainment have largely forgotten video games. The preeminent counterfactual case in point is Activision's *Call of Duty* series. For example, the November 13, 2012, release of *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* was, at the time, the single biggest entertainment launch in history—netting over $500 million during its first day on store shelves,[5] and eclipsing the $1 billion mark in fifteen days (figure 1.1).[6] These numbers are staggering but not surprising. Since the 2007 release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, each annual installment has outpaced the previous year's offering (figure 1.2).[7] Or, to put the franchise's commercial dominance in slightly different terms, having moved over 14 million units domestically, its series predecessor, *Black Ops*, is estimated to be in one of every eight U.S. households.[8]

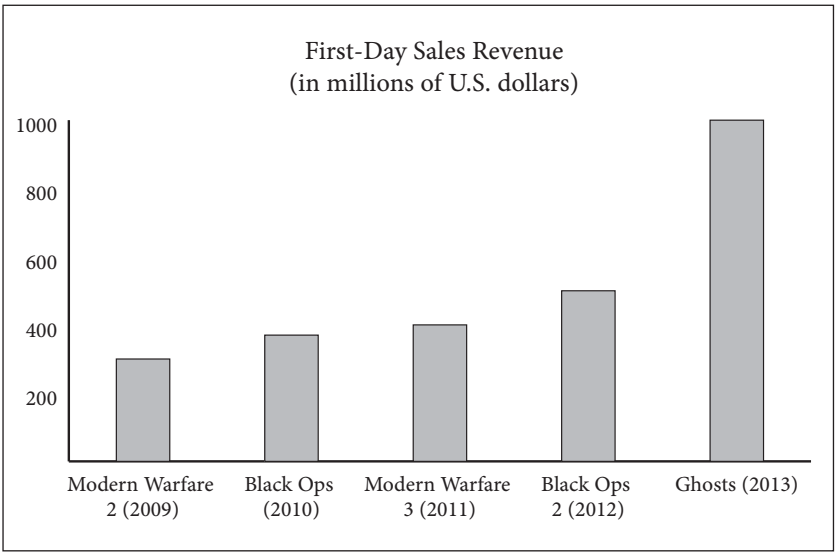


Figure 1.1. First-day sales figures for the annual *Call of Duty* games. No day-one sales data are available for *Modern Warfare* (2007) and *World at War* (2008).

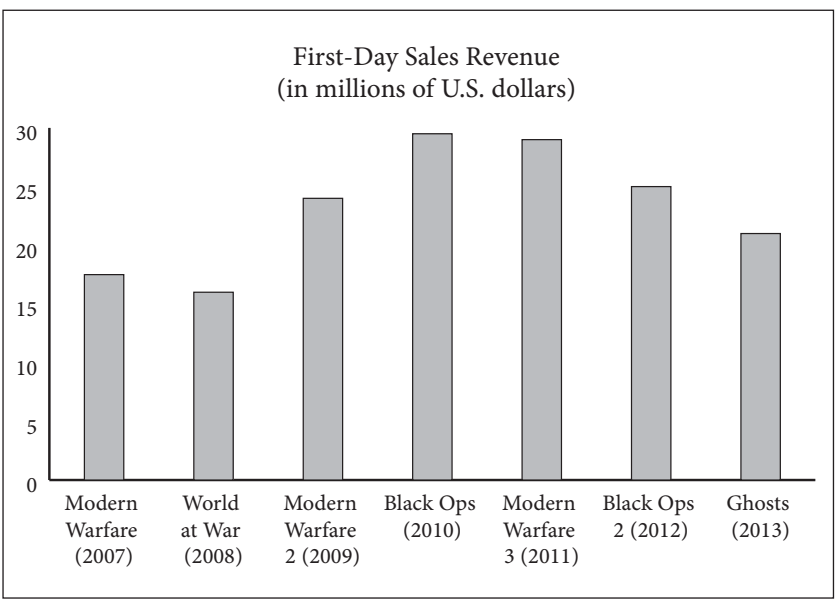


Figure 1.2. Total number of *Call of Duty* units sold globally through May 2014.

The *Modern Warfare* and *Black Ops* lines of Activision's *Call of Duty* games are far and away the best-selling military shooters in industry history. But this commercial trend is one that has been running counter to the reception of other combat media for years. And it is this dissimilar commercial reception that begs the questions driving this chapter and book: Why do contemporary war games sell in a commercial environment that is not favorable to other military entertainment; and what contextual forces and medium-specific traits might explain this success?

It bears repeating at this early juncture that there is no single "smoking gun" explanation, virtual or otherwise, for what makes combat games' ludic war experiences fun and popular. In one of the first mainstream reflections on the popularity of modern military shooters, journalist and *New York Times* video game critic Chris Suellentrop argues that *Modern Warfare* and similar titles have proven that "players have an appetite for games that purport to connect them to the wars their college roommates, or their sons, might be fighting in."[9] The aesthetic and narrative emphasis on realism and personal connection is undoubtedly true for some gamers. But this explanation gets us only so far. As the book's Introduction argues, media-based pleasures are overdetermined phenomena, as are the textual, paratextual, and contextual elements that contribute to any media artifact's financial and affective successes. Media pleasure's inherent complexity is further complicated by the culture industries' colorful array of intertextual production and marketing practices. Media and game scholars have appropriately examined the diverse, constitutive elements that make immersive games like first-person shooters pleasurable: these range from immersion and presence,[10] to agency and control,[11] to the visual and narrative intertextuality that connects games to mainstream Hollywood cinema[12] and experimental filmmaking,[13] to a participatory community that expands the gaming experience[14] and modifies titles' rules of play during times of political crises.[15]

Moreover, this chapter and the ones that follow are not the first to make sense of military shooters in light of their extant political environs. The critical pieces that have been published to date concerning the representation of twenty-first century war in video games evidence overlapping and complementary observations about the positive framing of post–Cold War military policies and technologies. For instance, scholars

have examined the discursive fidelity between the cinematic and gamic versions of *Black Hawk Down*;[16] how this form of play contributes to a militarization of everyday life and attempts to popularize network-centric warfare, or gaining military advantage by linking multiple combat and surveillance systems in real-time;[17] and how in-game narratives have shifted away from the underdog story of one soldier against many (i.e., the "*Rambo* story"), to the "overmatch narrative" where an elite team is still outnumbered, but is armed with overwhelming technological support and combat skills.[18]

Keeping these insights in mind, the current chapter examines how the format of the first-person shooter creates an attractive textual means of interacting with the unpleasant aspects of postmodern conflict. Specifically, it argues that the military shooter is a structuring play modality that narrates and personalizes postmodern military interventions. Postmodern war possesses vexing traits that make its popular representation problematic, as is evidenced in part by combat cinema's waning commercial appeal. By contrast, first- and third-person military shooters employ a modality uniquely suited to addressing the challenges of making virtual war pleasurable during a time of international conflict.

Geoff King's and Tanya Krzywinska's concept of "gameplay modality" is employed in the first half of this chapter to make sense of how the video game carries its own set of expectations and attitudes (its own "context-defining frame") regarding how it is understood in relation to and separate from other media interactions.[19] Combat video games' intertwined contextual and formal markers of modality signify repeatedly that these are objects to be played with and invite players to engage in sanctioned activities in their mediated gamespaces; in other words, even if the manifest screen content looks, sounds, and possesses themes similar to other war entertainment and news reportage, games offer players performative liberties not afforded by other media. Military shooters want to have it both ways: They want to be read as "realistic" by connecting symbolically and thematically to other war media, while simultaneously making available to players medium-specific textual affordances that create a pleasurable unreality.

Of course, not all ludic wars are created equal, and specific gameplay modalities represent dynamic and fluctuating textual configurations that change over time, reflecting unique historical moments and modes

of production. The final section of this first chapter examines the major similarities and differences between two military shooters produced decades apart with the goal of illustrating how generational changes in gaming technologies and play mechanics affect gamers' ludic war experiences in foundational ways. Finally, it is argued that the trend toward producing increasingly immersive and narrative ludic wars is an attempt to ameliorate postmodern war's crisis of meaning.

Postmodern War and Its Discontents

Postmodern war's discursive terrain and its definitional wrangling by critics is the key historical and political backdrop against which military shooters and their ludic war pleasures are evaluated and experienced. In fact, commercial militainment struggles to succeed in the marketplace *precisely* because of postmodern war's varied epistemological and ontological challenges—namely, how can war entertainment appear truthful when contemporary war's narratives, images, and reportage are held in such suspicion? Video games are not immune to these commercial and representational challenges. However, game producers have been able to use the unique modality of games to navigate postmodern war's commercial hurdles. Reviewing postmodern war's conceptual and historical legacy will allow us to better understand here and in the following chapters why military shooters engender specific textual pleasures, how marketers strategically pre-frame their digital wares, and the various ways that gamers negotiate through play the incongruities between virtual war play and their understandings of worldly warfare.

War and media scholar Chris Hables Gray argues for the "postmodern" label for contemporary warfare for two reasons.[20] First, according to Gray, modern war has its origins in the 1500s, when "total war" (the mobilization of all a nation-state's resources for the purposes of winning a conflict) became a physical and organizational possibility, and ended with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, when the use of atomic weapons in a total war scenario would make it all but impossible to distinguish war's winners from its losers. Second, the representations and practices of contemporary war share enough similarities with postmodernism's paradoxical cultural phenomena to warrant the admittedly tricky label. The paradoxes of contemporary war (again,

according to Gray) are fueled in equal parts by new technologies and modernist logics of rationality and social organization that evolved during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Gray focuses on the role of technological innovation in driving changes in warfare (not unlike technics scholar and historian Lewis Mumford or even cultural critic Paul Virilio), he credits information as being the preeminent tool in the warfighter's toolbox. Gray notes: "As a weapon, as a myth, as a metaphor, as a force multiplier, as an edge, as a trope, as a factor, and as an asset, information (and its handmaidens—computers to process it, multimedia to spread it, systems to represent it) has become the central sign in postmodernity."[21] Friedrich Kittler and Paul Virilio agree with this emphasis, having themselves labeled contemporary warfare as "infowar."[22] Kittler notes that ever since the late Cold War, the Pentagon has moved from electronic warfare, which is the attempt to gain control over the electromagnetic spectrum, to information warfare, or the "fight over digital technology with digital technology."[23]

For other media and war critics, information control and technological advances explain only so much. Philip Hammond, in *Media, War and Postmodernity*, observes that descriptions of postmodern war tend to overemphasize two major themes: (1) the proliferation of smart technologies that distance soldiers from targets; and (2) an attendant media spectacle produced by news firms and the cultural industries that conflate the actual with the virtual, fact with fiction.[24] Hammond divides "postmodern war" scholars into those who position the first U.S. Persian Gulf War (1990–1991) as the apotheosis of postmodern warfare with its deployment of high-tech weapons and near real-time media coverage (for example, James Der Derian, Chris Hables Gray, Douglas Kellner, and Jean Baudrillard[25]) and those who see postmodern war as mainly small, low-tech intrastate conflicts in developing nations or in Eastern Europe over local politics and organized crime.[26] The point of division between these camps, according to Hammond, is that the former group privileges technologies and media spectacle whereas the latter sees local identity politics as being postmodern war's most salient characteristic. Hammond situates his own work between these poles, arguing that

> war and intervention since the Cold War have been driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and mean-

> ing, both for themselves and for the their societies. This in turn has led to a heightened emphasis on image, spectacle and media presentation. Yet it is not really the media themselves that is the problem, even though some reporters and commentators have actively colluded in the process. Rather, it is the changing character of war which is at issue, and behind that, a fundamental shift in the policies of Western societies, summed up as the "end of Left and Right."[27]

Bringing these critical threads together, we can say that postmodern warfare's break with modernity is its political rupture as it is expressed through its info-centric technological transformations. Ironically, the end of the Cold War only exacerbated postmodern warfare's ontological crisis. Building on the work of Zaki Laidi,[28] Hammond argues that the post–Cold War period introduced a crisis of meaning for Western governments who lost their go-to enemy—the Communists. "That is to say, the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the end, not only of communism, but all forward-looking collective projects for the foreseeable future. In postmodern terms, one might say that the end of the Cold War represented a collapse of grand narratives."[29] The West's loss of its "Other" engendered a vacuum in the political imaginary, a void that was unsatisfactorily filled by humanitarian missions and "cosmopolitan interventionism" that recognize others' suffering. Yet as Hammond rightly notes, "Sympathy for others' pain and suffering is a lowest-common-denominator approach to humanity which emphasizes individual human frailty and vulnerability. It is about as far away from a future-oriented collective project as one can get."[30] Such a vague political project begs questions like: What exactly counts as suffering? Why choose one humanitarian mission over another? And when exactly have we "won"? It bears underscoring that "postmodern," as the aforementioned critics use it, refers to the dominant mode of war production in the West *and* how it gains popular representation in the media. Postmodern for these scholars is neither an uncritical nor an ahistorical celebration of the new, nor should it suggest a clean material or epistemological rupture with the past. Hammond argues that the United States's post–Gulf War humanitarian and peace-keeping missions of the 1990s in Somalia and Kosovo were politically unsatisfying because "therapeutic war" (his term) cannot be other than disappointing when compared to previous

conflicts that had more compelling and nationalistic political agendas. The rise in military interventionism predicated on humanitarianism is an outgrowth of the "collapse of the political sphere."[31] Hammond continues: "Indeed, to a great extent the attraction of this discourse [of therapeutic war] lay in the fact that it was anti-political. Putting morality above *realpolitik* and vested interest, it appealed directly to no interest, and addressed itself to no particular constituency."[32]

Therapeutic war's underlying discourse is nothing new to American culture. For rhetoric scholar Dana Cloud, it is the "discursive pattern of translating social and political problems into the language of individual responsibility and healing," and it had become a dominant political strategy and thematic motif across U.S. popular culture following the social turmoil of the late 1960s.[33] The spread of therapeutic discourse during and after the Vietnam War maps well with what Hammond (and critics like Gray and Douglas Kellner) have said about the way that postmodern war is waged and how it is perceived—including the domestic crises supposedly engendered by "the Vietnam Syndrome" and later the humanitarian missions of the 1990s. Thus, the low-intensity conflicts of the early post–Cold War period are less an outgrowth of technology than they are a lack of a compelling, unifying political mission, or, as Hammond puts it: "The humanitarian spectacle . . . was a symptom of the crisis of meaning, not a solution to it."[34] The end of the Cold War allowed this war-as-therapy discourse to flourish and weave its way into the language of 1990s humanitarian missions. The post–Cold War crisis of meaning and its politically impotent interventions ended in a flash on September 11, 2001—or so it would initially seem.

The War on Terror was not the solution to postmodern war's identity crisis. This amorphously labeled war lost its patina in a few short years thanks to a cavalcade of strategic missteps by the Bush administration. In fact, not long into George W. Bush's second term, the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan were characterized by the mainstream press—the same press that had enthusiastically endorsed the initial invasions—as being politically suspect at best and criminally mischievous at worst. This persistent public distrust of postmodern warfare is primarily a twofold issue concerning the efficacy of documentary news-gathering practices and the political motivations driving the military interventions. Indeed, both the public and the press question the very veracity of that

which is being reported, as well as the political ideals motivating the government's shifting foreign policy aspirations—a political apprehension that likewise affects post-9/11 military entertainment.

One of the foremost reasons why the War on Terror has been difficult to commodify is that the daily news reports of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars have themselves been handled like high-concept Hollywood products. From its earliest stages, journalists and commentators saw the War on Terror as an overtly calculated and transparent attempt by the U.S.-led coalition powers at "creating an image of purposefulness."[35] The news media's self-conscious awareness of the manufactured quality of the war reportage undercut the coalition's case that their campaign was righteous and just.

The documented instances of the U.S. government's blatant image and information manipulation are numerous. Events that have contributed to justifiable skepticism about the war efforts include, in part, the famous April 9, 2003 toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad by Iraqi civilians (in fact, the media event was spearheaded by the Army's psych-ops team);[36] the longstanding ban on publishing photographs of soldiers' remains returning to Dover Air Force Base (this restriction, which was instituted in 1991 by George H. W. Bush, was lifted in 2009 by the Obama administration);[37] the broadcasting of government-produced news reports supporting a range of policy efforts, including regime change in Iraq, in the nation's largest TV markets;[38] and the manufactured stories of battlefield heroics created for Private First Class Jessica Lynch and Corporal Pat Tillman (in actuality, Lynch's rescue was a carefully coordinated media event,[39] and Tillman was killed by "friendly fire" not by Afghan militia—a fact that went unacknowledged before his voluntary service was used as a publicity device).[40]

Of all the examples one could cite, the U.S. government's publicity piece de resistance during the early years of the War on Terror remains President Bush's aircraft carrier landing and "Mission Accomplished" address. This $1 million piece of televisual stagecraft invited sharp criticism from journalists and politicians who saw the event as little more than a thinly veiled reelection stunt.[41] Yet for all the media cynicism that characterized the news coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the attitude about the truthfulness about the images and manifest "spin" did little to dampen news outlets' general support of the wars or

reporters' complicity and collusion in spreading such misinformation (recall Judith Miller's reporting for the *New York Times*). Mortal combat remains a boon for ratings, cynicism notwithstanding. Given the skepticism surrounding the war planners' political motives and their shifting strategic goals—which changed from finding weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to bringing Saddam Hussein to justice and freeing the Iraqi people, to advancing democracy in the Middle East—it is little wonder that cultural producers sought to sell a less confusing war that was beyond moral reproach.

Hollywood's return to World War II during the early 2000s was a commercially adept maneuver that permitted producers to articulate popular anxieties about a nation at war while remaining optimistic about the United States's chances of victory (a position that was increasingly untenable as the coalition's litany of post-invasion missteps grew, including its failure to capture Osama Bin-Laden "dead or alive"). In addition to its making financial sense, returning to the Second World War also makes cultural sense given the numerous comparisons linking 9/11 to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.[42] The frequent comparisons of these homeland attacks signal a common desire for establishing a historical precedent for justifying the use of military force, not to mention the centrality of the moving image to the collective memory of these traumatic events—be they black and white newsreels of decimated battleships in Hawaii or handheld color videos of smoking buildings atop the New York City skyline.

The comparisons between Pearl Harbor and 9/11 also explain why moving image representations of combat, even that of patently fictionalized conflicts, invite public debates about the moral appropriateness of war entertainment. The issue is an especially thorny one for War on Terror media chiefly because it implicates the consumer in unsettled historical events. Even fictional post-9/11 combat entertainment cannot help but allude to the terrorist attacks and America's counterinsurgency responses. This is the source of recent war media's cultural salience, but it is also a potential stumbling block if war's representations are mishandled. Visual studies scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff offers this observation about documentary combat imagery: "The war image in particular comes guaranteed by the full faith and credit of the sanctioning government that allows it to be seen. It is an event that creates a sense of identi-

fication or disidentification. In short, the representation of war as global culture reconfigures individuals in history by means of visual imagery."[43] War imagery is thus not simply about communicating some visual truth about what happens on the battlefield or representing the daily reality that soldiers face. When viewed broadly, war imagery is about the audience's identification with the nation's history and political mythologies, including its ideals of citizenship. Again, war games and war media are *not* created equal. These militainments mediate between individuals and their national imagined communities in medium-specific ways and to different ends. The discussion turns now to examining how military shooters are thought to connect (or not) with worldly strife.

Media Modality and Playing with Reality

The chapter's guiding question about why military shooters succeed commercially in commodifying the War on Terror while other moving image media struggle invites a series of more difficult questions concerning users' expectations about the relationship between war and differing media forms, and the congruencies and incongruences between fictional media's depiction of combat with consumers' lived understandings of it. Fortunately, the concept of "modality" is available to explicate a "particular attitude toward an activity and how that activity is situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world."[44] However, the term does complicate matters, as it may also refer to the means by which a semiotic system functions in creating an affective experience (that is, modality as a mode of representational or narrative conveyance). This chapter cautiously deploys modality in *both* of these senses because the ideas are interrelated, and because the modern military shooter's gameplay modality is a synthesized experience of user expectations concerning war games' relationship with reality generally (modality of gaming context) and the design technics by which military shooters produce their liminal but compelling gaming experiences (modality as a semiotic system, as a way of doing things). Thinking of media modality thusly underscores this project's methodological emphasis upon understanding game culture as the result of interlocking practices.

Media and game scholars Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska contend that the video game has its own modality because it possesses

medium-specific semiotic and use markers differentiating it from other media (such as a combination of contextual framing routines and internal textual traits).[45] Moreover, the medium uniquely solicits and invites would-be players to experience its computational algorithms and (in some cases) its immersive narratives *as a game*—as something to be played with and explored. The authors borrow "modality" from Hodge's and Tripp's research on children's perceptions of TV reality and fantasy, which the latter scholars had taken from linguistics.[46] For linguists, "modality" denotes the *perceived* reality or certainty of a given message. And as in Hodge's and Tripp's research on televisual content, King and Krzywinska use modality to think through how video games represent fantasy and reality differently than other visual media, and how user expectations about that entertainment shape public discourses and debates about gaming. [47]

To clarify, the sense of realism or, on the other hand, the perceived unreality of a message—be it a political statement, a billboard advertisement, or an animated cartoon—is not equivalent to the absolute veracity of that message. We are talking here about the perceived truthfulness of a representation, and whether and to what extent that sense of truth is shared across social interactions. Hodge and Tripp underscore this fine but critically important distinction, stating:

> The modality of a statement is not its actual relation to reality, its truth, falsity or whatever: it is a product of the judgment about that relationship which the speaker makes, wants, or enables the hearer to make, and the judgments that hearers do actually make by drawing on their selective reading of the variety of cues that are available as potential bases for moral judgments.[48]

Media modality is therefore neither an aesthetic or generic category like sci-fi or fantasy with their conventional representational elements nor is it a singular truth-claim about a state of affairs. Rather, a message's modality is a complex site of social contestation where truthfulness is constantly being renegotiated by interested parties; modality "is nearly always a complex, even contradictory package of claims and counter-claims."[49] One non-game example of a message's shifting modality is the contentious debate over the so-called "death panels" that grabbed headlines during

the 2009–2010 U.S. healthcare reform effort. Former Alaskan Governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin popularized the pejorative term, alleging that giving the federal government more control over regulating heath care costs would result in rationing care to sick Americans. The ensuing public debates, which unfolded across media old and new, engaged the veracity of the claim even as it morphed into a talking point and rallying cry for political opposition to regulatory reform; that is, the point was often less about whether death panels were or could ever be a reality, but that the very idea of the death panel played into long-standing narratives about the dangers of government-controlled healthcare.

The debate over a media message's connection to reality is nothing less than the fight over the epistemological and ontological high ground, and ultimately, the exercise of social control. Hodge and Kress make this point clear:

> Social control rests on control over the representation of reality which is accepted as the basis of judgment and action. This control can be exercised directly on the mimetic content that circulates in a semiotic process, or it can be exercised indirectly, through control of modality judgments. Whoever controls modality can control which version of reality will be selected out as the valid version of that semiotic process.[50]

Furthermore, there are two major fronts where debates over a representation's connections to reality unfold: on a textual or representational level (relating to that which is being depicted), and on a contextual or social level (as in public debates over a medium's ability to communicate such truths).

King and Krzywinska wisely note that modality markers vary across the same semiotic mode, and that these same markers may enjoy variation within a generic category for that semiotic mode.[51] Although they are both first-person shooters with similar control schemes, there is a considerable difference between the fantasy markers in the sci-fi shooter *Doom* (1993) and the historical markers in the World War II shooter *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), as figures 1.3 and 1.4 illustrate.[52] These textual variations affect user expectations concerning their respective modalities and shape subsequent debates about these games. King and Krzywinska state:

> Games whose localized modality markers lean towards the realism/authenticity end of the scale are, on balance, more likely to become subjects of controversy in debates about real-world issues. By making claims to authentic representation of Second World War contexts, in some respects, *Medal of Honor* opens itself up for potential criticism about the adequacy of the simulation it offers of aspects of an historical experience.[53]

This is precisely why modern military-themed games tend to attract criticisms concerning their representations of military history and recruitment potential, whereas more spectacularly violent and fantastic shooters often attract media effects questions about aggression and violence.[54]

For all the variation between the modality markers of a gaming genre—those components that read as realistic and those that do not—greater still are the differences between the modality markers found in games and those literal, worldly things that these screen elements represent. That is, as "realistic" as shooter games purport to be, the performative demands of gameplay ultimately differentiates war games from unalterable combat films, TV shows, and news media.[55] This essential difference rooted in the practices of play creates the experiential and expectational divides that determine how these entertainment texts are read as mediating (pleasurably or not) combat past, present, and future. War films ask you to *watch* the combat on screen; war games ask you to *play* with the combat on screen. It is this foundational and consequential divergence in media interaction that partially explains why the public has received these intertexual artifacts differently than other war products. The graphic in figure 1.5 categorizes militainment along these two axes of modality. The X-axis represents the modality markers that are thought to connect (or not) with reality (contextual modality). The left side of the spectrum favors abstracted representations; the right side favors specificity and worldly analogs. The Y-axis represents opportunities to play with the media as an interactive apparatus (textual modality).

The "distinctive realm" to which King and Krzywinska refer is the same elusive entity as Johan Huizinga's famed "magic circle." While the concept has been productively critiqued and complicated, as this book's Introduction explains, the Dutch sociologist reminds us that the key ex-

Figures 1.3 and 1.4. The player fires the BFG 9000 in *Doom* (1993), and dodges bullets in Normandy, France, in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002).

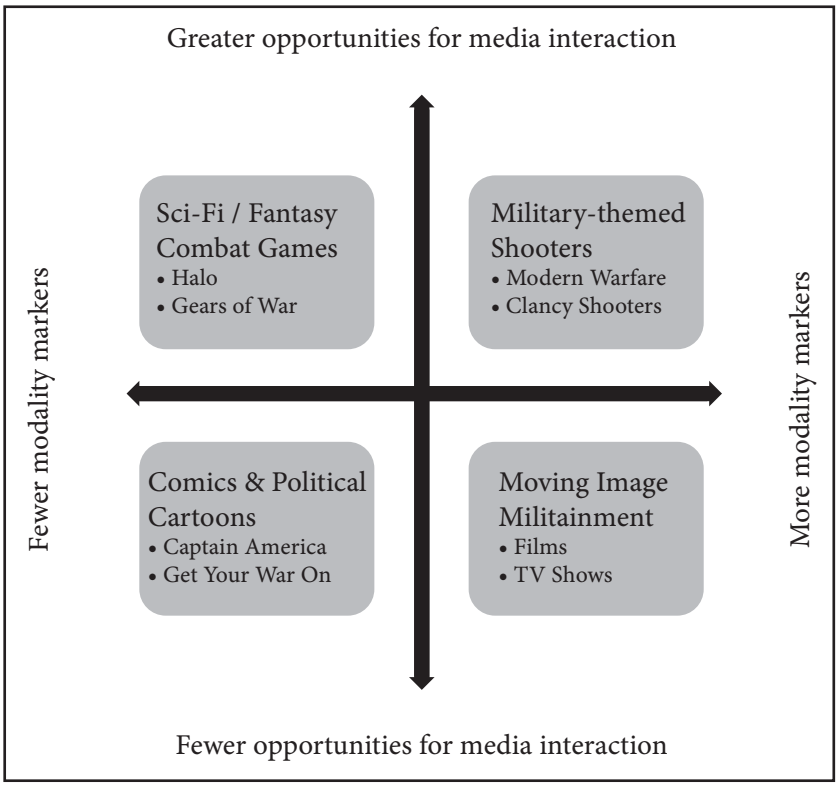


Figure 1.5. Militainment's modality vectors.

periential quality of gaming rests in its participatory nature. The act of play is just that—an act. It is therefore insufficient to understand play only as an epiphenomenal or shadow representation. He sounds this important reminder for communication and game studies:

> The rite, or "ritual act" represents a cosmic happening, an event in the natural process. The word "represents," however, does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least not in its looser, modern connotation; for here "representation" is really *identification*, the mystic repetition or *re-presentation* of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much *shown figuratively* as *actually reproduced* in the action. . . . As the Greeks would say, "it is *methectic* rather than *mimetic*."[56]

Whatever a game's commentary on or connection to the real world, gameplay must work to establish that connection along different fronts if it is to be culturally meaningful. Gameplay's textual modality is never a given, even if most players expect that they will be entering a distinct realm when they pick up a controller. As an interactive set of claims about a near-real world at war, the modality of the military shooter makes sense only if we account for the varied design strategies and practices that give rise to a given gameplay state.

Media Modality and Textual Transport

War media is a profoundly complex discursive field. Combat's breathtaking images and heartrending stories are remediated from one expressive form to another as they travel from military bloggers' video postings on YouTube, to radio journalists' podcasts, to major Hollywood productions. Hollywood has been particularly successful at memorializing and narrating America's military interventions because cinema is thought to accurately represent (or, at least, have the potential to accurately represent) such spectacular and visceral histories. Cinema's modality markers and aesthetic design of photographic fidelity, narrative form, complex sound design, et cetera, work together to establish credibility for the film's constructed fiction. During their considerably shorter history, games have often parroted cinema's storytelling conventions and visual spectacle and have thus been engaged in an intertextual and interindustrial exchange with Hollywood's war films for decades.

As much as games owe to cinema,[57] the first-person shooter format is nevertheless a medium-specific modality that engenders medium-specific pleasures. The shooter's narrative subjectivity is culturally resonant because shooters draw on the same visual lexicon and representational tropes as other postmodern war media while rendering these signs and markers in a ludic gamespace. A brief historical review will make plain how the first-person shooter modality operates as a textual vehicle that connects its gameplay to the broader visual genealogy of postmodern war's politically suspect agenda.

The first-person shooter (FPS) has been a perennially favorite genre since its formation and popularization in the early 1990s. As the name suggests, the FPS has two essential design conventions: its perspective and

its gunplay. These twin components appear together in a handful of video games in the 1970s and 1980s, and there is an even longer visual history in cinema.[58] However, the FPS did not truly emerge as a commercially viable game format until 1992, when the Texas game studio id Software successfully merged traversable, three-dimensional space with frenetic, run-and-gun gameplay in their PC game *Wolfenstein 3D*. This breakout hit was soon followed by the company's other popular franchises of *Doom* (1993)[59] and *Quake* (1996). The success of these shooters and the public outcry over their violence secured id Software's infamous place in gaming history and established the FPS's generic conventions for years to come.

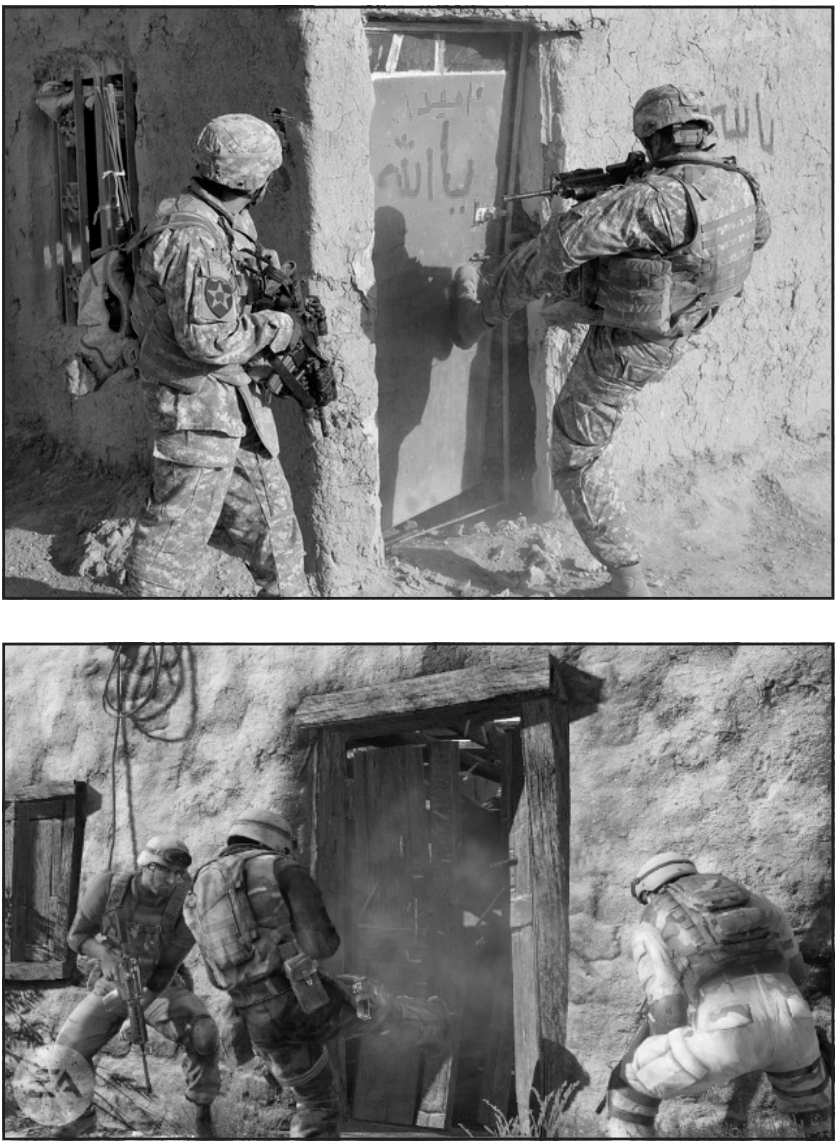
Of course, anxieties about the fuzzy line separating realistic and fantastic representations of military violence did not originate with post-9/11 shooters, but were voiced a decade earlier by journalists' sobriquet for the first Persian Gulf War: the "Nintendo War." TV pundits were drawn to this colorful and provocative descriptor because Western news outlets framed this globally televised post–Cold War conflict as a "clean" military engagement for its few U.S. casualties (a feeling not shared by the Iraqis who lost tens of thousands of citizens) and because of the Defense Department's steady stream of TV-friendly combat footage. Among the most celebrated moving images of the "Nintendo War" were the video feeds pulled from attack vehicles and rocket-mounted cameras that recorded the final moments of their "smart" weapons' flights. The images of this war resemble the pixilated visions of destruction being played in arcades and living rooms in games like *Missile Command* (1980) and *Battlezone* (1980).

Striking as these graphic similarities are, there is a more consequential correspondence between the mainstream news and game industry's similarly evolving storytelling techniques from the Gulf Wars of the 1990s to the 2000s, and how these industries would visually narrate war after 9/11. The high-tech weapons' points of view made famous during the Persian Gulf War were previewed in the interfaces of the arcade shooters of the 1980s, which transformed digital crosshairs into the focal points for their militarized gameplay. But missing from these mediated views was any narrative that contextualized the on-screen destruction. Defense officials and reporters had to make sense of the pixilated video feeds on the nightly news just as arcade patrons had to fabricate stories for their abstracted arcade firefights.

By the 2003 invasion of Iraq, FPS-based storytelling had evolved dramatically. Complex spatial designs were complemented with an array of customizable gameplay options and, as importantly, with characters and narratives that motivated the on-screen violence. The Department of Defense made a similar realization concerning its management of war information. No longer content only to release sanctioned images and videos of their technologies and warriors in press briefings as it had during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War, the Defense Department selected choice reporters to accompany its fighting men and women into Iraq. These reporters did not necessarily present viewers with any more spectacular images of war than had been seen previously; however, the embedded journalists did succeed in delivering live images of themselves in Iraq as a means for American audiences to identify with the war effort.[60] To be clear, it is highly unlikely that design innovations in the commercial games market influenced war planners' policy decisions regarding embedded journalists. Nevertheless, it remains a remarkable fact that the traits long-associated with war cinema—namely, spectacular, kinesthetic visuals and gripping narratives of personal heroism—had migrated to the daily reporting practices of cable news programs as well as to the design of war games (see figures 1.6 and 1.7).[61] Popular culture was searching high and low for some militainment, any militainment, to alleviate postmodern warfare's crisis of meaning. Having matured during the decade between the Gulf Wars, today's first-person shooter games bear only a passing resemblance to their pixilated forbearers thanks to considerable advances in gaming technologies including faster 3-D engines, higher resolution graphics, high-speed Internet connectivity, and better artificial intelligence.

Despite these and other upgrades, the shooter's two foundational structures endure and help explain the genre's lasting hold. Andrew Kurtz explains how the perspective ("first-person") and activity ("shooter") work together to personalize gameplay:

> Seeing the game's world through the eyes of the protagonist, the player negotiates the gaming space as he would in any computer game, through an input control such as a keyboard, mouse, or joystick. To create an even more seamless first-person environment, the player typically sees a representation of the protagonist's hands, most often armed with a range of



Figures 1.6 and 1.7. War media utilize the same visual lexicon. Soldiers and gamers breach doorways in the real world and in *Medal of Honor* (2010).

> selectable weaponry, protruding into video space from the bottom of the player's screen, roughly at hip-level relative to the protagonist's/player's "eyes." From this perspective the player moves the protagonist through a series of environments, ranging from simple room-based mazes as in *Wolfenstein 3D* and *Pathways into Darkness*, to more complex outdoor environments as in the *Marathon* and *Half-Life* series of games. Given varying degrees of narrative complexity, the ultimate goal in the first-person shooter is to traverse from point A to point B, ridding the environment of the enemies which inhabit it.[62]

As a textual apparatus, the shooter locates the player as an agent of change in a universe where his or her choices are decisive plot points for a personalized war story. As a cultural apparatus, the shooter targets political anxieties as opportunities for play and pleasure.

From the First-Person to the *First-Personal* Shooter

One of this book's guiding tenets is that the modality and meanings of video games are socially constructed and negotiated across multiple sites, from cover art, to level design, to news coverage. Another foundational premise is that as techno-cultural artifacts, games cannot help but to reflect their moment and mode of production. Meaningful cultural criticism about gameplay must accordingly make sense of titles' creative designs in light of their broader social and political contexts. "Modality," as it has been argued, is a generative term for assessing how games are broadly understood as representing and relating to reality, or how gameplay is "situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world."[63] Modality is likewise useful for thinking through how the form operates as a textual vehicle that transports players to other experiential realms.

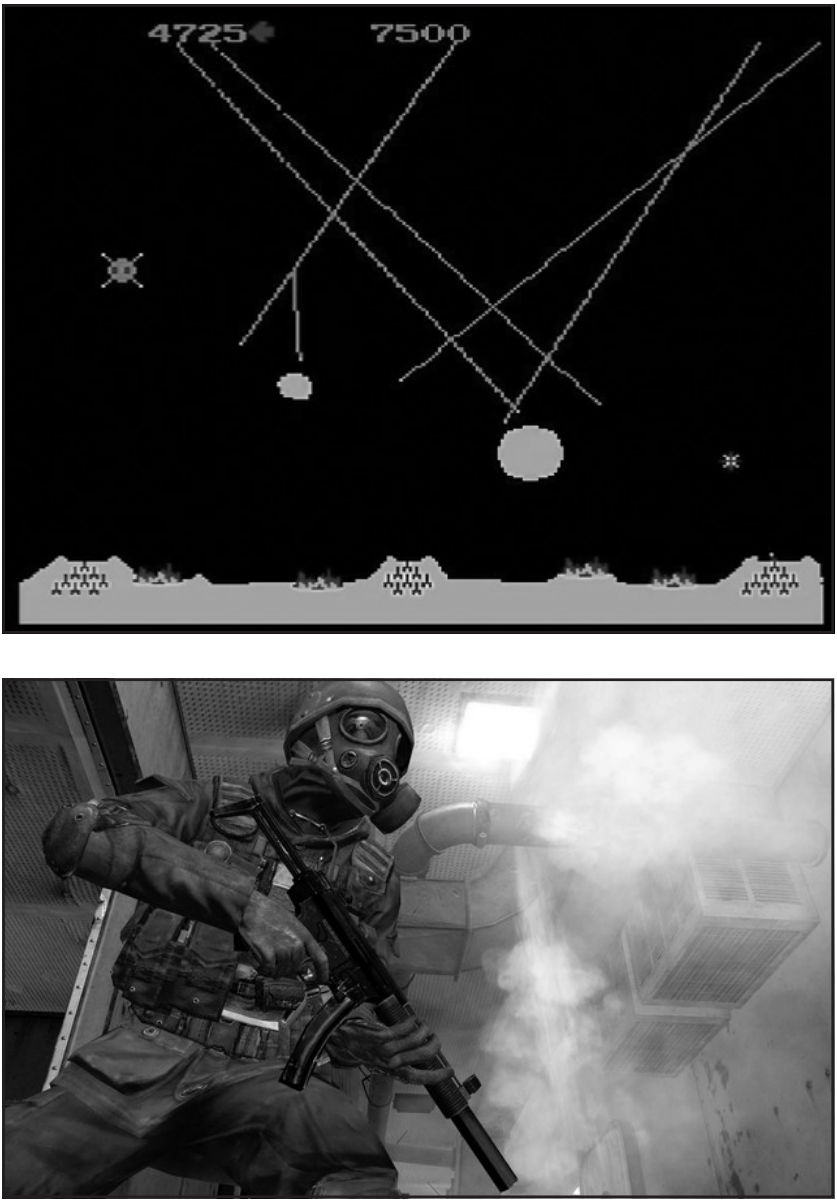
Comparing popular shooters produced decades apart will clarify the interrelated issues of modality-as-reality-claims and modality-as-transport by revealing how gaming platforms' differing capabilities to engender ludic war pleasures are both historically specific (reflecting extant technologies and cultural concerns) *and* how they possess aesthetic structures that transcend their eras (their enduring medium-specific traits). The following diachronic comparison of two well-known games is necessarily limited in scope and is not intended to represent all the

arcade coin-op shooters of the 1980s or all of the first-person shooters of the 2000s. Nevertheless, the Cold War's *Missile Command* (1980) and the War on Terror's *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007) are emblematic titles of their respective gaming epochs, and they offer in tandem a dramatic comparative snapshot for appreciating how gameplay modality is predicated on the underlying technology, which in turn, shapes designers' abilities to craft individuated ludic wars.

When placed side-by-side, *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4* bear little resemblance to the other. The former game, which Atari modeled closely after its 1978 hit *Space Invaders*,[64] presents the player with a pixilated and flat world populated exclusively by six cities and three missile defense stations (figure 1.8). The player, whose view of this world is tied to a single fixed point of view, is tasked with protecting these cities from incoming missiles that increase in number and aggression as the levels progress. (It bears quick noting that while there is perhaps more pronounced gameplay symmetry between *Battlezone* and *Call of Duty* regarding moving and shooting, *Missile Command* was selected for the comparison because it was unquestionably more popular than was *Battlezone*, and because its paranoid Cold War imaginary was more evident and affecting than was the empty, alien gamespace depicted in the vector graphics tank game.) There is no way for the player to complete *Missile Command*, because, at some point, the gamer will lose the cities to the overwhelming barrage of incoming rockets.[65] This arcade favorite contains no soundtrack and no video clips conveying a story (explaining, for instance, why the player is under attack), and there is no means of changing one's point of view within this stark world.[66]

By contrast, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is a photorealistic, multiplatform game that places one in the midst of frantic firefights using a variety of weapons, equipment, and vehicles (figure 1.9). Throughout the game's story-driven levels, the gamer plays as different soldiers fighting along numerous war fronts. *Call of Duty 4*'s production value is on par with Hollywood films, and this shooter has been lauded for its engrossing story, riveting score, and its numerous gameplay modes (including a wildly popular multiplayer mode). Given these considerable visual, aural, and gameplay differences, what could these titles possibly have in common?

In her influential and prescient *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet Murray describes cyberdrama's (a cat-



Figures 1.8 and 1.9. *Missile Command* (1980), and *Call of Duty 4* (2007).

egory that includes video games) three foremost aesthetic structures that engender user pleasure: immersion, agency, and transformation.[67] Murray's concepts, when applied to *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, reveal how ludic war design strategies have changed alongside advances in computer graphics, artificial intelligence, and processing power. At the same time, commercial games typically strive to realize Murray's structures as best they can, which lends interactive fiction a historically transcendent design continuity despite the form's considerable changes over these same years. The admittedly limited comparison that follows should be viewed in light of the previous section's argument about the contextual, discursive aspects of media modality, and how techno-cultural conditions determine and delimit what constitutes realism in war games.

Immersion

Murray's first category, *immersion*, or the experience of being transported to a simulated realm is not strictly a technological feat, but is a co-creation of player and text. She contends that because we want to experience immersion, "We focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience"; hence, digital environments present users with "new opportunities to practice this active creation of belief."[68] Key instruments in fostering these processes of belief-building are the creation of space and of story. Moreover, the avatar, or the gamer's primary representation in the mediated world, is a linchpin element that unites diegetic game spaces and game stories.

In *Call of Duty 4*, the construction of space and story is wholly different from that of *Missile Command*, and this difference directly affects how the games are experienced. For example, in *Call of Duty 4*, the player moves his or her soldier through three-dimensional spaces, overcoming a variety of physical and tactical obstacles, and must cooperate with non-player characters to defeat enemies in a number of dramatic scenarios. In *Missile Command*, the player aims a reticle at the cascading rockets that fill the sky over a vulnerable, two-dimensional megalopolis. There is no personalized avatar or any human form in this game because of the era's computational limitations. Video game scholar and historian

Mark J. P. Wolf argues, like Murray, that the player-character is among the most important screen elements in video games, and that player-characters are either "surrogate-based" (there is a third-person view of one's avatar) or "implied" (you share the character's perspective as in a first-person shooter game, or there may only be a manageable interface for controlling the world as in the *Civilization* or *SimCity* franchises).[69]

The two war games clearly handle space and narrative differently, and yet, the player's foremost screen proxies in both games are the crosshairs. These "implied player-characters" are informational markers communicating where their gunshots (in *Call of Duty*) or surface-to-air rockets (in *Missile Command*) will strike.[70] But in *Call of Duty*, the game's engrossing, 3-D spatial design and narrative sophistication cultivate detailed, implied player-characters. By contrast, there are few elements in *Missile Command* hailing the gamer as an embodied defense operator in that 2-D world: there is no military brass imploring the player to aim better, no cinematic scenes relaying a dramatic backstory, and no fellow humans inhabiting the world. And because *Missile Command* is without additional immersive elements like narrative and 3-D space that interpellate the gamer as a diegetic being, the arcade shooter's abstract modality markers engender a comparatively less immersive ludic war experience.[71]

Agency

Murray's second cyberdramatic structure is *agency*, or the "satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices."[72] Agency is at the heart of the interactivity definition debates and is the key characteristic that gives new media its participatory quality. Simply put, agency puts the "play" in "gameplay." With respect to most FPS games, agency is generally expressed in terms of moving and shooting. But meaningful gameplay is more than just seeing the effects of one's joystick movements or having one's mouse clicks appear on screen. As Murray notes,

> Agency, then, goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savored for its own sake, it is offered to a limited degree in traditional art forms but is more commonly available in

> the structured activities we call games. Therefore, when we move narrative to a computer, we move it to a realm already shaped by the structures of games.[73]

The reason why games, and especially narrative-driven games, excel at promoting a sense of agency is that the structured activity gives players prompts for meaningful role-playing and opportunities for exercising intentionality in a fictional world.[74]

The most common game type and—not incidentally—the earliest form of narrative involve "agon, or [the] contest between opponents."[75] This is why, according to Murray, the "simple shoot-'em-up videogame . . . belongs to the extremely broad dramatic tradition that gives us both the boxing match and the Elizabethan revenge play."[76] *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4* are likewise part of that same contest tradition; the gamer staves off an unseen opponent's missile volleys in one and eliminates terrorists in close-quarters combat in the other. Murray continues: "Because guns and weaponlike interfaces offer such easy immersion and such a direct sense of agency and because violent aggression is so strong a part of human nature, shoot-'em-ups are here to stay. But that does not mean that simplistic violence is the limit of the form."[77] We should add that simplistic violence is also not the limit of the genre. Although long-hamstrung with simplistic representations of violence, all war games are not de facto "shoot-'em-ups" (although, some combat games certainly deserve the pejorative label). Explosive violence figures prominently in both *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, and agency is exercised primarily at the business ends of their virtual guns. But that obvious observation misses a larger point. The virtual gunfire means something different in each game because of the surrounding narrative structures, aesthetics, and play contexts. For example, there is a detailed and complex journey afoot in *Call of Duty 4* that gives narrative and ethical motivation to the in-game actions. There is no such narrative framework in *Missile Command*, making it a less visceral virtual war experience.

The gunplay is predictably different in these military shooters as well. In *Missile Command*, the player-turned-defense operator can neither traverse space nor change weapons. Even as the player is charged with becoming more accurate and efficient from his or her fixed firing position(s), the ending in *Missile Command* is always the same. No mat-

ter the player's skill, there will be a nuclear apocalypse with every quarter dropped into the arcade cabinet. *Call of Duty* players, meanwhile, deploy a variety of guns for a variety of strategic ends: from using shotguns in close-quarters combat, to firing rocket launchers to eliminate enemy vehicles, to using silenced sniper rifles on reconnaissance runs. Players must abide by the level's specific dictates, but they are relatively free to engage the opposing force using whatever weapons they have at their disposal. The ability to choose where and when to fire the weapon of one's choosing ties the player's desires to the game's objectives, producing a sense of personal investment. Let me be clear on this point, as I do not want to overstate my case: It is not that in-game actions are de facto signs of player agency or are empirical evidence of interactivity (which they certainly can or could be); it is rather that game actions can be deeply meaningful if the gaming apparatus (again, understood broadly) creates an environment that reinforces the fiction of the synthetic world *and* connects to gamers' lived experiences. The Cold War political environment informed the ludic experiences of arcade-goers playing *Missile Command* in the 1980s, just as the War on Terror colors the gaming experiences of today's *Call of Duty* players. Although the latter game's visual, narrative, and control schemes engender a comparatively complex and customizable text, it does not follow that simpler games are unaffecting. Indeed, our liminal states of play can be so personally and profoundly moving that these experiences can change the way we look at ourselves and the mediated and nonmediated worlds around us.

Transformation

Transformation is Murray's third characteristic pleasure of cyberdrama, and it refers to interactive fiction's ability to offer users multiple imaginary roles and opportunities to see a process (or set of processes) unfold in varying ways. "In computer games we do not settle for one life, or even for one civilization; when things go wrong or when we just want a different version of the same experience, we go back for a replay."[78] The ability to immerse oneself in a synthetic world and act on objects, thereby transforming that space and its stories to varying degrees (and to do so over multiple journeys) is an immensely pleasurable sensation that is rarely available (or as available) in other media arts. Murray argues: "Because

the computer is a procedural medium, it does not just describe or observe behavioral patterns, the way printed text or moving photography does; it embodies and executes them. And as a participatory medium, it allows us to collaborate in the performance."[79] By participating in the game's processes and algorithmic procedures, we become part of the game, part of the story. Murray wisely cautions that this attachment and performed enactment is not some neutral state of being, but that embodied experiences can contribute to the social good or collective ill.[80]

Games are a potentially transformative medium because they allow us to consider the ramifications of a variety of actions, many of which are regularly denied to us in real life. One of the foremost events in war games is killing others and experiencing our own death. Given all that has been said about *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4*, it is not surprising that they differ in terms of how they represent the gamer's demise. In her popular *Joystick Nation*, video game critic and historian J. C. Herz recalls her feelings around her inevitable defeat in *Missile Command* in a way that speaks to the paradoxical pleasures of knowing when and how one meets one's virtual maker.

> The most intense thing about *Missile Command*, though, was this weird crazy moment near the end, when the ICBMs were raining down and you knew you were just about to lose it, that was totally euphoric. Because you knew that you were going to die, that you were within seconds of everything going black. You're gonna die in three seconds. You're gonna die at this instant. You're dying. You're dead. And then you get to watch all the pretty explosions. And after the fireworks display, you get to press the restart button, and you're alive again, until the next collision with your own mortality. You're not just playing with colored lights. You're playing with the concept of death.[81]

Missile Command, which "originally grew out of a military simulation to see how many nuclear warheads a human radar operator could track before overload set in,"[82] is a remarkable achievement because it playfully commodified the Cold War anxiety of a nuclear holocaust.

Call of Duty 4 also plays with death, but it does so in a more personal manner than *Missile Command*'s cold remove. Upon being killed in a multiplayer game, the player is treated to a "killcam" replay that shows

how that player was killed. Yet *Call of Duty 4*'s most intimate and moving depictions of death are conveyed in its single-player narrative campaign. It is in these depictions of death that the ludic differences between the titles are most pronounced. This final point of comparison also primes us for thinking about the range of pleasures that shooters cultivate (including hegemonic, popular, critical) and their political import.

The *Modern Warfare* games (that is, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* [2007], *Modern Warfare 2* [2009], and *Modern Warfare 3* [2011]) are emblematic post-9/11 military shooters that model in striking narrative and ludic terms the political need for personal sacrifice—a point I explore at length next chapter. The first death scene of note in the series occurs during *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s opening credit sequence when the player is located in the body of Yasir Al-Fulani, the fictional president of an unnamed country in the Middle East. Opening in media res during a separatist-led military coup d'état, kidnappers force Al-Fulani-the-player into the backseat of a car and, as the car travels down the city streets, the player witnesses an urban space ravaged by militants who conduct public executions and home invasions. The player is then dragged before the opposition leader, Khaled Al-Asad, in a public square. Al-Asad addresses a small video camera before turning around to execute Al-Fulani with a pistol (figure 1.10).

The second scene of note occurs immediately after the gamer—who is at that point playing as helicopter passenger U.S. Marine Sergeant Paul Jackson—is knocked out of the sky by an exploding nuclear device. When the player-character awakens, Jackson stumbles from the wreckage to find a decimated and irradiated Middle Eastern city devoid of life. Jackson-the-player only has moments to explore the wasteland before he too dies of his wounds (figure 1.11).

Players are powerless to do anything but to bear witness to their virtual deaths in these levels. Even the seemingly ever-present guns of this first-person shooter game are absent, and with them, the player's ability to intervene in these sequences. These moments are also especially powerful because they are told through the first-person perspective. Alexander Galloway rightly notes how the protracted first-person view operates differently in film than it does in games: "Where film uses the subjective shot to represent a problem with identification, games use the subjective shot to *create* identification."[83] In these two moments, players experience

Figures 1.10 and 1.11. The player-character's views of death during a public execution and from nuclear fallout in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

the circumstances and causes of their deaths; they see their executioner's gunflash and the mushroom cloud from ground zero. These scenes are viscerally affecting and are, ironically, potentially personally transformative moments precisely because they present fates that the gamer cannot escape. This curious design choice, which is examined in closer detail in the next chapter, inverts and short-circuits the agency typically enjoyed in shooters. But the absence of textual transformation (that is, of the ability to change the game narrative) in these cases does not foreclose absolutely the potential for personal transformation. After all, like agency and immersion, transformation is not some impersonal activity. Rather, the three aesthetic structures of cyberdrama wield their power by interfacing and interacting with players and their extant cultural concerns, such as non-state terrorists and WMDs. *Missile Command* and *Call of Duty 4* play differently with anxieties about an outside nuclear attack, be it by an unseen aggressor or a non-state terrorist group.

Post-9/11 shooters offer players affecting gameplay experiences that are produced by immersive environments, photorealistic visuals, engrossing narratives, complex avatar controls, and digital worlds that can be transformed again and again. I do not wish to suggest that games like *Call of Duty 4* engender a qualitatively *better* ludic war experience than more graphically abstract games like *Missile Command*. These are, however, most certainly *different* ludic wars. Marie-Laure Ryan strikes this useful distinction when comparing games across eras:

> Through the increasing attention devoted to the sensorial representation of the game-world, the pleasure of modern games is as much a matter of "being there" as a matter of "doing things." From a strategic point of view the newer games (*Doom*, *Myst*, or *Quake*) are not superior to the old ones (*PacMan* or *Tetris*), but they are infinitely more immersive.[84]

That is, while one game is not more inherently artistic than the other, *Call of Duty 4*'s interactive war story speaks more forcefully to post-9/11 cultural anxieties than *Missile Command*'s non-narrative (or spectacle-based) gameplay does to the Cold War crisis because the former is, ultimately, a more sophisticated piece of media. The changes in how ludic war is produced—from classic arcade shooters like *Missile Command* to multimillion dollar titles like *Call of Duty 4*—represent the transition

from the first-person to the *first-personal* shooter. Furthermore, this evolution of form explains why the gameplay modality of military shooters resonates with the political anxieties spawned by postmodern war in ways that other war entertainment does not, and perhaps, cannot.

Towards a New Modality of Ludic War Play

> The towers are gone now, reduced to bloody rubble, along with all hopes for Peace in Our Time, in the United States or any other country. Make no mistake about it: We are At War now—with somebody—and we will stay At War with that mysterious Enemy for the rest of our lives.
> —Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson writing on September 12, 2001[85]

The foregoing comparison of *Missile Command* to *Call of Duty 4* is intended neither to gloss over the multitude of technology and game design innovations that occurred during the nearly three decades separating these titles, nor is it to suggest that less complex games are unable to engender lasting and evocative experiences. Instead, the side-by-side comparison illustrates how gameplay modality presents scholars with a means of tracking the experiential "moving target" that is ludic war and its pleasures. *Missile Command*'s highly pixilated and impersonal battl-escape looks nothing like *Call of Duty*'s intimately presented, near-future war story. Yet the games possess structural components that put them in a historic, industrial, and aesthetic dialogue with each other. Media modality reminds us that there are, after all, important continuities of form connecting these dissimilar looking shooters.[86]

Missile Command's story-less and low-resolution depiction of a nuclear Cold War turned hot is abstract; its narrative (such as it is) is clearly allegorical. The game invites players to spend quarter after quarter to see how long they can defer the inevitable apocalypse while imagining what a bleak future might look like. Despite its simple presentation, *Missile Command*'s ludic war nevertheless produces lasting visions of Cold War destruction as Barkan's poetry at the chapter's opening attests. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is not allegorical, however. It is hauntingly and graphically specific.

We should remember that in addition to generating gaming pleasures for individual players in narrative campaigns (or those in multiplayer sessions), military shooters also wield popular, global influence. This is where modality-as-transport (this chapter's second definition of modality) intersects with modality-as-reality claims (the first understanding of modality) in producing a shared sense of reality, and why games have broader implications for how citizens play with a post-9/11 war imaginary.

The shooters examined in this and in the following chapters convey a certain received wisdom regarding the righteousness of American military interventions, in large part because these commercial goods are *not* government produced. These cultural products wield what Joseph Nye calls "soft power":

> Soft power is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from hard power, the ability to use the carrots and sticks of economic and military might to make others follow your will. Both hard and soft power are important in the war on terrorism, but attraction is much cheaper than coercion, and an asset that needs to be nourished.[87]

Gameplay modality, understood simultaneously as a claim about reality and as a form of textual transport, demonstrates that the soft power of fiction can operate in the service of the hard power of the state by making war fun. The next three chapters further unpack this connection between modality and pleasure by focusing on a range of post-9/11 military shooters. Chapter 2 analyzes how the *Modern Warfare* franchise's immersive perspective and complex narratives produce a mode of player subjectivity that justifies the sacrifice of soldiers and citizens on behalf of the post-9/11 state. Chapter 3 examines how the Tom Clancy–brand shooters transform players into cyborg warriors who save the homeland through their maneuvers and perpetuate a conservative vision of American exceptionalism that showcases the tragedies of failing to act swiftly if not preemptively. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the pleasurable control and affective dissonances of drone piloting in a sampling of military games. This final text-focused chapter is a useful reminder that military shooters can be ambivalent and perhaps even critical in design, and need not only engender jingoistic hegemonic pleasures.

2

The First-Personal Shooter

Narrative Subjectivity and Sacrificial Citizenship in the Modern Warfare *Series*

> True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside. It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.
> —Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*[1]

Introduction

I argued in the last chapter that the military shooter's modality of play enables it to respond in medium-specific ways to the numerous anxieties—political, cultural, existential—introduced by postmodern conflict. I also argued that the interactive entertainment industry's generational changes in gaming technologies and design innovations have likewise shaped producers' techniques when commodifying warfare. The drive toward more fully realizing the aesthetic ideals of agency, immersion, and transformation has resulted in more intimate and personalized ludic war experiences over this same time, making possible a ludic subjectivity that represents the transition from the first-person to the first-*personal* shooter.

The current chapter turns its attention to better understanding the manner by which the modern military shooter cultivates its gameplay attractions. The post-9/11 shooter allows players to *interface* with a counterinsurgency imaginary that they can only bear witness to in other militainment. I choose the word "interface" purposefully for several reasons. For one, interface denotes the general way that games play intertextually with popular notions and depictions of warfare, including

how the control interfaces of modern weapon systems are represented and simulated in popular media. A second reason for emphasizing interface is the specific manner in which the *Modern Warfare* trilogy—*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), and *Modern Warfare 3* (2011)—locates the gamer in the virtual boots of numerous soldiers and civilians across its interconnected narratives. In playing through the trilogy's single-player campaigns, the gamer becomes a virtual interlocutor, narratively interfacing with stories of heroism and sacrifice. Moreover, these games' changing perspectives give the player a uniquely transcendental view of the martial action that responds to the two major dilemmas of postmodern war discussed in the last chapter: its perspectival distance and its political meaninglessness.

The perspective that dominates the *Modern Warfare* series is that of the skilled soldier. However, the *Modern Warfare* titles are particularly noteworthy among shooters for placing players in different war theaters as soldiers *and* civilians who fight and die. These shifting points of view engender a paradoxical subjectivity that is at once situated within individual battles and also transcends space and time. This modality of war play models for the player the "sacrificial citizenship" that has come to characterize post-9/11 American political identity, a subject position that situates U.S. citizens as de facto conscripts for a war that may ask, at any moment, the greatest of personal sacrifices.

This chapter begins by arguing that the games industry's push toward crafting a personalized narrative subjectivity resonates with the United States's counterinsurgency doctrine. I then analyze how the *Modern Warfare* titles, in telling their fictional war stories, engender a virtualized sacrificial citizenship that connects recent post-9/11 war efforts to a Cold War past. Finally, by granting players intimate battlefield views and performative liberties not afforded by other war "fare," the series engenders empathetic bonds between gamers and their sacrificial avatars, effectively rationalizing their deaths as necessary blood sacrifices to ensure the political health of the republic.

The Narrative Subjectivity of Counterinsurgency

Technology ruled the day during the first Persian Gulf War. Saddam Hussein's troops and armored divisions were routed easily by

the overwhelming power of the United States's networked forces and advanced weapons systems spawned by the post–Cold War's Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The RMA (or, as it is sometimes called "the Transformation") maintains that the U.S. armed forces could become swifter and more powerful by deploying advances in communication and computer technologies, essentially turning them into force multipliers in conventional warfare. This was not the case for the post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, as these conventional technologies were proven insufficient and ineffective when faced with the asymmetrical tactics of militants and insurgents. The RMA eventually gave way to counterinsurgency as a defense strategy, which downplayed technology and emphasized instead the role of culture in winning wars.[2]

Counterinsurgency (or COIN as it is known in the military and in think-tank circles) is a military doctrine that calls for the United States to leverage its considerable technological superiority in failed political states (that is, those harboring terrorists) alongside cultural outreach and nation-building projects with the aim of achieving military and political victory for "the long war."[3] Counterinsurgency is thus a distinct ideological lens. It is a way of viewing global conflict and the United States's central place in adjudicating and moderating that conflict. Citing General David Petraeus's famed *Counterinsugency* field manual, which outlines the military and cultural strategies needed to face down threats posed by asymmetrical warfare, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that COIN presents the long war as nothing less than a global cultural war. He states: "Cultural war, *with visuality playing a central role*, takes 'culture' as the means, location, and object of warfare. . . . In the era of United States global policing, war is counterinsurgency, and the means of counterinsurgency are cultural. War is culture."[4] Just as visuality emerges as key to the counterinsurgency approach, it accordingly becomes essential to understanding how military shooters produce their affective experiences by building upon and conveying beliefs about U.S. warfighting.

Visuality is a historically specific and contingent mode of vision; perhaps a more useful phrasing for our purposes would be to say that visuality is a kind of media modality. Vision and visuality are related terms, though they are not synonymous. The former is a physical *ability*; the latter is a cultural *practice*. "Visuality . . . [orders and narrates] the chaotic events of modern life in intelligible, visualized fashion."[5] Visuality is

a discourse. It is a way of organizing personal sensoria into causal order whereby they can be made intelligible vis-à-vis some interpretive framework. The social construction of visuality makes it, like the modality of media, a site of struggle for meaning and social power.

If war is culture, as Mirzoeff claims, and modern war is visual culture,[6] then postmodern war is simulational culture.[7] Moreover, the visual modality of the shooter is the idealized military visuality of simulational culture. This is because games like the *Modern Warfare* series, as well as the Tom Clancy–brand shooters examined in the next chapter, model how military-grade technologies function in the post–Cold War era and narrate how counterinsurgency interventions are launched or might need to be launched. It is not hyperbole to call the first-person shooter the *ideal* visual modality of the early twenty-first century. In fact, Mirzoeff warns us against dismissing the congruencies between counterinsurgency efforts and commercial shooters. He states:

> In the section of the counterinsurgency manual intended to be read by officers in the field, visuality is defined as the necessity of knowing the map by heart and being able to place oneself in the map at any time. This mapping is fully cognitive, including "the people, topography, economy, history, and culture of their area of operations" . . . . The counterinsurgent thus transforms his or her tactical disadvantage into strategic mastery by rendering unfamiliar territory into a simulacrum of the video game's "fully actionable space" . . . . *When soldiers refer to action as being like a video game, as they frequently do, it is not a metaphor*. By turning diverse aspects of foreign life into a single narrative, the counterinsurgent feels in control of the situation as if a player in a first-person shooter video game. The commander thereby feels himself to be in the map, just as the game player is emotively "in" the game.[8]

The first-person visuals of weapons made famous during the Persian Gulf War were an aesthetic precursor to the post-9/11 shooter's immersive visualization of counterinsurgency. But, as was argued last chapter, the key design innovation of the shooter's modality is not some dramatic graphical upgrade or play mechanic. Rather, it is the adept creation of *narrative subjectivity* that sets the shooter apart from its interactive predecessors and other forms of militainment.

Narrative subjectivity and war visualization are inextricably linked concepts for the post-9/11 military shooter. The visualization of war is the ability to see the battlefield in all of its complexity. It involves understanding how various war units interact as one does when moving knights, rooks, and bishops on a chessboard. "Visualization is the key leadership tactic that holds together the disparate components of counterinsurgency."[9] But visualization encompasses more than visuals alone; it is more than dispassionate and quantifiable battlefield tactics. The visualization of war also includes understanding the rationales that motivate military interventions and the risks they pose to blood and treasure. And here is where shooters deviate notably from prior war games. For post-9/11 shooters, the visualization of ludic war means empathizing with soldiers' and civilians' stories of sacrifice that enable America to wield its political power in the new century. By linking the gamer's actions with the unfolding counterinsurgency narrative, the war stories on screen effectively become the gamer's stories. In the case of the *Modern Warfare* games, because the player experiences these campaigns as international soldiers engaged in a range of activities, the changing subjectivity further implicates the gamer in the narrative action by engendering a paradoxical vantage point that is at once situated in individual campaigns and is able to transcend space, time, and singular points of view. The gameplay action is personal (as in, the enemy is shooting at me, and I am shooting at them) *and* interpersonal (that is, I am walking in another avatar's boots, and another, and then another . . .).

Mirzoeff posits that "counterinsurgency has become a digitally mediated version of imperialist techniques to produce legitimacy."[10] Commercial military shooters are a paradigmatic part of this legitimacy-producing cultural effort due to their unique ability to simulate what counterinsurgency efforts might look and feel like. We see this appear in the *Modern Warfare* games where the gamer plays as multiple characters, and in the Clancy-brand shooters examined in Chapter 3, where cutting-edge military weapon systems and battlefield tactics promise to protect the homeland from terrorists and perpetuate American exceptionalism as the reigning post-9/11 political belief.

The first Gulf War was compared to graphically abstracted and storyless gamespaces. It was the "Nintendo War." It was an 8-bit war. But the second Gulf War was a mediated event through and through.[11] Unlike

the pixilated and person-less battlefields typical of gaming titles from the 1980s, the first-person shooters of the 2000s offer immersive and customizable theaters of war. These virtual wars are no 2-D, 8-bit affairs. They are complex, 3-D synthetic worlds. They possess soldiers who yell and scream, and bleed and die, only to be digitally resurrected when the levels are replayed. By the time that the U.S. military had returned to Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein in 2003, the first-person shooter was well on its way to presenting players with a new modality of ludic war play.

Post-9/11 military shooters were and remain marketplace successes because their photorealistic visuals and immersive stories sync with what producers and players believe combat to look and feel like. Moreover, these narrative and procedural elements engender a virtual sense of patriotism. Conservative political philosopher Roger Scruton calls patriotism "a *natural* love of country, countrymen [sic] and the culture that unites them."[12] For Scruton and similarly minded thinkers, patriotism is an essential building block of the nation-state; it is a social bond that unites a nation's imagined community of citizens across space and time. Patriotism is not some staid encyclopedia entry, but a lived and felt energy. The *Modern Warfare* games engender a sense of virtual patriotism that creates a bond between the gamer and the avatars. Recall that counterinsurgency is a powerful policy concept because it theorizes how to face down asymmetrical threats through the deep appreciation of the tactics, strategies, and personal costs extending beyond any single battle. The *Modern Warfare* games model for players the human sacrifices that modern counterinsurgencies demand and reify the practices by which soldiers and civilian are transformed into patriots. The remainder of this chapter examines how this best-selling series generates its affective hold or, to borrow novelist Tim O'Brien's phrase, this chapter will now examine how the *Modern Warfare* games make "the stomach believe."

Sacrificial Citizenship in the *Modern Warfare* Series

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare was the first game of the storied franchise to deviate from its established World War II setting. The game was a popular and critical success, selling over 17 million units across multiple consoles and receiving almost universal praise from game reviewers and critics.[13] Two years later its sequel, titled simply *Modern Warfare*

2 (2009), was released to more tepid reviews though greater fanfare while moving nearly 25 million units. And since its release in 2011, *Modern Warfare 3* has sold an astounding 30 million units.[14] The *Modern Warfare* games owe much of their success to the *Call of Duty* franchise's established track record, including popular online multiplayer modes that pit gamers against one another or in teams in fast-paced, objective-oriented matches. The *Modern Warfare* games' single-player narratives—criticized by some critics and journalists for their relatively short campaigns (each takes about six hours to complete)—are structurally similar to the previous *Call of Duty* installments insofar as they drop players in the boots of recurring characters along several war fronts. While this mechanic is hardly original to the *Call of Duty* franchise, *Modern Warfare* possesses a textual potency absent from its World War II predecessors.

In the previous *Call of Duty* offerings, the gamer plays as international soldiers (American, British, Soviet, Canadian, Polish) fighting in a superbly documented global war. This is not the case for *Modern Warfare*'s fictional, near-future battles. In these games, the player's Special Forces soldiers battle to contain an outbreak of modern-day horrors. Virtually fighting today's non-state terrorists in the *Modern Warfare* games taps into a different register of political anxieties than does fighting yesteryear's Nazis in World War II shooters. For instance, concerns regarding World War II gameplay largely revolve around issues of historical accuracy (as King and Krzywinska rightly note): Did the battle unfold in this manner? Are these uniforms and weapons accurately rendered? This is not the foremost modality concern for titles daring to model near-future conflicts. World War II–based militainment is also generally thought to be beyond moral suspicion. This is certainly not the case for the War on Terror or properties looking to capitalize on it. *Modern Warfare* and similar games must make repeatedly a special effort to justify the sacrifice of American lives and, by extension, to justify playing with these topics. The *Modern Warfare* games make their textual justifications in dramatic fashion.

The *Modern Warfare* single-player campaigns contain serpentine storylines and numerous characters, making their elegant summarization difficult. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* centers on the multifront counterinsurgency efforts of the British Special Air Service (SAS), a Spe-

cial Forces unit of the British Army, and the American United States Marine Corps (USMC) in tamping down an international conspiracy waged by Russian Ultranationalists and Islamic separatists operating in an unnamed Middle Eastern country. Led by Imran Zakhaev, the Russian Ultranationalists have financed a military coup d'état in that unnamed country, allowing Khaled Al-Asad and his Islamic insurgents to overthrow the local government. The American forces invade the Middle Eastern country to capture or kill Al-Asad, while the British forces pursue his Russian financiers. The gamer plays as different SAS and USMC soldiers attempting to return the Middle Eastern country to its elected leadership and to prevent Zakhaev's group from launching nuclear-armed ICBMs at the United States. The game ends when USMC and SAS forces kill Zakhaev and detonate the ICBMs over the Atlantic.

The events of *Modern Warfare 2* begin a few years after the first, once Imran Zakhaev has been lionized as a political martyr and the Ultranationalists have gained control of the Russian government. The player again assumes control of American and British soldiers in multiple theaters of war—this time as "Task Force 141," a multinational counterterrorist unit, and the U.S. Army Rangers. Vladimir Makarov, one of Zakhaev's former lieutenants, has been spearheading numerous terrorist attacks across Europe and has succeeded in framing an American special agent in a civilian massacre at a Russian airport. This heinous act prompts Russia to declare war on the United States. Task Force 141 is charged with traversing the globe for evidence that will exonerate the United States in the airport massacre, while the Rangers defend Virginia and Washington, D.C., against invading Russian forces. After a series of plot twists that reveal American and Russian military leaders to be duplicitous, power-hungry warmongers, the Rangers save Washington, D.C., and Task Force 141 eliminates the traitorous military leaders.

Modern Warfare 3 begins with U.S. forces repelling a Russian assault on New York City. A few months later, Makarov kidnaps Russian President Boris Vorshevsky to obtain nuclear launch codes and to position himself as the next Russian president. Meanwhile, Makarov's soldiers transport large caches of chemical weapons into Europe's largest cities to weaken them for Russian annexation. The chemical attacks destroy European defenses, and the United States springs to their aid. Eventually, an American Delta Force team rescues the Vorshevsky family from

a Siberian diamond mine. With Vorshevsky back in charge, the hostilities between Russia and the United States cease. In the game's final act, American specialists locate Makarov hiding in a large hotel on the Arabian Peninsula. Following a massive assault on the hotel, Makarov is finally slain.

In a postmortem of its development history, *Call of Duty 4*'s lead designer, Zied Rieke, and technical art director, Michael Boon, discuss the creative liberties that the Infinity Ward studio took with the initial *Modern Warfare* story. They state:

> Modern-day warfare is very emotional for people, which is both good and bad. We really wanted to avoid referencing any current, real wars, and one aspect of the gameplay that we didn't want to change from previous titles was the idea of two large opposing forces with similar numbers and technology. To facilitate that, we invented a war with several fronts, primarily involving a group splintered from the Russian army, with a secondary front in the Middle East.[15]

They continue later:

> Story is something we've always put a little effort into, but by and large we've prioritized it below other aspects of our games. Moving away from WWII and into a fictional war removed that option. We spent hours brainstorming with military advisors, trying to come up with a credible scenario that would involve a large-scale war, and then weeks interviewing writers to find someone who could help us craft a narrative that would draw the player in. The result, while not Shakespearean, has drawn almost universal praise. We feel like we have a new skill, and we intend to build on it in our future projects.[16]

It is certainly debatable that the first game's story represents a "credible scenario," and the sensational narratives of *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* stretch any claims of credibility to the breaking point. However, the designers correctly note that "modern warfare is very different from more traditional warfare in that direct confrontations between huge armies are relatively rare. Instead, you have a huge variety of different types of low-intensity conflicts and special forces

missions."[17] The titles reimagine a counterinsurgency wherein the fighting is between Western nations and their well-funded and well-organized enemies. That is, the two sides in this fictional war function as military equals. The choice to set military equals against one another in the current era is an adroit sleight of hand that enables the player's virtual war experience to be politically and ludically satisfying (the enemy is an equally matched adversary), as well as resemble the smaller-scale engagements players have come to expect from post-Cold War interventions. In actuality, however, the game and its sequels more closely represent conventional, not asymmetrical, warfare (even if the game's levels are largely built around Special Forces missions). This conflation explains part of the games' ideological appeal. *Modern Warfare*'s scenario is politically satisfying because it recasts the Manichean political dynamics of World War II (Allies vs. Axis powers) and the Cold War (the United States versus the Soviet Union) in the post-9/11 era, when such divisions are rarely that clear and military clashes are generally quite lopsided. This design choice also makes sense given the franchise's successful track record with its World War II titles. There is, however, a more consequential mystification that helps explain the games' popularity.

Modern Warfare's campaigns focus on the gamer's combat in a contemporary setting, and the visual modality that dominates the games is that of the skilled soldier. But there exist pronounced moments in the games' single-player campaigns that stand apart from the rest—moments when the player is prevented from acting as the skilled and heroic soldier. At first blush, these scenes seemingly throw the hectic combat into stark relief by invoking postmodern warfare's existential and political anxieties—in particular, the dehumanizing distance of war machinery's technological mediation and the epoch's political crisis of meaning. These moments are experientially arresting, literally. In these scenes, which I shall describe shortly, players are unable to move or defend themselves as they normally might and thereby give the *Modern Warfare* titles a momentary sense of moral and political sophistication. These scenes hint that "truth" on the battlefield is a complex and elusive entity and that determining war's "winners and losers" is never as clear as the games' scoring mechanisms might suggest.

But like the design conceit that transforms asymmetrical counterinsurgency into a conventional and symmetrical war, these scenes also perform a textual sleight of hand. Ironically, it is precisely these scenes' radical deviation from the banal gunplay that rationalizes and legitimizes the games' principal activities. The narrative moments examined presently, which I am labeling moments of *sacrificial citizenship*, underscore the need for exercising and maintaining military vigilance by personally visualizing and experiencing horrors that are largely absent from non-shooter militainment.

Modern Warfare's shifting subjectivity engenders a pronounced sense of "sacrificial citizenship" that is a key affective element in the games' pro-counterinsurgency ideology. Sacrificial citizenship has not been thoroughly theorized to date, and appears sporadically across a range of scholarship. Typically, it refers to a core element of American political identity that demands that the rights of citizenship be affirmed and that the political health of the U.S. body politic be reinvigorated through periodic and voluntary self-sacrifice. This sacrifice can be figurative or literal in nature. For instance, legal scholar Paul Kahn discusses how courtroom judges model a form of sacrificial citizenship when they do not rule by individual expertise but rather "give themselves up to the law."[18] Communication scholar Carolyn Marvin invokes sacrificial citizenship when discussing the American flag's symbolic power and public debates around flag burning. Marvin argues that the American flag is an "unacknowledged but potent symbol of the body . . . a special kind of body sanctified by sacrifice."[19] In these quite different cases, sacrificial citizenship involves a form of discursive transfer or symbolic exchange with the physical self. The judge is not the law, but a vessel for law. The flag is not the soldier, but an incarnation of those who have sacrificed their bodies for the nation. Sacrificial citizenship in the *Modern Warfare* games likewise involves a virtual exchange on both sides of the screen; it happens as characters' selfless actions are connected across multiple storylines, and sacrificial citizenship is enacted when the gamer plays through the characters' sacrifices. These textual elements work in tandem, producing an experiential modality that works to offset the mediated distance and the crisis of meaning posed by postmodern warfare. I turn now to examine these ludic paroxysms.

Closing the Perspectival Distance in "No Russian," "Second Sun," and "Davis Family Vacation"

The notable soldier and civilian deaths in the *Modern Warfare* games are scripted events, meaning that no matter how well one plays, certain characters cannot be saved because these deaths are part of the games' storylines. As noted in the last chapter, the first *Modern Warfare* game provides intimate scenes of one's own virtual deaths. These startling moments include the broadcast execution of overthrown President Al-Fulani and the protracted death of U.S. Marine Paul Jackson following a small nuclear blast. The player is prevented from doing much more than looking around while suffering through these characters' final moments. *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* continue in this same vein, and the series has at least three levels that invite closer scrutiny: "No Russian," "Second Sun," and "Davis Family Vacation."

The "No Russian" level contains the most controversial machinations of plot in the *Modern Warfare* series, and arguably that of the entire *Call of Duty* franchise.[20] This early level places the gamer at the center of the airport massacre that is the catalyst for the conflict between Russia and the United States. The gamer plays as undercover CIA agent Joseph Allen who is tasked with infiltrating a Russian terrorist cell led by Vladimir Makarov. During the elevator ride to the terminal, the terrorist leader instructs his team (including the player, Allen) not to speak any Russian once they begin shooting lest they reveal their true nationality. The elevator doors open and the five-man squad opens fire on the travelers making their way through the security checkpoint and in the terminal beyond (figure 2.1).

The game narrative goes to considerable lengths to justify and punish Allen-the-player's participation in the slaughter. The sacrificial citizenship that is modeled in this level is twofold: Allen compromises his morality for a shot at bringing Makarov to justice, and he ultimately loses his life for the botched mission. Even before the player is transported into the Allen character, the interstitial cut-scene[21] that plays while the level loads establishes the need for the agent's sacrifice.

The "No Russian" loading scene begins as a wide shot of the Earth as it might be seen through a surveillance satellite in the Defense Department's imagined Global Information Grid, which observes military hot

Figure 2.1. The player participates in an airport massacre in *Modern Warfare 2*.

spots in Europe and Africa. In this segment's voiceover, General Shepherd explains the dire need for Allen's patriotic service. The satellite images give way to digitized newspaper clippings and other data summarizing Makarov's long history of cruelty. The general states to Allen, the player:

> Yesterday you were a soldier on the front lines. But today front lines are history. Uniforms are relics. The war rages everywhere. And there will be casualties. This man Makarov is fighting his own war and he has no rules. No boundaries. He doesn't flinch at torture, human trafficking, or genocide. He's not loyal to a flag or a country or any set of ideals. He trades blood for money. . . . He's your new best friend. You don't want to know what it's cost already to put you next to him. It will cost you a piece of yourself. It will cost nothing compared to everything you'll save.[22]

General Shepherd rationalizes how the long war against terrorism demands special soldiers who can face down monstrous non-state enemies. Soldiers who sacrifice a piece of themselves for the greater good is a pro forma theme in militainment. Yet this instance of "sacrifice" assumes ghastly import when the gamer suddenly finds himself or herself staring down gun sights at a room full of unarmed civilians.

Another moment of personal sacrifice emerges at this level's finale, once Makarov and his men elude the airport's security forces. As the player steps into the escape van, Makarov turns and shoots the player. Before he dies, Allen hears the leader remark to one of his men: "The American thought he could deceive us. When [the Russian authorities] find [Allen] . . . all of Russia will cry for war." Allen is punished for his participation in the massacre and for falling victim to Makarov's nefarious plans. (This would be an unceremonious conclusion were the player not able to rectify the military's mistakes and exonerate the United States from criminal wrongdoing.) The level's controversial content nevertheless rationalizes the need for soldiers to engage in morally suspect actions if counterinsurgency operations like undercover missions and low-intensity proxy wars are to serve the nation's post–Cold War interests. "No Russian" gives players the opportunity to see those questionable military actions up close, and it gives them license to commit war crimes under the auspices of national security.

In addition to this moment in which the player-protagonist must accept having caused graphic collateral damage, *Modern Warfare 2* also includes a memorable scene of the player *becoming* collateral damage. During the "Second Sun" level in the game's third and final act, the gamer plays as U.S. Ranger Private James Ramirez who is defending Washington, D.C., against invading Russian forces. Ramirez's team is stationed near a downed helicopter while his outnumbered team runs low on ammunition. As an enemy attack chopper descends on the Rangers, its spotlight blinds Ramirez and the game suddenly transitions to an orbiting space station. The player is now in limited control of an astronaut conducting a spacewalk. Houston's Control Center requests that the astronaut turn his helmet camera toward a bright object streaking over the horizon. Within a few short moments, the player sees that the object in question is the missile that was launched from a Russian submarine during a previous level. Suddenly, the rocket explodes in its low orbit, obliterating the International Space Station and propelling the player-astronaut into the empty void of space (figure 2.2). The screen fades again to white as the player is transmogrified back to Ramirez who is still hunkered beneath the helicopter. The rocket's explosion unleashes an electromagnetic pulse that disables the city's electronics, including American and Russian weapons and vehicles. With planes and helicop-

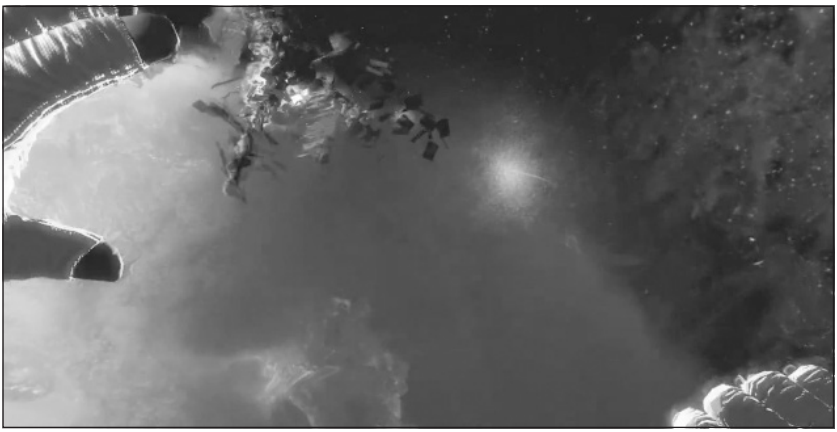


Figure 2.2. An exploding rocket demolishes a space station and knocks the player's character helplessly into space in *Modern Warfare 2*'s "Second Sun" level.

ters falling from the sky (a thinly veiled allusion to the 9/11 attacks), Ramirez and the Rangers use this moment to their advantage and make their way to the besieged White House.

Like "Second Sun," *Modern Warfare 3*'s "Davis Family Vacation" pulls players out of the armed action and locates them in civilian shoes, this time behind the lens of a consumer camcorder. A young American woman and her daughter address the father's camera as they discuss their trip to Big Ben, which is visible in the background. As the Davis family documents their vacation along an exceedingly stereotypical London street (there is a black taxi and a soccer ball in the foreground, and at least two pubs in the shot), a moving van parks in the background. The father does not notice the driver sprinting away seconds before the truck erupts, vaporizing the mother and daughter and knocking the video camera to the ground.

Standing alone, these narrative moments offer little more than nihilistic and bleak assessments of modern conflict. Slaughtering unarmed citizens or dying an unceremonious death—be it as an undercover solider or noncombatant—is a stark, but one might argue strangely welcome, corrective to the sanitized and citizen-less representations of contemporary combat that dominate the history of video war games. The "No Russian," "Second Sun," and "Davis Family Vacation" scenes

are not standalone levels, however, and they cannot help but be interpreted within the games' interconnected narratives. These first-person deaths are justified within the interconnected storylines, thus diffusing their potential to prod the gamer into reexamining the precepts of postmodern war. Instead, these civilian losses become regrettable but necessary sacrifices—narratively and ideologically speaking—in the modern counterinsurgency effort. They are the human resources needed for maintaining and fueling the United States's perpetual War on Terror.

Closing Historical Distances in "All Ghillied Up" and "One Shot, One Kill"

Oceania was at war with Eastasia: Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia.
—George Orwell, *1984*[23]

CAPTAIN PRICE: The Loyalists are expecting us half a click to the north. Move out.
GAZ: Loyalists, eh? Are those the good Russians or the bad Russians?
CAPTAIN PRICE: Well, they won't shoot at us on sight, if that's what you're asking.
GAZ: Yeah, well that's good enough for me, sir.
—British SAS soldiers in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

Modern Warfare and similar shooters combat textually the anxieties of postmodern war by narrativizing virtual combat through their immersive first- and third-person perspectives. These ludic wars are not fought primarily from the mediated perspective of aerial vehicles first made famous during the Persian Gulf War, but are conducted by soldiers on the ground. But postmodern war's political crisis of meaning is not only an effect of advanced communication technologies' experiential remove. As was noted in the previous chapter, this crisis is also due to the post–Cold War era's absence of a reliable, ideological Other. The *Modern Warfare* games diffuse these related anxieties by establishing historical continuities between Cold War menaces and twenty-first century non-state terrorists, and by positioning the gamer as a participant in these unfolding martial histories. The first *Modern Warfare* game

possesses telling back-to-back levels that work through, or perhaps more accurately, work *around* the political and ideological challenges of conducting modern-day combat operations.

Call of Duty 4's "All Ghillied Up" and "One Shot, One Kill" levels stand out by virtue of the fact that they are the game's only flashback sequences.[24] The gamer, who has been taking orders from Captain John Price in previous levels, plays here as Lieutenant Price fifteen years before the game's main storyline. Paired with Scottish SAS officer Captain McMillan, he and the player are tasked with assassinating Imran Zakhaev during an open-air meeting in the abandoned city of Pripyat, Ukraine. After the two soldiers stealthily navigate patches of deadly radiation and enemy patrols, they assume a sniping position in a derelict high-rise. As Zakhaev's meet-up unfolds, McMillan coaches Price-the-player on the mechanics and challenges of firing his high-power sniper rifle from such a distance. After adjusting for wind and other variables, Price shoots Zakhaev, and the force of the .50 caliber shot rips the Russian's left arm from his body. McMillan states (incorrectly) that the wound is fatal, and he instructs Price to pack up and make haste to the extraction point. McMillan and Price encounter heavy resistance around the landing zone, but they manage to board a helicopter and are carried to safety. In deviating temporally from the present-day action in Europe and the Middle East, these two flashback levels showcase the dual ideological functions served by the Zakhaev antagonist and the Pripyat space in the cultivation of the game's ludic pleasures as they relate to the visualization of history and sacrificial citizenship.

The Imran Zakhaev character fills the void of the absent, ideological Other, and is the game's "missing link" between the Cold War's Communists and the War on Terror's "Islamofacists." This ideologue seeks to return Russia to its precapitalist glory, and he is the principal financier behind the Middle Eastern terrorists who have deposed and executed President Al-Fulani. But fifteen years before these events and prior to becoming the leader of the Russian Ultranationalist Party, Zakhaev operated as a rogue arms dealer who exploited the collapse of the Soviet Union for his personal gain. This is the point at which Price and McMillan interrupt his black market sale of stolen uranium fuel rods taken from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (the site of the infamous April 26, 1984, meltdown). By creating a narrative through-line that connects

the attempted black market sale of stolen uranium in the 1990s to the explosion of a nuclear device in the 2010s, the game evocatively connects Russian arms dealing and nuclear proliferation with Middle Eastern terrorism. The fact that Zakhaev survives the assassination attempt by the SAS only further underscores the game's tacit assertion that Special Forces operatives need to exercise extreme martial prejudice to ensure that their human targets do not live to cause problems years later.[25]

Price and McMillan's assassination mission also stands apart because it is one of the few moments in the first *Modern Warfare* game when the player interacts in a named and identifiable real-world space.[26] By setting these levels in Pripyat, Ukraine, *Modern Warfare* suddenly injects a worldly reality into the game's fiction. The historical memory of the worst nuclear power plant accident in history becomes a sliding signifier in these levels. That is, the game frames the city's tragic history not as an object lesson in the challenges of nuclear energy production, but as a convenient narrative backdrop for international lawlessness. Pripyat is framed as a failing or failed political state that has become a magnet for terrorism, and thereby demands Western oversight. Point of clarification: I am not disputing the dangerous reality of WMDs or the ability of terrorists and black market interests to exploit unguarded or under-guarded nuclear stockpiles. Rather, the point is that introducing a worldly space into a fictionalized history is a startling choice for a title that has remained conspicuously nonspecific about its locations. Indeed, McMillan underscores this point to the player during their exploration, saying: "Look at this place. Fifty thousand people use to live in this city. Now it's a ghost town. I've never seen anything like it" (figure 2.3).

The dramatic intrusion of the real into the game's fictional diegesis conflates historical enemies of the West (not unlike the clumsy "Islamo-fascist" neologism) from different eras to shape the current struggle into a comprehensible and, ultimately, defensible narrative. Functionally, the Pripyat levels establish Price and Zakhaev's long-standing antipathy, setting the stage for their violent repartee in levels to come, which concludes in the final stage of *Modern Warfare 3*. Ideologically, however, this sequence portends that our collective fates hinge on the ability of Western powers to operate militarily as needed, lest our cities come to resemble Pripyat. The sacrificial citizenship modeled in these levels is a quid pro quo arrangement: The soldiers make sacrifices for us, the citi-

Figure 2.3. *Call of Duty 4*'s rendering of Pripyat.

zenry, and, in return, we sacrifice our desire to know how these operations are executed, or who is executed for that matter.

Playing with Modality in "End Credits" and "Museum"

Modern Warfare 2's "End Credits" and its non-campaign "Museum" bonus level present players with two sides of the same proverbial coin in terms of this game's handling of history and its human sacrifices. The former moment, which directly follows the conclusion of the single-player campaign, is a virtual tour of a museum exhibit commemorating the game's fictional global war. As the production credits roll vertically, the virtual tour reminds players how civil society glorifies wars and its warriors and how combat's victors consecrate their story as accepted history. The "Museum" bonus level is an interactive version of that same museum space. It is also an irreverent handling of the social process represented in "End Credits," and it offers a textual

subversion available only in the video game form. While *Call of Duty 4*'s flashback levels in Pripyat illustrate how real history can be injected into a diegesis to lend narrative credibility and amplify the affective dimensions of a fictional war, the "End Credits" of *Modern Warfare 2* reify the game's fictional happenings to model the materialist processes by which victors calcify their version of events as official public record and heroic myth.

Once the player defeats the duplicitous and power-hungry General Shepherd in *Modern Warfare 2*'s single-player campaign, the screen fades to black and the game credits roll (accompanied by an orchestral track scored by film composer Hans Zimmer). Seconds later the screen fades back from black, and the camera pulls out to reveal Captain Price sitting in a small boat on an exhibition stage with other game characters frozen in various poses nearby. The scene is a recreation of the game's final "Endgame" level, where Price and the gamer (playing then as Captain "Soap" MacTavish) pursue Shepherd down an Afghan river.

The stillness is broken suddenly by a passer-by, and the previously frozen figures come to life. Also visible at this point are descriptive plaques positioned around the figures. It is now evident that we are in a history museum exhibition hall. The museum attendees are the "real" people in this scene; they chat with one another, inspect the exhibits, and talk on their cell phones. The previously playable avatars and story characters on the stage are automatons.

After these figures complete their automated movements, the camera swings to the left, revealing a stage that depicts the U.S. Rangers' defense of Washington, D.C., against the Russians. This set shows James Ramirez's squad (the gamer's character in this level) standing against the backdrop of the charred White House. The camera then swings again, revealing the larger exhibition hall with other stages, vehicles, and glass displays housing *Modern Warfare 2*'s varied weapons. The credits continue to roll as the camera takes the viewer on a tour of the museum's stages representing the game's key set pieces—from fighting in the densely populated *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, to climbing the icy mountains of Kazakhstan, to swimming to a heavily guarded off-shore oil rig. The museum tour ends once the floating camera has finished exploring the museum's three halls. The screen fades back to black and the credits continue rolling.

The museum tour is more than a reflective "curtain call" for the Infinity Ward design studio and its virtual combatants. It is a pointed conclusion to the game's theme of military historiography. This theme is especially pronounced in the voiceovers during *Modern Warfare 2*'s loading screens. For example, before his treacherous plans are revealed, General Shepherd offers this reflection:

> We are the most powerful military force in the history of man. Every fight is our fight. Because what happens over here matters over there. We don't get to sit one out. Learning to use the tools of modern warfare is the difference between the prospering of your people, and utter destruction. We can't give you freedom. But we can give you the know-how to acquire it. And that, my friends, is worth more than a whole army base of steel. Sure it matters who's got the biggest stick, but it matters a hell'uva lot more who's swinging it. This is a time for heroes. A time for legends. History is written by the victors. Let's get to work.[27]

Shepherd's thoughts about the need to wield military power agree with strategic aspirations outlined in General David Petraeus's counterinsurgency manual (the U.S. cannot abstain from participating in the "long war," for example, or the need to train other nations to acquire "freedom"), and they are in accord with the doctrine's cultural goals as assessed by Mirzoeff (in terms of the centrality of Western culture in replacing weapons stockpiles, or "whole army base of steel"). But it is Shepherd's common refrain throughout the game that "History is written by the victors"[28] that best explains the curious location of "End Credits," as well as why the virtual museum tour is a revealing coda for the game.

In his influential *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses the museum's power as a state apparatus that fulfills numerous cultural and political functions.[29] Foremost among these are the legitimization of the ruling elite's hold on popular understandings of the nation's history and, by extension, its definition of citizenship. Museums sterilize the ugly history of colonial conquest in order to make it palatable for consumption by tourists and, with other social technologies like the map and census, museums also provide the social glue that unifies a nation's imagined community of citizens.[30]

If the museum tour reads as particularly somber and serene, it is because it lacks the frenetic fighting that has characterized the games up until this point. As museums cannot help but to do, the stage exhibits sanitize the intense violence and elide the soldiers' personal stories of sacrifice, some of which the player has witnessed and experienced personally. During the second to last mission, "Just Like Old Times," Captain Price justifies the suicide mission that he and Captain MacTavish-the-player are about to embark on. He reflects:

> The healthy human mind doesn't wake up in the morning thinking this is its last day on Earth. But I think that's a luxury, not a curse. To know you're close to the end is a kind of freedom. Good time to take. . . . inventory. Outgunned. Outnumbered. Out of our minds on a suicide mission, but the sands and rocks here stained with thousands of years of warfare. . . . They will remember us for this. Because out of all our vast array of nightmares, this is the one we choose for ourselves. We go forward like a breath exhaled from the Earth. With vigor in our hearts and one goal in sight: We will kill [Gen. Shepherd].

The player's first-hand experience of the fictional war's history extends well beyond that which is on display in the museum. The player has traveled to the varied war theaters represented in the exhibition halls, has shot the guns that are resting safely in the display cases, and has fought and bled with the soldiers modeled on stage. But this is not the game's only presentation of the museum space. And this other presentation is anything but hallowed.

The "Museum" bonus level is the antithesis to the war story that provides a moral context and narrative motivation for the gamer's martial actions. Moreover, "Museum" represents the unstable and frolicsome undercurrent of gameplay that opponents of military shooters find so objectionable. The museum level bears a closer resemblance to the multiplayer modes in shooters because of its privileging of "quick twitch" gameplay above any story. As is often the case in the virtual arenas of multiplayer matches, there is no narrative setup, and players must use their weapon assets and combat skills to survive waves of overwhelming enemies.

The playable rendition of the museum space that is revealed during the previously discussed "End Credits" sequence is a tourist-less bonus

level that is unlocked after the single-player campaign is completed. This enigmatic level opens with this title card—"An evening with Infinity Ward. *Modern Warfare 2* Gallery Exhibit. Encino, California, U.S.A."—and it lets players explore the museum's three halls including removing and firing weapons from display cases. During their exploration, gamers may discover one of two red buttons on information desks in the museum's halls. They are labeled ominously, "Do Not Press." After pushing either button, as any curious player is surely wont to do, the space is transformed into a nightmarish Epcot-esque exhibit hall as the soldiers on stage spring to life and assault the player en masse.

In eschewing any narrative pretext by pitting the player against characters drawn from the campaign, the museum level revels in the kinesthetic pleasures of non-narrative gunplay. This is spectacle to be enjoyed for its own sake. The firefight's unbridled celebration of the game's combat mechanics is an important reminder that there are non-narrative pleasures of ludic war. The museum's gunplay is not completely free form play; the action still respects the game's physics and damage system. There is, however, no additional narrative or rule set governing the player's actions. Moreover, this subversive and irreverent collapsing of the game's fictional history into an unprovoked, non-narrative battle royal does little to address postmodern war's crisis of meaning. This absurd fight has no reasonable explanation; it is, with the push of a button, a museum besieged by gun-wielding maniacs. The bonus level's absurd chaos is a convenient point of departure for considering textual elements beyond the intimate perspectives and counterinsurgency narrative that engender immersive pleasures in post-9/11 ludic wars—elements like agency and transformation which are discussed in the following chapters.

Conclusion: Narrating Counterinsurgency, Becoming Counterinsurgency

War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. . . . The truths

> are contradictory. It can be argued, for instance, that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat. You stare out at tracer rounds unwinding through the dark like brilliant red ribbons. You crouch in ambush as a cool, impassive moon rises over the nighttime paddies. You admire the fluid symmetries of troops on the move, the great sheets of metal-fire streaming down from a gunship, the illumination rounds, the white phosphorus, the purply orange glow of napalm, the rocket's red glare. It's not pretty, exactly. It's astonishing. It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not. Like a killer forest fire, like cancer under a microscope, any battle or bombing raid or artillery barrage has the aesthetic purity of absolute moral indifference—a powerful implacable beauty—and a true war story will tell the truth about this, though the truth is ugly.
> —Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*[31]

Bookending this chapter is Tim O'Brien's arresting reminder of creative fiction's ability to convey the experience of combat (here, the Vietnam War), including its subjective and its contradictory "truths." These fictional truths concern questions of content and form, of subject matter and media modality. What makes a war story feel "true?" Why do some tales leave us unmoved, while others "turn the stomach?" Why might the same war story resonate in one media but not another? Or, why might it resonate differently? In the above quotation, O'Brien recognizes the visceral pleasures of warfare's visual spectacle (the "aesthetic purity of moral indifference—a powerful implacable beauty"). The military shooter has been able to simulate successfully modern combat's violent phantasmagoria thanks to its photorealistic visuals, surround sound, haptic feedback, and so on. But these games do more than replicate "the rockets' red glare" and "the bombs bursting in air"—they narrate soldiers' personal combat experiences, and the player bears witness to and participates in dramatic acts of virtual patriotism in *Modern Warfare*'s intertwined narratives.

These games also add a sheen of legitimacy to the United States's policy gambit in the Middle East by closing the perspectival distances

of television's war optics and by reframing the War on Terror's asymmetry as the latest and greatest balanced war between the forces of good and evil. The games' war stories and the player's changing points of view posit that counterinsurgency interventions are necessary, as are occasional civilian sacrifices, for protecting United States and Western interests.

I want to conclude this chapter with a final thought regarding the sacrifices in *Modern Warfare* because I anticipate some exception to how this chapter has discussed the term. As was noted earlier, the moments of sacrifice are scripted events through and through. The player has no power to decide whether or not their character volunteers his or her virtual life. This inability to volunteer oneself freely, virtually or otherwise, cannot rightly be called "sacrifice" if there is no elective surrendering of the self. One might rightly ask: How meaningful (or, how truly sacrificial) can these virtual deaths be?

Two responses come to mind. The first is a practical matter concerning narrative cohesion and the second a modality issue involving processes of identification. In story-driven video games, there is a persistent design tension between crafting a compelling narrative and designing gameplay rules and freedoms.[32] In these rare moments of forced sacrifice, the *Modern Warfare* titles clearly subordinate the player's agency to the story's concerns. If these games were judged only by the gamer's limited agency (if not total paralysis) during these anomalous moments, these virtual deaths would be read as politically hollow and disaffecting. The characters are clearly sacrificed because it amplifies the stories' conflicts. If players could choose not to die, it would likewise complicate the task of designing causal narratives that justify the player-soldiers' violent gunplay.

My second response to the anticipated objection concerns user identification with video game characters. The sacrificial events in war films and TV programs are rarely questioned as "un-sacrificial" because the determinacy of these moving-image media is never in question. This is clearly not the case for video games. Ludic sacrifice is at least technically conceivable, even if it is not a standard component of military shooters' design (which it most assuredly is not).[33] The *Modern Warfare* titles overwhelmingly possess linear narratives and spatial designs that do not, as a rule, permit much choice beyond avatar customization (how

the soldier looks), tactics (how to attack the enemy), and weapon and/or vehicle selection. This is partially a question of media affordances and genre expectations, but it is also one of user identification. The viewer's identification with the cinematic or televisual soldier is not the same as the player's identification with the computational soldier. Despite the rupture in identification with a character over whom the player has limited or lost control, it is critical to remember that these moments are affecting precisely because the player is suddenly stripped of the will-to-power he or she normally enjoys. The *Modern Warfare* games ask the player to sacrifice agency and disbelief momentarily for the sake of dramatic structure and narrative satisfaction.

American political identity was laid bare in the minutes, days, and weeks after the 9/11 attacks. The uncontrollable scenes of sacrifice in the *Modern Warfare* games provocatively connect with these feelings of helplessness and paralysis. As the book's Introduction documents, the rapid return to the discourse and doctrine of American exceptionalism was one popular reactionary strategy for regaining a sense of control that the nation had lost. The next chapter addresses the ludic means of virtually re-seizing that sense of political power by examining the character and spatial designs of Tom Clancy's technothriller shooters.

3

Fighting the Good (Preemptive) Fight

American Exceptionalism in Tom Clancy's Military Shooters

Defending our Nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the Federal Government. Today, that task has changed dramatically. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America. Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us.

To defeat this threat we must make use of every tool in our arsenal—military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing. The war against terrorists of global reach is a global enterprise of uncertain duration. America will help nations that need our assistance in combating terror. And America will hold to account nations that are compromised by terror, including those who harbor terrorists—because the allies of terror are the enemies of civilization. The United States and countries cooperating with us must not allow the terrorists to develop new home bases. Together, we will seek to deny them sanctuary at every turn.

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The United States will not allow these efforts to succeed. We will build defenses against ballistic missiles and other means of delivery. We will cooperate with other nations to deny, contain, and curtail our enemies' efforts to acquire dangerous technologies. And, as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerg-

ing threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies' plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.
—President George W. Bush's remarks on the 2002 National Security Strategy[1]

Always historicize!
—Fredric Jameson's opening directive in *The Political Unconscious*[2]

Introduction

On September 20, 2002, the Bush administration unveiled a revamped national security strategy that described the government's newfound defense policy of unilateral, preemptive military action to face down would-be terrorist threats. This aggressive brand of foreign policy represented a dramatic change from the multilateral deterrence strategies that had dominated the Cold War and early post–Cold War years. Critics questioned the dramatic change of tone and posturing, arguing instead for caution and diplomacy. Meanwhile, supporters believed that the 9/11 attacks (then only a year old) provided all the necessary justification for a more interventionist defense strategy. And yet, as philosopher Samuel Weber observes in *Targets of Opportunity*,[3] as radical a shift as preemptive war policy would seem to represent, it is a continuation of one of the nation's most enduring political and cultural doctrines: American exceptionalism.[4] According to this belief, the United States's unique political origins and economic and productivity successes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries provide policymakers with all necessary justification for pursuing perpetual military supremacy. Weber argues: "Global political *supremacy*, understood in large measure to derive from economic and technological superiority, is at the same

time declared to be *supremely vulnerable*, given the relative availability of destructive technologies to 'rogue states' and, perhaps even worse, to non-state 'terrorist' groups."[5]

The 9/11 attacks also provided neoconservatives with the political cover for pushing through an aggressive post–Cold War defense policy that had actually been crafted nearly a decade before in the wake of the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War. At that time, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney with fellow neocons Paul Wolfowitz and I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, drafted a 1992 classified document called "Defense Planning Guidance." This controversial document advocated three primary objectives for American foreign policy: (1) preventing the ascendance of any competing superpower; (2) gaining and maintaining access to Middle Eastern oil reserves; and (3) the efficacy of unilateral military action in meeting said objectives.[6] The document was later withdrawn after it was leaked to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. However, its central tenets remained popular in conservative policy circles, and it finally found its official public articulation in September of 2002—an articulation that represented a generational shift in the public's understanding of exceptionalism "from the liberal consensus to the conservative ascendency" that had been taking place during the last half of the twentieth century.[7] Less officially, this revitalized and aggressive post–Cold War interventionist policy was expressed in an array of military entertainments. And there is arguably no name more synonymous with militainment and with American exceptionalism—before and after 9/11—than Tom Clancy.

In the previous two chapters, I argued for the utility of gameplay modality as an analytical concept and applied it to understanding how *Modern Warfare*'s narrative subjectivity attempts to ameliorate postmodern war's representational problems by reinterpreting modern-day counterinsurgency for the military first-person shooter. This chapter continues in a similar vein by examining how the character and level design of the best-selling series *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* represent American's high-tech military capabilities alongside convenient policy beliefs about the use of preemptive force. The Clancy shooters transform the player into a virtual military insider who knows how and why to fight during imagined crises. The justifications for preemptive war emerge out

of the games' mutually reinforcing avatar and spatial design constructs, producing a paranoid ludic imaginary that reinforces the righteousness of neoconservative foreign policy ideas popularized during the early 2000s.

The four Clancy titles examined herein have been selected for several reasons. First, as of 2015, all four shooters—*Advanced Warfighter* (2006), *Advanced Warfighter 2* (2007), *Vegas* (2006), and *Vegas 2* (2008)—have sold well over a million copies each, making them best-selling titles by conventional game industry standards. Second, because Clancy was thought to be the "novelist laureate of the military industrial complex"[8] until his death in 2013, his oeuvre offers unique points of entry for understanding how a multimedia brand renowned for its technological detail and suspenseful narratives could be adapted for interactive play. Finally, the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* series are prototypical squad-based tactical shooters that immerse the player in the role of a counter-terrorist squad-team leader who must execute tactically sound actions to complete a mission—in effect, making the player the military solution in these fictionalized Wars on Terror. These games clearly profit from their status as Clancy properties. But they also model the efficacy of martial power when it is executed "correctly." By remaining attentive to what these games ask and allow us to do and how they represent American soldiers and terrorized domestic spaces, we can appreciate the hegemonic pleasures of becoming a technowarrior, and how these choices reflect and perpetuate a conservative view of American exceptionalism after 9/11.

Tom Clancy's Branded (War)Fare

Notwithstanding his prominent billing, Tom Clancy has had relatively little input on the production of the games that bear his name.[9] It is instead more accurate to think of Clancy's influence as functioning on the level of brand. In 2008, the French video game publishing powerhouse Ubisoft bought the rights to Tom Clancy's name. This acquisition included *all* transmedia intellectual property rights associated with the games, books, and movies bearing the Clancy brand and saved the publisher millions in annual royalties.[10] (Nothing quite says "American exceptionalism" like selling one's name to a multinational corporation

headquartered in Paris.) The Clancy name remains a cornerstone of Ubisoft's product line and a vital component of its military shooter offerings, with *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege* and *Tom Clancy's The Division* scheduled for release in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

The Clancy brand games do not, however, represent a singular authorial voice or gameplay genre as much as they imagine a set of overlapping technology and policy beliefs common to postmodern warfare.[11] The *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* series celebrate a technology-rich form of militarized American exceptionalism, a technowar discourse in which defense officials manage war as though it were a corporate business or a science.[12] This discourse emphasizes the increased reliance on (if not fetishization of) techno-centric solutions as represented by the Revolution in Military Affairs[13] and the growing centrality of net-centric weapon technologies that transform soldiers into cyber nodes in real-time information grids.[14] These cutting-edge and near-future information and weapon technologies promise to make the military's Special Forces units more agile, lethal, and invisible. Or, in the language of our just-in-time production culture, they are destruction-on-demand.[15] According to the *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* instruction manual, Clancy games transform the player into "the soldier of the future." The manual continues: "In full command of the cutting edge of military technology, *you* are the most lethal, high-tech soldier on the battlefield."[16] The pleasures of playing as a cyborg soldier draw heavily on the politics established in Clancy's technothriller fiction.

Clancy's decidedly pro-U.S. technothriller genre[17]—wherein suspenseful narrative elements are structured around military-grade technologies, their surreptitious uses, and its related discourse of technowar, or treating modern warfare as a capitalistic endeavor that privileges technology and economics in its production[18]—contains all the necessary ingredients for remediating pro-military fiction into ludic form. For example, Clancy's literary pulp canon contains readily identifiable protagonists (soldiers and government agents) who are primed for technologically aided action (tactical warfare) against international threats (terrorist groups, rogue states) that will reinforce the political righteousness of American exceptionalism. Technothriller fiction generally, and Clancy's branded offerings in particular, endorse a highly militarized version of American exceptionalism by representing the Defense De-

partment's public and clandestine programs in a favorable light. Accordingly, the majority of the critical ink spilled on Clancy's novels has targeted the author's Manichaean moral universe and his preoccupation with warfighting technologies and strategies.[19]

Clancy's early publishing successes established the technothriller's generic parameters, while the brand's subsequent wide-ranging wares solidified in consumers' minds what to expect from the Clancy name. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, "Commodification turns genre into a brand-name . . . and the social contract into a product guarantee."[20] The Clancy games' eventual commercial harvest was first sown during the waning years of the Cold War after President Ronald Reagan enthusiastically endorsed the author's breakout 1984 political pulp fiction novel, *The Hunt for Red October*. According to *Life Magazine* journalist Loudon Wainwright, Reagan called the novel "the perfect yarn," and most likely enjoyed it because the story offered "relief from the drab reality of life—although it might be disconcertingly close to some of the reality in Reagan's daily intelligence briefings."[21] In his treatment of the president's escapist reading, Wainwright is also one of the first to critically assess the attractions of Clancy's fiction. The reporter astutely notes:

> But surely one of the book's biggest selling points has to be that it all comes out right in the end. More than that, it reaffirms the comfortable convictions we have about ourselves and our superiority over the usually villainous Russians. In its broad strokes the book is as much an act of propaganda and caricature as those scores of Happy Yank films Hollywood turned out during World War II. There's nothing wrong with the novel; it's simply a not very skillful wrapping of action in the flag. It must be reassuring to many, including the President, to read novels that feature the good intentions, the ingenuity and the bravery of Americans, to fantasize for a few hours that the best Soviet commanders will wnat [sic] to defect, that in an orderly and well-plotted world we must win out over a people weakened by their slavish adherence to a cruel and rotten ideology.[22]

Clancy's dozen-plus novels published after *The Hunt for Red October* assume a similar literary construction and ideological disposition. In *The New American Militarism*, Andrew Bacevich describes the author's oeuvre in these broad strokes:

> In any Clancy novel, the international order is a dangerous and threatening place, awash with heavily armed and implacably determined enemies who threaten the United States. That Americans have managed to avoid Armageddon is attributable to a single fact: the men and women of America's uniformed military and of its intelligence services have thus far managed to avert those threats. The typical Clancy novel is an unabashed tribute to the skill, honor, extraordinary technological aptitude, and sheer decency of the nation's defenders. . . . For Clancy and other contributors to the [technothriller] genre, refuting the canards casually tossed at soldiers in the aftermath of Vietnam forms part of their self-assigned charter.[23]

Not surprisingly, American military personnel and conservative opinion leaders were among Clancy's biggest fans. The respect is largely mutual, as the author counted President Reagan, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, retired General Colin Powell, and Colonel Oliver North among his favorite and most inspiring public servants.[24]

Clancy's deepest contempt was reserved for terrorists and Congress, a fact that is reflected in many of his works. The author is famously quoted as having said: "There are a lot of people in Congress who . . . would rather trash the military than hug their own kids."[25] America's preeminent representative and deliberative political body, an elected quorum whose governing actions are by design balanced by other governmental actors and measured by debate, is an inconvenience and an obstruction to the decisive action preferred by the author's patriotic technocrats and soldiers. Clancy, like his fictional heroes, eschewed deliberation for action.

The commercial success of his pulp fiction migrated swiftly to Clancy's movies and video games because, like the novels, these texts narrate the political stakes of postmodern war and represent visually state-sponsored violence (not unlike TV shows like *24*).[26] Yet the Clancy games locate players in an experiential space different from that of TV/film viewers or pulp fiction readers. The Clancy games remediate the genre one step further—beyond narration and visualization either alone or in tandem—by modeling the field tactics needed to best non-state terrorists. The Clancy-brand video games are thus the most complete textual realization of the author's technothriller

universe because the user has the fullest opportunity to experience these American war mythologies, enacting and becoming the righteous technowarrior. That is, while the games support the discourse of technowar and American exceptionalism found in technothriller fiction generally, these shooters also enable gamers to play with the martial force by which global political hegemony is secured. This textual affordance helps explain the games' popularity and the brand's overall value to its game publisher Ubisoft. Taken together, the Clancy games are the tenth best-selling franchise of all time, having sold over 55 million units worldwide as of May 2008, surpassing other memorable franchises in sales such as *The Legend of Zelda*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and the *Resident Evil* series.[27]

The *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas* series depict the political necessity and strategic efficacy of postmodern military interventions using similar stories and gameplay designs. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* narratives unfold in (what was at the time of their release) near-future Americas (*Warfighter* in 2013 and *Vegas* in 2010), with their conflicts originating in Mexican city streets and ending on U.S. soil. Both franchises locate gamers in firefights using first- (*Vegas*) and third-person (*Warfighter*) perspectives in outdoor expanses (*Warfighter*) and in tight, indoor spaces (*Vegas*) where their counterterrorism specialists are armed with a cache of weapons and communication devices to foil the terrorist plots. Despite these similarities, the two series nevertheless possess unique elements that make them worth examining individually. For the *Advanced Warfighter* games, the proper and judicious use of high-tech weaponry and communication technologies represent the Defense Department's early-to-mid-2000s approach to net-centric warfare as being the best means of combating twenty-first century threats. The *Vegas* games, meanwhile, unfold amid civilian population centers in the Americas and in the United States and stress the need for maintaining a preemptive policy of "fighting them there, so we don't have to fight them here." Taken together, the gameplay modality of these Clancy-brand tactical shooters—again, understood as textual vehicles for narratives *and* as beliefs about how the world works—illustrate the efficacy and moral righteousness of preemptive, technologically aided martial strikes to prevent horrific attacks on U.S. citizens, helping to ensure a state of post-9/11 Pax Americana.

How We Fight: Visualizing Technological Exceptionalism in *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*

In *Advanced Warfighter I* and *II*, players must use their technological advantages and training to overcome the superior enemy numbers and foil the terrorists' attacks on civilian populations and domestic infrastructure. *Warfighter*'s instruction manual summarizes its action:

> The Ghost Recon squad, led by Scott Mitchell [the gamer], is expert at using its sharp military tactics to survive seemingly impossible military situations. In this realistic conflict, "run and shoot" behaviors are not a viable option and will only result in quick death. To prevail Scott Mitchell must use his tactical assets to their fullest.[28]

In the first *Warfighter* game, the player's elite band of "ghosts" are deployed to Mexico City in 2013 after Nicaraguan rebel forces steal U.S. military hardware and try to unload their ill-gotten wares to Mexican paramilitary forces. Before the ghosts recover the equipment, however, they are redirected to the Mexican capital to save the Mexican and U.S. presidents and the Canadian prime minister, who are meeting to announce the North American Joint Security Agreement treaty, from a coup d'état (there are terrorist threats in both games to defense infrastructure and negotiations). The Canadian prime minister is killed in the attack, the Mexican president is nearly fatally wounded by an embassy bomb blast, and the U.S. president disappears—and thus begins the player's forty-eight-hour mission to save U.S. President James Ballantine, prevent military technology from falling into the wrong hands, and tamp down the Mexican insurgency. In a similarly hyperbolic vein, *Advanced Warfighter 2* unfolds a year later as Mitchell's ghost team is sent to Ciudad Juarez to neutralize a nuclear device that has fallen into the hands of the same rebel force that is now threatening to take out an American nuclear defense shield.

True to Clancy's technothriller poetics, the *Advanced Warfighter* titles contain numerous plot twists that make recounting their serpentine storylines tedious work. More importantly, such a detailed summary fails to illuminate what it is these games do best: represent technowarriors and battlefield tactics. This is not to suggest that the stories are irrelevant;

indeed, they are necessary components for engendering the narrative subjectivity discussed in the last chapter. Still, it is more illuminating in this case to examine *how* the player's available actions create an engaging military cyborg identity.

The player engages the enemy in *Advanced Warfighter*'s proleptic post–Cold War battlefields as a high-tech, decision-making node in an interconnected, cybernetic weapons system. The game's visual centerpiece is its "Integrated Warfighter System" interface, which grants the player with information gathered by other Global Information Grid assets (figure 3.1).[29] The game's Integrated Warfighter System is a fictionalized version of the U.S. Army's "Future Force Warrior"—itself a major weapons subsystem of the now defunct Future Combat Systems project (2003–2009).[30] Key features of the game's Integrated Warfighter System include advanced communications and networked optics that keep the ghosts connected with one another and with their commanders and a sophisticated heads-up display (HUD) that maps virtual information over worldly objects and terrain in real-time. The player also remotely controls a bevy of support vehicles (spy drones, armored personnel carriers, and the like) that offer additional firepower and reconnaissance capabilities. The Clancy games celebrate unapologetically the power of remote controlled robotics and networked forces, refusing to problematize their usage as do the games examined in the next chapter.

Information and communication technologies are of particular importance in realizing Clancy's brand of military fantasy because they mediate the player's identification with the games' counterterrorism agents (Scott Mitchell in the *Advanced Warfighter*, games Logan Keller in *Vegas* and Bishop in *Vegas 2*). Central to this identification is the avatar's HUD. This visual display is awash with digital markers and screens, enabling the gamer to internalize the hostile environments as a cybernetic weapons system (figure 3.2). During any one mission, the player may need to triangulate data gathered by an unmanned aerial vehicle, camera-equipped teammates, and weapons that can see through surfaces. Once the player has successfully gathered the necessary battlefield intelligence and has positioned the ghosts, he or she engages the enemy force.[31]

The *Advanced Warfighter* games' technothriller narratives and their underlying technowar discourse, in concert with their computational

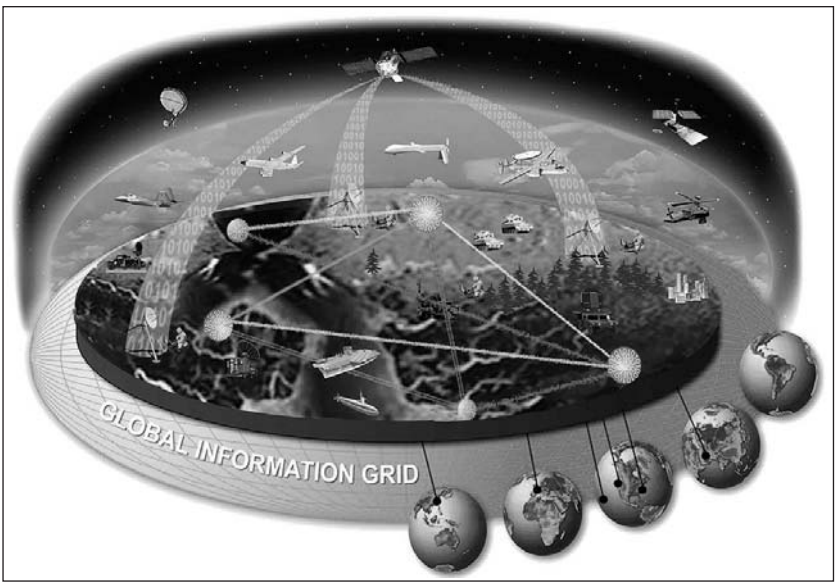


Figure 3.1. The Department of Defense's "Global Information Grid" seeks to maintain informational superiority through its interconnected warfighting systems.

Figure 3.2. Real-time information is mapped over worldly elements for the cyborg soldier in *Advanced Warfighter 2*.

rules and operations, exercise rhetorical conviction concerning the efficacy of future warfighters and their weapons. The Clancy properties are ideologically comforting fantasies because they posit that challenging "overmatch" victories in which a small, technologically aided team can overcome considerable obstacles, are attainable with the proper application of advanced weaponry and political will.[32] The firefights in the novels, films, and games gain credibility because they resonate with what gamers already know of the application of advanced technologies in current military engagements. As George Bush's secretary of state, Donald Rumsfeld, argued in 2003, "In the twenty-first century, 'over-matching power'—the ability to field a small but technologically superior force—is more important than 'overwhelming force.'"[33] Clancy's war games are compelling precisely because their gameplay modality *seems* to represent faithfully weapons systems and Special Forces field tactics. These games are pleasurably affecting, however, because the player makes the key choices—via the action mediated by the HUD display and through the available actions in game—that bring the overmatch military victory to fruition, transforming the player into the classically trained Tom Clancy hero.[34]

Identifying as a cyborg weapons system is central to the ludic war pleasures of the Clancy titles and other post-9/11 shooters. Yet there is nothing particularly new about the fantasy of playing with potent weapons. Cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin documents how the American imagination has long been shaped by an obsession with superweapons from at least the late nineteenth century and the formative role that science fiction has played in the development of foreign policy and defense projects. Regarding the occasional fine line between the George W. Bush administration's neoconservative consultants and sci-fi authors, Franklin states:

> The New American Century authors become truly ecstatic as they project their images of war in space, from space, and in cyberspace (which their report calls cyber-war). Here it becomes truly difficult to distinguish between this strategic document and the Robert Heinlein–Ben Bova–Jerry Pournelle–Newt Gingrich branch of ultra-militaristic and technophiliac science fiction. But that science fiction had already become a part of the Pentagon's strategic vision of the twenty first century.[35]

And herein lies the cultural currency of the Clancy name. The author's brand is not just a recognizable marketing construct that taps into a proven generic formula or consumer demographic (though it is that too); the name also prescribes the rules for *how* its games are to be designed and the virtual worlds that might be imagined and constructed. Clancy's poetics constitute such a "house style" at this point that his influence is evident in the visual design and political imaginary of wholly unrelated projects—from TV recruitment ads for the armed forces to foreign policy penned by the Project for the New American Century, a neoconservative think tank that advocated for regime change in Iraq and included such high-ranking Bush administration officials as Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz.[36]

If the fantasy of playing with weapons of mass destruction is nothing new for American culture, then what is perhaps innovative about these games is that they transform the player into a fantastically "smart" weapon. The player is not some weapon of *mass* destruction; instead, the player is a weapon of *exact* destruction. The games celebrate U.S. technological exceptionalism by modeling for the player the precise and specific martial power of the cyborg warrior who is able to overcome considerable obstacles through the application of extreme competence. The strike forces represented in the Clancy games are the inevitable outgrowth of a defense production logic where the massive military presence has been replaced "with a customized force configuration, managed informatically."[37] *Advanced Warfighter* gives ludic expression to a long-standing fantasy that sees next-gen technologies as liberating Americans from excessive losses of "blood and treasure." Randy Martin describes how the military's technologies produce a more precise and lethal defense actor:

> Now computer modeling has been decentralized from the decision makers pushing the button for nuclear attack to the soldiers in the field. The network is meant to integrate people and things, machines and marines, labor and capital by converting the activities of all into the measurable output of information flows. Transformation, according to a statement by George W. Bush at the start of the Iraqi occupation, figures a military future "defined less by size and more by mobility and swiftness, one that

> is easier to deploy and sustain, one that relies more heavily on stealth, precision weaponry and information technologies."[38]

This massive military transformation is justified on the grounds that surgical interventions that leverage computing technologies can be used to preemptively protect a range of global interests, while sidestepping political blowback like the "Vietnam Syndrome." Technological exceptionalism is generally justified as working in the service of the United States's political exceptionalism. Or, "how we fight" in the twenty-first century makes sense in light of "why we fight."

Why We Fight: Navigating Political Exceptionalism in *Rainbow Six: Vegas*

> If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. . . . It's not about our analysis. . . . It's about our response.
> —Vice President Dick Cheney[39]

Whereas the *Advanced Warfighter* games project the gamer into the imagined experience of future counterterrorism warriors and their technologically enhanced operations, the gameplay modality of the *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* games articulate in forceful narrative and spatial terms how these types of soldiers and their preemptive actions are a post-9/11 necessity. The *Vegas* titles differ from the *Warfighter* series in that they present their 3-D levels through the first-person perspective (the game switches to a third-person point of view when the player finds protective cover), and the firefights occur largely in interior spaces rather than in open-air venues. More importantly, and as the titles suggest, these games focus on engaging terrorists on U.S. soil. The box art on the first *Vegas* game promotes its action thus:

> Las Vegas. The entertainment capital of the world. Thousands of unsuspecting tourists visit each day. Thousands more call it home. But on this

> day, something has gone terribly wrong. The Strip has become a battleground. Fremont Street is no longer safe. And casinos are being blown up one by one. On this day, Rainbow Six is the city's last hope.[40]

This franchise holds out the chance of saving the homeland from terrorists who have targeted civilians and domestic infrastructure. And, in a manner similar to the positive framing of the future weapon systems in *Advanced Warfighter*, proceeding through the domestic spaces in the *Vegas* games produces a terrorized "story map."

Building on the idea of the cognitive map, games scholar Michael Nitsche proposes the concept of the "story map" to explain how players experience virtual spaces.[41] Whereas a cognitive map is a mental interpretation of a fictional or real space's characteristics or dimensions, Nitsche's story map explains how players make sense of virtual realms when they are experienced in concert with immersive and narrative elements. According to Nitsche, "In contrast to the cognitive map generated primarily for orientation, a story map aims not at an accurate understanding of Euclidian space but of spatialized drama and its setting; it combines navigation of drama, film, and interactive space."[42] The story map is therefore neither an "objective" rendering of a game space, nor is it even principally about space. Instead, the story map is the experiential whole of navigating a game's architectural design while making sense of the story and other dramatic elements that contextualize and make meaningful that spatial exploration.

The *Vegas* franchise engenders a decidedly anxious story map by having players navigate the horrors that could be visited upon a major U.S. city ravaged by a well-organized and well-funded terrorist group. In the games' near-future narratives, transnational terrorists are planning to destroy domestic infrastructure like the Nevada (read: Hoover) Dam (*Vegas*) and have smuggled chemical weapons into the country (*Vegas 2*). The games' terrorized spaces present a series of object lessons, or object simulations, of the failure to guard absolutely against such potentialities—potentialities articulated most clearly by former Vice President Dick Cheney's famous "one percent doctrine." Journalist Ron Suskind describes the former VP's distinctly Clancy-esque view of post-9/11 national security as follows:

> A rogue state might slip a nightmare weapon, or a few pounds of enriched uranium, to a nonstate actor—a *transnat*—if it could be assured that the weapon's country of origin was undiscoverable. And why not? Let the terrorist do the dirty work that some secret sponsor would never do on its own, but maybe had dreamed of: *Bring America to its knees*. Cheney's response: If there was even a one percent chance of such an act occurring, we must act as if it's a certainty.[43]

The civilian spaces that are explored over the course of *Vegas*'s missions include downtown city streets, flashy casinos, high-end hotels, and recreation and convention centers. The tactical exploration of these spaces, which contain horrific fragments of their former humanity—ringing telephones, blood-splattered cubicle walls, and fleeing civilians and frightened hostages—engenders a terrorized story map that at once reflects the procedural dictates of the tactical shooter and the narrative elements of technothriller fiction, while indicting any policy that might second-guess the necessity of swift or preemptive responses to perceived threats.

Thinking about how game spaces and story maps inform interpretations of gameplay modality can be difficult for at least two reasons. First, as Nitsche notes, the descriptive metaphors that we use to explain game spaces are not without their linguistic baggage.[44] "Sandbox," "playground," or "garden" are not meaningless labels for games, but they more accurately describe the experiential quality of a space, not its structure for in-game movement. The critical and commercial hit *Grand Theft Auto 4* (2008), for example, is a "sandbox" action adventure game where the player is free to engage in different actions: completing narrative-based quests, driving around the city causing havoc, or peacefully sightseeing as a tourist might. The game's synthetic city is called a "virtual sandbox" because it accommodates a variety of play choices and allows one relative freedom to pursue (or not) the narrative campaign. A second difficulty in describing the layout of a game space is that the virtual world is navigated alongside a host of representational elements. Like continuity editing in film and television, the narrative spaces in the Clancy games hide the computational artifice. (Of course, it is precisely because of this complex layering that the games can be experienced as impressionistic story maps.)

The spatial structures dominating Clancy's *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* shooters closely resemble arena spaces. Both franchises place the counterterrorism squad at some insertion point—in *Ghost Recon* it is usually in an open-air location, and for *Rainbow Six* a multilevel building complex—where the player is tasked with completing the objectives en route to the extraction point. According to Nitsche, "The arena's spatial arrangement often supports events such as battles, dances, or speeches that demand skillful operation of the avatar, often in collaboration or competition with others."[45] The tactical exploration of Las Vegas's residential and business buildings transforms the municipality into a series of mini-arenas where the gamer tests and retests his or her equipment and skills against enemy forces.

The repetitive firefights performed in *Advanced Warfighter*'s *and Vegas*'s arenas differentiate these games from other military shooters that possess more linear or track-like structures. For example, the *Call of Duty* titles offer considerably more restricted environments where gamers are led down relatively narrow paths. These guiding structures emphasize the need for accurate firing and frenetic movement, and thus color the player's experience of these ludic wars differently. A closer examination of dramatic moments from *Vegas 2* will make clear how a Clancy-brand story map comes to fruition by uniting narrative action with virtual spaces.

In *Vegas 2*, the gamer plays as Bishop,[46] a Rainbow Six veteran who has been reinstated to combat the terrorist menace seizing Las Vegas. The player leads a three-person squad through a series of engagements in and around the city killing terrorists, disarming bombs, and rescuing hostages. At the game's midpoint, Bishop's team traces a chemical bomb to the Hawkins Recreational Facility, a large exercise complex. The player then fights his way through the facility's offices, gymnasium, and courtyards. As Bishop's squad nears the Hawkins stadium, the terrorists trigger their chemical weapon, killing the unseen civilians sealed inside. The player is too late and must watch as the deadly gas leaks from the building's locked doors and listen to the off-screen screams. Like *Modern Warfare*'s moments of sacrificial citizenship and gameplay paralysis described in the last chapter, this nightmare scenario is one of the game's most powerful events precisely because the space is off limits to exploration and because the outcome cannot be altered.[47] True to the

politics of the technothriller, the player bears witness to the horrors of late intervention.

Another remarkable sequence immediately follows the stadium massacre, as Bishop's team pursues Miguel Cabrero, one of the terrorist leaders, through a residential section of the city. The player's team moves swiftly from one backyard to the next, killing the terrorists aiding Cabrero's escape. These middle-class backyards have been transformed into de facto arenas for tactical combat. Bishop warns the team: "Check your fire. Do not hit the houses." (Yet there is no penalty for shooting houses as there is for killing civilians. In fact, there is a distinct tactical advantage in shooting the outdoor grills' propane tanks to wound nearby enemies.) The level design here is peppered with an array of household items including grills, bicycles, flower planters, while the audio track contains off-screen sounds of barking dogs and crying babies. The *Vegas* story maps maintain that if we are to be victorious, we must allow Special Forces units to finish the War on Terror wherever it takes them, including our backyard patios and gazebos.

There is also a level in *Vegas 2* that presents the War on Terror as a professional game and addresses its players as would-be recruits. As Bishop's team tracks down the terrorists through the Las Vegas International Convention Center, they move through what is unquestionably the game's most self-referential level—an exhibition hall hosting a Major League Gaming (MLG) event. The MLG is a professional video gaming league in which players compete for cash prizes and professional sponsorship. To the untrained eye, the exhibition hall may appear to be just a room full of tables and computers. However, dedicated gamers and fans of competitive electronic sports will recognize that these networked computers are for high-speed gaming competitions and that the exhibition room, adorned with MLG ads, looks like an official competition venue. *Vegas 2*'s publisher, Ubisoft, crafted the game's multiplayer map after consulting with the MLG, and the league then adopted *Vegas 2* for its competitions.[48] In sum, in this "hall-of-mirrors" play space, competitive gamers in the physical world are playing as soldiers in Clancy's universe, and these avatars are virtually fighting in a room that represents competitive gaming competitions.

Like *Modern Warfare 2*'s Museum bonus level, the convention center's self-referential MLG room illustrates the persistently blurry lines char-

acterizing the gameplay modality of post-9/11 shooters (figure 3.3). Yet there is something else afoot here. The MLG stage is more than product placement for the league; it interpellates its gamer subjects as potential warfighters. By locating a firefight in a room that supports these competitions, the title recognizes these gamers as those who might sympathize with Clancy's technothriller ideology since they have demonstrated the know-how for actualizing its martial tactics in an array of spaces, including an e-sports game room.

Vegas's story maps posit that preemptive military interventions are a post-9/11 necessity and legitimize interventionist policy ideals like Cheney's "one-percent doctrine." Gymnasiums, game rooms, and even our own backyards—the *Vegas* games teach us that no domestic space is safe from terrorists and their WMDs. Conversely, the games maintain that with the right application of tactics and technological support, there is no space that cannot be secured by American forces. Additionally, the gameplay modality of the *Vegas* games communicate to avid gamers that they are uniquely qualified to participate in future Wars on Terror because they can attest to the virtues of American exceptionalism, having experienced virtually the utility of preemptive war.

Society Must Be Defended Preemptively: Clancy Games as Games of Exception

> Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.
> —President George W. Bush, October 7, 2002[49]

> If we have actionable intelligence about high-valued terrorist targets and if President Musharraf [of Pakistan] will not act, we will.
> —President Barack Obama, August 1, 2007[50]

The games examined in this chapter and the last do more than visually narrate America's rationale for taking up its so-called "preemptive wars." These games demonstrate how postmodern conflicts are to be

Figure 3.3. An exhibition hall hosting an MLG event.

conducted and how such actions are a logical extension of post-9/11 foreign policy beliefs. The *Advanced Warfighter* and *Vegas* games showcase advanced technologies as the means to transform disciplined soldiers into elite technowarriors who can win on tomorrow's battlefields and secure the political promises of American exceptionalism. And while the characters, settings, and mechanics are key constitutive elements in maintaining the series' commercial appeal, what truly sets these games apart is that they remediate Clancy's technothriller genre, enabling the player to perpetuate the American exceptionalism popularized in his books and films. The gamer becomes the technowarrior who enacts a militarized "state of exception."[51]

The hegemonic pleasures of Clancy-brand games are intimately bound up in operating as "exceptional" ludic soldiers. Clancy's warfighters are exceptional with respect to their weapons systems, communication technologies, and skill sets, and they are likewise exceptional with respect to the law. Clancy shooters are pleasurable because players can brandish lethal force in "black ops" missions that cannot be officially recognized by the government, which nevertheless grants such instrumental actions and agents their liminal legitimacy. For instance, the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011 by the Navy's SEAL Team Six unfolded under the cover of night, and under the cover of legal exception. Yet rather than acting as

a ludic aporia that draws attention to the state of exception's legal, political, and ethical contradictions, the Clancy games and similarly designed militainment revel in the paradoxical pleasures to be found in protecting the state's democratic rule of law by acting autocratically beyond the law.

Exception is not a limitless privilege, however, and even fairly mainstream shooters contain textual fissures that reveal oblique and explicit critiques of the military-entertainment complex's cultural politics. Among the more recent targets of criticism are the robotic systems that have come to epitomize warfighting in the new century: unmanned ground and aerial drones. As valuable as these remote controlled spies and assassins are to the military brass, they are weapons of exception that engender no shortage of legal and ethical concerns—apprehensions that find their way into a variety of post-9/11 ludic wars.

4

Through a Drone, Darkly

Visions of Dystopic Ludic War

Sasha and Malia are huge fans, but boys, don't get any ideas. Two words for you: Predator drones. You'll never see it coming.
—Nobel Peace prize recipient President Barack Obama cracks a joke aimed at the Jonas Brothers during the 2010 White House Correspondents Dinner[1]

To invent the sailing ship or the steamer is to invent the shipwreck. To invent the train is to invent the rail accident of derailment. To invent the family automobile is to produce the pile-up on the highway.
—Cultural critic and philosopher Paul Virilio[2]

Introduction

The photograph that would come to be known simply as "The Situation Room" was posted to the White House's Flickr account at 1:00 p.m. EST on May 2, 2011, and it quickly became one of the most viewed images on the popular photo-sharing site. In the now iconic image, President Barack Obama and his staff are shown watching a live feed from a drone surveilling the night-time raid of Osama bin Laden's secret residential compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. In an adept and nuanced reading of the image, Liam Kennedy notes: "In the Situation Room image the state is witnessing the execution of its own violent power. This form of state violence is enacted as shock and awe, as high technological interventions in foreign terrains, with the use of drones and other forms of distant, 'surgical' killing."[3] Given its popularity across old and new media alike—from newspapers to cable news programs and social media—and given the image's evidentiary status as a partial document of the demise

of America's Public Enemy #1, it is not surprising that it became the raw material for innumerable transformations, quickly becoming its own Internet meme.[4]

One of the more popular remixes for gaming blogs was of the president holding a game controller with images of *Call of Duty* pasted on the laptop screens in the foreground (figure 4.1).[5] What this game-oriented modification and indeed the countless other parodic images communicate is that the original documentary photo is not above suspicion. The issue is not that "The Situation Room" had been somehow faked, but rather that its public circulation by the Obama administration has a clear and calculated modus operandi. Again from Kennedy: "This illusion of transparency—a powerful component in the image's iconic rendering of the workings of power—needs to be resisted and debunked. The idea that this image is transparent to the reality of the moment ignores the various ways that it is staged or edited (not faked)."[6] Of course, this concern should apply to any image that is sanctioned by the government for public relations purposes, and it is perhaps of particular importance for an administration that so frequently touts its supposed political transparency. However, the game-inflected version of "The Situation Room" image gets at an uncomfortable truth—one that military game producers have had to wrangle with during the latter parts of the Bush administration and that have become especially pronounced during Obama's years in office—namely, the suspect use of military drones.

These flying surveillance and/or weapons systems, which go by many names and acronyms—unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), remotely piloted vehicles (RPVs), remotely piloted aircraft (RPAs), or unmanned aerial systems (UASs)—but which are most generally called "drones," serve an ever-increasing number of tactical and strategic purposes for world governments and for private companies. For example, they support troop activities in Iraq and Afghanistan; armed drones such as the Predator and the Reaper sport Hellfire missiles that can and have killed suspected terrorists in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan; they have been used to spy on the activities of drug cartels and to gather environmental information on natural disasters; and drones are being used to monitor unauthorized crossings along the United States–Mexico border. As these examples make clear, drones operate in both official theaters of war and in liminal "security-scapes."[7]

Figure 4.1. One of innumerable alterations of "The Situation Room" photo, this one has President Obama holding a game controller with *Call of Duty* appearing on laptop screens.

Whatever label one ultimately employs, the drone is unquestionably the most emblematic technology of postmodern warfare, both for its long-range, remote abilities as a robotic warfighting marvel *and* for its ability to trouble political, ethical, and legal boundaries. And it is this oscillating tension, between heralding the fantastic benefits and recognizing its horrific mis-utilizations, that the gamified "Situation Room" image speaks to. The obvious fiction of Obama playing a war game gestures at a disconcerting reality about unchecked governmental control of advanced weaponry. Kennedy contends:

> The Situation Room is, in other words, a key node in the networks of military and political power that prosecute the doctrine of preemptive violence. It signifies a militarized extension of vision ("the President's eyes") beyond that technologically available to most citizens (yet which is mimicked in the popular cultures of U.S. gaming, television, and cinema), an omniscient geopolitical gaze that is activated in the surveillance, targeting, and destruction of "adversaries" at a distance. This omnipres-

ent surveillance of the globe makes possible the conduct of preemptive war-at-a-distance, the targeted killings by drones, and other forms of so-called surgical strikes. In this context, this image illustrates the sovereign power of the United States to extend violence with impunity. In the age of drones, this is indeed an iconic image of war.[8]

If the undoctored image is an iconic image of perpetual war, then the doctored version (figure 4.1) is a telling reflection on the place of ludic war in the popular imaginary.

In this chapter, I examine the representation of UAVs and drone-like technologies in three video games released in 2012: *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, *Spec Ops: The Line*, and *Unmanned*. Unlike those in the previous chapters, the games under scrutiny here are not necessarily best-selling titles. The first game, *Black Ops II*, is most definitely a blockbuster, having moved over 25 million units across multiple consoles. The second game, *Spec Ops: The Line*, is a multiplatform critical darling that has nearly crested the one million unit sales mark. Finally, *Unmanned* is a noncommercial, free-to-play indie game.[9] *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Unmanned* are included for analysis because their narratives, like that of *Black Ops II*, deal explicitly with drones, and all three texts articulate concerns about the military's use of these robotic systems. More precisely, all three games frame drones, narratively and interactively, as a "disruptive technology" to borrow David Hastings Dunn's useful term.[10] The inclusion of drones as a narrative element disrupts a number of warfighting mythologies common to militainment. For instance, they disrupt the mythology of the supremacy of U.S. military technology (*Black Ops II*); they disturb the mythology of the drone's omniscient viewing power (*Spec Ops: The Line*); and they dethrone the mythology of the noble warfighter (*Unmanned*). In other words, these games trouble the conventional shooter's interactive pleasures by cultivating a discomfort that draws attention to the disquieting moral implications of employing drones.

Before assessing how these games handle drones, it is necessary to historicize the dramatic uptick in UAV usage during the Obama presidency and to synthesize the critical literature that conceptualizes and theorizes drone warfare. This brief detour will establish why the manipulated image of Obama with a game controller is humorously unset-

tling. Moreover, such a move will demonstrate how that obvious fiction, like the ludic fictions of the military shooters examined herein, get to a deeper truth about the precarious mix of high-end weapon technology and unchecked executive privilege.

Obama's Robotic War on Terror

Thought to be named for their monotonous in-flight buzzing sound, drones have been used by the armed forces since World War I—at that time, for anti-aircraft exercises. Later, during the Vietnam War, UAVs were deployed to gather field intelligence. Further, in 1999, during NATO's Kosovo campaign, drones were first armed with munitions.[11] However, it was really 9/11 that jumpstarted the current unprecedented boom in the production and utilization of robotics by the United States military, which controls the largest force, consisting of an estimated 11,000+ UAVs and 12,000+ ground robots.[12]

The proliferation of automated technology in the new century is partly attributable to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's net-centric "revolution in military affairs," which sought to make the armed forces more agile and responsive to a variety of potential global threats (see Chapter 3 for more on Rumsfeld's RMA). While the Bush administration's failed invasions-turned-occupations largely discredited the reigning neoconservative policy beliefs about how to "spread democracy" and "nation build," the drone—as a tool both of surveillance and of death—survived these mismanaged campaigns and a change in the Oval Office. According to Peter W. Singer, author of the influential *Wired for War*, the reason for the drone's staying power is that the technology "fundamentally changed" how war was fought at a fundamental level.[13] Singer notes:

> Whether it was the longbow, the gun, the airplane, or even the atomic bomb, the essential changes were new weapons and/or ways of using them that transformed the speed, distance, or destructive power of war. By contrast, the introduction of unmanned systems to the battlefield doesn't simply change how we fight, but for the first time changes who fights at the most fundamental level. It transforms the very agent of war, rather than its capabilities.[14]

This transformation has been fully embraced by multiple agencies and multiple administrations, and the numbers are nothing short of staggering. "From 2002 to 2010, the Department of Defense's unmanned aircraft inventory increased more than forty-fold . . . [and at] the height of government deficit-reducing cuts in 2012, the U.S. taxpayer was shelling out $3.9 billion for the drone budgets for the [Central Intelligence Agency] and the Department of Homeland Security."[15] Over this same time, the Air Force increased its unmanned flying time by 3,100 percent, and it processes daily nearly 1,500 hours of moving video and still images from its 24/7 air patrols.[16]

Although unmanned aerial vehicles come in many shapes and sizes, in the minds of most of us they assume the imposing shape of the armed drone—vehicles such as the MQ-1 Predator and the MQ-9 Reaper.[17] These machines dominate the public consciousness because they offer the most dramatic displays of American military power whether they are supporting ground troops engaged in combat, monitoring suspicious activities, or conducting targeted assassinations.[18]

Obama's drone-heavy counterterrorism policy has been a difficult one for his domestic supporters and international allies to justify. On the one hand, it was a priority to close the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba, to the extent that Obama has circumvented the normal legislative channels to do so (although, this effort remains a difficult work-in-progress five years after his initial declaration to shutter the facility). On the other hand, Obama has expanded[19] well beyond his Republican predecessor the government's unmanned vehicle program, including its use by clandestine groups—such as the CIA and the (arguably more secretive) Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC)—for which there is little legislative oversight.[20] The CIA and JSOC do not, as a rule, say where they operate or explain their protocols as to who is targeted or killed. They justify this complete lack of accountability by declaring simply that they do not wish to "aid the enemy" with information.[21]

Even so, there are some numbers that we do know. For instance, in 2007, before Obama took office, the Air Force reported conducting seventy-four drone strikes. By 2012, close to the beginning of Obama's second term, that number had leapt to 333. Even as soldiers were being moved out of Iraq and repositioned in Afghanistan, drone activity was increasing dramatically. By 2012, the Air Force alone was averaging

thirty-three strikes per month, more than at any other time during the United States's decade-plus campaign in Afghanistan.[22]

Although CIA Director Leon Panetta, as well as his predecessor Michael Hayden, have been tight-lipped on the intelligence agency's use of armed drones, it is known that they rely heavily on them. Panetta has refused to get into specifics other than to say: "Very frankly, it's the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the al Qaeda leadership."[23] It is easy to appreciate Obama and the CIA's love affair with the armed drone given that, in 2008, eleven of the top twenty "high-value" militant leader targets were killed by drone strikes.[24] Four years later, the CIA pushed for further expansion of its fleet, reflecting, as drone critic and co-founder of the social justice activist group CODEPINK Medea Benjamin notes, "the agency's ten-year transformation from its pre-9/11 role as a spy agency into a paramilitary force."[25]

The CIA is certainly not alone in its push for increased use of military robotics. Numerous other government agencies and military branches are also looking to expand their unmanned ranks, as is reflected by the growing production orders and expanding base infrastructure to accommodate the swelling robotic fleets. As Nick Turse chronicles in *The Changing Face of Empire*, there are at least sixty bases around the globe that are integral to U.S. drone operations.[26] Furthermore:

> At Kandahar Air Field, that new intelligence facility for the drone war will be joined by a similarly-sized structure devoted to administrative operations and maintenance tasks associated with robotic aerial missions. It will be able to accommodate as many as 180 personnel at a time. With an estimated combined price tag of up to $5 million, both buildings will be integral to Air Force and possibly CIA operations involving both the MQ-1 Predator drone and its more advanced and more heavily-armed progeny, the MQ-9 Reaper.[27]

This technical infrastructure is being complemented by corporate resources, including private military contractors like the infamous Blackwater security firm. Jeremy Scahill, an investigative reporter for the *Nation* reported that according to a source deep within the U.S. military intelligence community, Blackwater essentially ran the drone

programs for the CIA and JSOC. Moreover, it is Blackwater that is responsible for most of the civilian deaths resulting from drone strikes. Fortunately for the company and its bottom line, Blackwater need not worry about government censure since it is shielded from congressional oversight even more than the considerably insulated CIA and JSOC.[28]

There are currently no signs of the U.S. drone programs slowing, not only because of their operational successes (setting aside, as problematic as it is, the human costs), but also because of the rapid pace of the technology's evolution. The next significant stage for these robots will likely be autonomous operation. There will come a day in the not-too-distant future when armed drones take off, fly, identify targets, and execute humans all according to sets of algorithmic parameters. "Imagine . . . ," says the *Washington Post*'s Peter Finn with tongue planted firmly in cheek, "aerial 'Terminators,' minus beefcake and time travel."[29] This relatively autonomous operation would also facilitate the massive computational coordination of a host of unmanned vehicles on land, sea, and air. In the popular press and in defense circles this future turn is known simply as "the swarm." Peter W. Singer sees this innovation as the next step in the technology's development. He notes: "So the self-organization of these groupings is key to how the whole works. The beauty of the swarm, and why it is so appealing to military thinkers of unmanned war, is how it can perform incredibly complex tasks by each part's following incredibly simple rules."[30]

Rightly or wrongly, the armed unmanned vehicle is *the* preeminent symbol of American military might in the early twenty-first century. More troubling, the widespread utilization of these weapon systems is bolstered by policy decisions to keep their uses, costs, and results hidden from American citizens and journalists. When increasingly potent and invisible military-grade technologies are shielded from public scrutiny, there can be little doubt that these weapons will result in blowback—either by violating the territorial sovereignty of the nations in which the United States operates (Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen), by reinvigorating terrorist networks' recruiting abilities, or by generating diplomatic complications for nations that might want to use the United States's violation of another country's sovereignty as pretext for raising other political concerns.

Theorizing Drones as a Disruptive Technology

Peter W. Singer contends that the drone represents a true revolution in military affairs because it transforms "the very agent of war." While this is true, so too are the second- and third-order effects of this transformation, including their technical, diplomatic, and psychological complications. These ramifications are just as revolutionary as they are unforeseeable. And it is for these reasons that David Hastings Dunn labels drones a "disruptive technology," one that "triggers sudden and unexpected effects and represents the potential for discontinuity from what went before."[31] Drones are not weapons of mass destruction; they are weapons of mass exception. They are technically and legally "exceptional" for having facilitated the targeted assassinations of suspected terrorists and their accomplices in clear defiance of international laws but in keeping with the preemptive post-9/11 war-fighting policies that were established by the Bush administration and have been expanded during Obama's tenure.

In the drone, new military tech meets old war ideology.[32] The real novelty of drones, argues Dunn, are the ways they promise to change the aerial environment in the coming decade, but not just for the United States and its Western allies.[33] This is precisely what French philosopher and cultural critic Paul Virilio suggests when he makes the case throughout much of his work that the accident is simply the dark side of scientific progress. He notes: "It is the duty of scientists and technicians to avoid the accident at all costs. . . . In fact, if no substance can exist in the absence of an accident, then no technical object can be developed without in turn generating 'its' specific accident: ship=ship wreck, train=train wreck, plane=plane crash. The accident is thus the hidden face of technical progress."[34]

The inevitable accident has already happened and will continue to do so in various manifestations thanks to the drone's inherently disruptive nature. The technical failures of these weapons systems are numerous. For example, the Air Force admitted that in 2009 more than a *third* of their Predator model drones had crashed, mostly in Afghanistan and Iraq.[35] Additionally, drones have been known to "go rogue," taking on a life of their own after failing to respond to their pilots' instructions. These noncompliant vehicles have been shot down, have crashed on

their own, and have been occasionally recovered (although not before sometimes entering restricted airspaces). Drones are also informational liabilities that have introduced no shortage of security breaches thanks to hackers' viruses and unencrypted video that was intercepted and later found on the laptops of Iraqi insurgents.[36]

Drones also introduce political challenges and have caused diplomatic failures. For example, Michael J. Boyle makes the case that, far from achieving lasting peace, these systems undermine the legitimacy and power of local governments while engendering deeper and more widespread anti-American sentiment, effectively boosting recruitment for radical Islamist groups.[37] A big part of the problem is that government officials, policy makers, politicians, military strategists, et cetera, hold a myopic view of what constitutes a "successful" drone program. Boyle argues that many continue to "operate with an attenuated notion of effectiveness which focuses exclusively at the tactical level without considering the wider strategic costs of drone warfare. The position of the American foreign policy establishment on drones—that they are an effective tool which minimizes civilian casualties—is based on a highly selective and partial reading of the evidence."[38]

Finally, there are unique mental and psychological challenges that U.S. drone pilots face after their prolonged, highly mediated work shifts—although the full extent of these health risks remains unknown. This is partially due to the tendency of military service personnel not to ask for mental health assistance—which is perhaps acutely the case for drone pilots whose work has been shielded from public view. While popular commentary on drone piloting has analogized the work to playing video games, there is a growing body of research that indicates operators appreciate the grave differences between these interactive activities. In his excellent essay on drone pilot subjectivity, Peter Asaro states:

> On the one hand, drone operators do not treat their job in the cavalier manner of a video game, but they do recognize the strong resemblance between the two. Many drone operators are often also videogame players in their free time, and readily acknowledge certain similarities in the technological interfaces of each. Yet the drone operators are very much aware of the reality of their actions, and the consequences it [sic] has on the lives and deaths of the people they watch via video streams from

> half a world away, as they bear witness to the violence of their own lethal decisions.[39]

In a similar vein, Marisa Brandt argues against technologically determinist critics who presume that screen-mediated warfare automatically and irrefutably evacuates operators' personal sense of moral accountability. Brandt uses Orson Scott Card's famous *Ender's Game* as an analytic lens for thinking through the competing public discourses about remote controlled combat. In both its literary and cinematic forms, *Ender's Game* "suggests that even when militaries utilize video game aesthetics to create weapons control interfaces, screen-mediation alone ultimately cannot blur the line between war and play and thereby psychically shield cyborg soldiers from combat trauma."[40] Wall and Monahan support Asaro and Brandt's thinking on UAV pilots' feelings of personal connection, saying: "This [interaction between human and drone] may create the possibility for a re-personalization of distant, technologically mediated attacks, wherein pilots register some experiences of trauma and responsibility. This phenomenon could vitiate some of the dehumanizing tendencies of remote warfare or, at the very least, render the experiences visceral for those viewing the monitors, whether they are pilots or the public."[41] In other words, operators appreciate the modality differences between their robotic systems and ludic drones in video games.

The research of drone scholars like Dunn, Wall and Monahan, Boyle, Asaro, and Brandt illustrates powerfully how we understand our complex and, at times, contradictory relationship to advanced robotics. Moreover, these critics are interested in revealing the dissonances in popular discourses that frame and shape our understandings of how remote controlled warfare is waged. The real innovation, they contend, has less to do with the technology proper than with all the possible, unknowable futures that come from a world that is overflowing with powerful and increasingly autonomous robots. Wall and Monahan remind us that as "surveillance and military devices, drones offer a prism for theorizing the technological politics of warfare and governance."[42] This is likewise the case for the video games that represent these high-tech weapons of war.

What follows is a textual and discursive analysis of three games that explore the disruptive potential of drones. These games deviate from the more positivistic techno-utopian vision of war introduced in the Tom

Clancy–brand titles and other shooters produced during the initial years of the U.S.-led War on Terror. Specifically, this chapter examines the loss of drone control in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*; the moral challenges that drone vision and technological distance introduce in *Spec Ops: The Line*; and how drones complicate the lives of the warfighters who pilot them in *Unmanned*.[43]

Disruptive Technology: Loss of Drone Control in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*

> We've all had problems with our PCs freezing up, frying their little computer minds. That's inconvenient. But it's much more worrisome if it's a laptop computer armed with an M-16.
> —Technology and foreign affairs journalist Noah Shachtman[44]

In *Wired for War*, Peter W. Singer recounts the horrific story of a "software glitch" afflicting an automated MK5 anti-aircraft gun during the early morning hours of a multination training exercise hosted by the South African military.[45] Shortly before 9:00 a.m. on October 12, 2007, the MK5 jammed and then, in a series of "runaway" programming errors, the anti-aircraft gun's twin 35mm cannons began wildly firing its explosive rounds. Despite the heroic efforts of a young female officer to shut down the system, nine soldiers were killed (including the officer) and fourteen others were injured by the time the gun spent its ammunition.[46]

The wildly popular *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* is the most commercially lucrative and popular game examined in this chapter, and it is the one that features robotic technologies run amuck. But unlike the overt criticisms levied in *Spec Ops* and *Unmanned*, *Black Ops II* is more ambivalent in its assessment of robotic technologies. This textual ambivalence arises from two of the gameplay modes in the single-player campaign: one a dystopic narrative campaign that features hijacked military drones, and the other, the "Strike Force" mode that grants the player a wide battlefield vision and tight control over an integrated force of drones, automated weapons, and human soldiers. The campaign's story of robots behaving

badly and the tactical management of a cyborg army in the Strike Force missions tell two dramatically different tales. However, when taken together, *Black Ops II*'s modes of gameplay raise serious questions about the uses and misuses of computer-controlled war machines.

The political ambivalence of *Black Ops II* is perhaps best exemplified by the contributions of its two lead consultants: political scientist and twenty-first-century warfare author Peter W. Singer and conservative political commentator and retired Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North.[47] Singer was brought in to work primarily on the game's future war sections (the 2025 narrative), whereas North was utilized for the sequences taking place in the 1980s. These subject matter experts (a unique production position that is explored in greater detail in the next chapter) are valuable because they lend credibility and a sense of authenticity to large-scale media projects. Singer and North are also the main talking heads on the game's multipart promotional series of mini-documentaries. Singer's expertise in futuristic military tech and North's controversial history (to put it mildly) in covert operations and illegal arms trades are competing interpretive frames for gamers' understanding of drones in *Black Ops II*, both its loyal and its rogue machines. Singer's is a critical view that argues that we should proceed into the realm of autonomous warfare with deliberate caution, while North's is the paranoid if "patriotic" view that the United States needs to win the robotic arms race regardless of its technological challenges and potential for blowback .

Like its series predecessors, the narrative of *Black Ops II* is a convoluted one with multiple storylines—the United States's proxy wars of the 1980s and its future wars of the 2020s—and multiple playable characters. But *Black Ops II* is the first game in the storied franchise to possess branching storylines—meaning that the player's narrative experience is shaped, in part, by in-game actions (or inactions) and mission successes and failures. This design choice, in tandem with an oscillating storyline that connects wars forty years apart, underscores the point that past military actions have unforeseeable and unmanageable consequences. This point is personified narratively by the game's father-son duo. The gamer plays as Marine Captain and CIA operative Alex Mason in the covert operations of the 1980s and as his son, Lieutenant Commander David "Section" Mason, during the futuristic battles of 2025. In the future storyline, the game's terrorist villain and leader of the "Cordis Die" populist

movement, Raul Menendez, gains control of America's massive drone fleet to attack the politicians and diplomats meeting at a G20 summit in Los Angeles. Menedez's attack on world leaders and the global economy is payback for the United States's proxy wars of the 1980s. Specifically, Menendez's takeover of the U.S. drone fleet is connected to America's military support of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan (when the player fights with them against the Russians) and its financial backing of the eventual Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega (the player fights alongside Noriega during a botched CIA mission in which Menendez's sister is killed).[48] The player's leaping between wars past and future illustrates how the political sins of the father are visited upon his son. That is, *Black Ops II* emphasizes that terrorists are not born in a political vacuum, but are created in part by American foreign policy decisions.

Toward the end of the narrative campaign, once David Mason is preparing to bring the captured Menendez aboard the *U.S.S. Obama*, there is a brief but telling exchange between Admiral Briggs and Secretary of Defense David Petraeus that connects the game's fictional attacks with 9/11:

> Admiral Briggs: I have a thousand drones at standby alert, ready to launch on my command. If Russia or [the Strategic Defense Coalition] gets any bright ideas, make no mistake Secretary Petraeus, your armed forces are ready.
>
> Secretary Petraeus: The last order to DEFCON 3 was given by Secretary Rumsfeld almost twenty-five years ago.
>
> Admiral Briggs: I know. I flew a patrol myself that day.

Of course, what these characters do not realize is that Menendez allowed himself to be captured to commandeer the robotic fleet. Beyond the apropos flourish of having the takeover of the drone fleet unfold on the aircraft carrier bearing President Obama's name, there is, in fact, a long history of terrorists using asymmetrical means of turning their enemies' technological gifts against them. Dunn observes:

> What the 9/11 attacks showed more than anything was a willingness on the part of the perpetrators to think creatively and to employ technologies and tactics that were entirely unconventional in order to achieve stra-

> tegic surprise, shock and destruction. They have also shown a propensity to attack symbolic targets like the Pentagon or the World Trade Center in part because they are defended and have been attacked previously. By attacking the same targets they seek to make the point that nothing is invulnerable or off limits.[49]

A potent mix of political and technological hubris on the part of the Americans facilitates Menendez's hacking of the drone fleet and his subsequent attack on the G20 leaders meeting in Los Angeles (figure 4.2).

In opposition to this dystopian storyline is a celebratory view of drones in the game's "Strike Force" missions. The key difference between these two gameplay modes is one of perspective and control. Instead of viewing the battlefield through a singular, first-person perspective, the player is gifted with an aerial view of the action and the ability to control multiple military assets. Moreover, players can assign their robotic and human warfighters with specific tasks, or they can instantly take control of any one unit—effectively "manning" the unmanned vehicles. By mixing the intimacy of the first-person perspective with the remove of the aerial view (effectively combining the interfaces and points of view of a first-person shooter and a real-time strategy game), the game's Strike Force mode makes pleasurable the effective management of a multi-unit robotic force. Being embedded in multiple robotic subjectivities—stationary guns, ground drones, cyborg soldiers—this mode reifies the perspective of advanced military hardware as perfectly functioning technologies. In fact, the ludic pleasures of drone control are such a core element of *Black Ops II*'s gameplay modality that they inspired Activision's marketing efforts. The premiere item in the game's limited "Care Package" edition (list price $180) is the Dragonfire Drone, a smallish quadcopter. The inclusion of this toy highlights how much fun remote control drones can be, while the game's narrative reminds players of the possible horrors that are opened up by this quickly proliferating technology.

As drones become more popular, cheaper, and easier to use, so too will the opportunities increase for their abuses by governments and terrorists alike. Medea Benjamin recounts the story of a Northeastern University graduate student who was arrested after plotting to attack the U.S. Capitol and Pentagon with explosives-laden drones that would have blown the capitol's dome "to smithereens."[50] Drone critics have been

Figure 4.2. Drones attack Los Angeles in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*.

wise to remind the American citizenry and its politicians that there is but a fine line separating a hobbyist toy from a weapon of terror. Dunn argues along these lines:

> Drones possess many qualities which, when combined, make them potentially the ideal means for terrorist attack in the twenty-first century. They can be operated anonymously and remotely; they present little or no risk to their operators; they can be acquired cheaply and easily; their operation can be mastered simply and safely; and they can be used in isolation or in large numbers (given their availability and cost) to devastating effect.[51]

Yet drones are not merely problematic for their range of potential misuses. They are likewise a problem for the illusion of objectivity conveyed by their unblinking stare.

Disruptive Vision: "Drone Stare" Ethics in *Spec Ops: The Line*

> People sitting in air conditioned command cells in distant countries, betting the farm on UAV optics or Blue Force Tracker symbology, will never get it right. You have to "walk

> the field" to fight the war. After all the GBUs [guided bomb units] have been dropped and the UAVs have landed, war remains a very human business. It cannot be done long-distance or over croissants and lattes in teak-lined rooms. It is done in the dirt, over chai, conversation, and mutual understanding.
> —An unnamed U.S. Army officer[52]

Game critics and fans praised *Spec Ops: The Line*, produced by Yager Development and published by 2K Games, for its clever "bait and switch" gameplay design and narrative storytelling.[53] On the surface, the game looks and feels like any other military shooter played from the third-person perspective. In the narrative campaign, the gamer plays as U.S. Army Captain Martin Walker who must locate the soldiers of the Thirty-Third Battalion (also known as "the Damned Thirty-Third") who disappeared after sandstorms all but swallowed the city of Dubai. Along with fellow Delta Force operatives Lieutenant Adams and Sergeant Lugo, Captain Walker traverses Dubai's sand-swept ruins for signs of survivors and for Colonel John Konrad, the commanding officer of the Damned Thirty-Third. The game's primary cover-and-fire combat system is exceedingly familiar, and is perhaps even dated when compared to its commercial rivals. The game's narrative setup is likewise ordinary, perhaps even banal when placed alongside the stories in franchise favorites *Halo*, *Gears of War*, and *Call of Duty*. Tacitly, *Spec Ops* asks: How is this game different from every other military shooter on the market?

In seeming response to this question, the game gradually introduces narrative uncertainties and gameplay oddities foreign to the shooter genre. For example, Walker is increasingly plagued by hallucinations that cloud his judgment; the player is forced to fight and kill fellow American GIs; the team slaughters defenseless civilians; and even the game's loading screens taunt the player with cynical questions and rhetorical ironies, including "Do you feel like a hero yet?" and "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you." As one plays through the campaign, it becomes evident that, first impressions to the contrary, this game is *not* what it purports to be. Indeed, *Spec Ops* is a critical darling because it might be the industry's first major antiwar game for challenging the conventional shooter's basic ludic pleasures.[54]

In a game filled with remarkable moments, *Spec Ops*'s most affecting sequence unfolds in its "Chapter 8: The Gate" level. Sometimes referred to simply as the "white phosphorous" stage by the gaming press, this section demonstrates emphatically the gulf between "clinical" aerial surveillance and a battlefield's on-the-ground reality. In "The Gate" our heroes must eliminate an overwhelming force to liberate civilian hostages. Walker and company elect to shell their opponents with mortar rounds loaded with white phosphorus, the same incendiary weapon that was used by U.S. troops in Vietnam and in Fallujah, Iraq (in so-called "shake and bake" operations against insurgents). White phosphorus typically kills through smoke inhalation or ghastly second- and third-degree burns.

When Walker grabs a nearby laptop, the player is treated to a bird's-eye view of the battlefield action thanks to an aerial surveillance camera (figure 4.3). The player then aims the mortar rounds by "clicking" on the scrambling black and white targets and their large military vehicles. As one might expect, the action is cold and precise and is reminiscent of combat footage posted to WikiLeaks, YouTube, and other social media sites.

This unique form of armed vision has been labeled by some, following the work of Wall and Monahan, as "the drone stare." These authors note that the drone stare "depends upon processes that seek to insulate pilots and allies from direct harm while subjecting targets to 'precision' scrutiny and/or attack. The drone stare further abstracts targets from political, cultural, and geographical contexts, thereby reducing variation, difference, and noise that may impede action or introduce moral ambiguity."[55] As the player rains death from above, the only humanity visible is the occasional reflection of Captain Walker's face on the laptop screen. Otherwise, the human enemies are simply rendered as scurrying black and white shapes against a two-dimensional field.[56] These ludic images are also doubtlessly similar to the kinds of long-range and flattened points of view featured on innumerable drone feeds in operation rooms around the globe.

The drone stare does not just flatten perspective. According to Wall and Monahan, it also collapses "identities into a single cluster of racialized information that is used for remote-controlled processes of control and harm. Bodies below become things to track, monitor, apprehend,

Figure 4.3. Captain Walker's drone view in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

and kill, while the pilot and other allies on the network remain differentiated and proximate, at least culturally if not physically."[57] But what makes the mediated shelling sequence in *Spec Ops* remarkable is not the attack; rather, it is the aftermath.

Instead of simply progressing to the next firefight, the player must traverse the burning battlefield and witness first-hand the consequences of his or her actions (figure 4.4). The few surviving soldiers scream in pain, many begging for death. The game allows the player to kill the injured or leave them to their wounds. The key affective difference between *Spec Ops*'s handling of its remote shelling and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*'s firing rounds from the safe remove of the AC-130 gunship (and, indeed, other games like it) is that the drone operator must witness first-hand what his or her firing has wrought. This stark transition from navigating a game-like interface on the laptop to touring the hellish graveyard of one's own making, complete with fire and brimstone, reflects the game's critical maneuver from the textual modality of drone control to the reality of its violent effects (figure 4.5).

Walker's team discovers that the civilians whom they were trying to save have been burned alive by the white phosphorus. Moreover, the soldiers whom the player attacked were actually trying to protect the

civilians from Walker's team (and, by extension, the player). Walt Williams, the lead writer of *Spec Ops*, said this about its design:

> We wanted the player to be stuck in that same kind of situation, even to the point of maybe hating us, as the designer, or hating the game for, in many ways, tricking them, making them feel like we had cheated the experience and forced them to do this thing. . . . They would have to decide whether or not they could choose to keep playing a game like this after this moment, or if they would be pissed to the point of putting the controller down and saying, "No, this is too much for me, I'm done with this. Fuck this game."[58]

To be clear, there is no way for the player to complete "The Gate" level without using the white phosphorous. The fact that the game forces the player's hand on this point is not especially remarkable; most games demand that players complete specific tasks for level and story progression. What is remarkable is just how brazenly *Spec Ops* flaunts its profoundly unpleasant design.

The awful truth is that it is not difficult to imagine this fantasy scenario happening in the real world. The drone stare radically flattens local difference, turning all humans caught in its robotic gaze—women,

Figure 4.4. Captain Walker's view from the ground in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

Figure 4.5. The collateral damage of dead civilians in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

children, elderly—into potential militants and thus potential targets. As Benjamin reports in *Drone Warfare*:

> According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, between 2004 and 2012, the CIA conducted over 350 drone strikes in Pakistan, with a spike of 118 attacks in 2010, killing somewhere between 2,600 and 3,400 people. The CIA killing spree was so out of control that, according to the *New York Times*, State Department officials joked that when the CIA sees "three guys doing jumping jacks," the agency thinks it's a terrorist training camp and sends in the drones.[59]

It should be added that these numbers are complicated by the Obama administration's suspect quantification of drone casualties. According to a *New York Times* report, the counting method "counts all military-age males in a strike zone as combatants, according to several administration officials, unless there is explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent."[60] This fuzzy math is justified on the grounds that counterterrorism officials do not believe that innocent people would associate with al Qaeda operatives. At Langley Air Force Base in Virginia the analysts morbidly refer to the UAV feeds coming out of Afghanistan as "Death TV."[61] Part of the reason for this ghoulish nickname is the Air Force's

practice of "double tap" firing, which sends two Hellfire rockets at each target. This tactic greatly increases the potential for additional "collateral damage" as individuals who race to help those affected are themselves blown up by a second missile. The U.K.-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism has reported that at least fifty civilians were killed in strikes resulting from this "double-tap" firing tactic.[62] At the same time, the Obama administration's accounting logic explains the decline in reported collateral deaths, despite the increase in "double tapped" drone strikes during that same period.

In a brief but elegant piece summarizing the ethical positions in support of and against drone strikes, Jai C. Galliott makes the case that there are two good reasons for taking a stand against the use of armed drones under what he calls the "asymmetry objection." First, drone warfare is almost certainly not the last resort since so many of the strikes are preemptive. Second, launching drone attacks forecloses the ability to use them as a means of diplomacy. Galliott continues: "This is not to say that the use of drones is wrong *in principle* . . . . The point is that there is indeed something powerfully disturbing and morally troubling about being killed by remote control."[63] This is clearly something that the playtesters of *Spec Ops* picked up on as well. According to Walt Williams:

> People were focus testing [that scene] and . . . they were pausing the game and they were leaving the room. . . . Some people were playing through it, waiting for it to be over and they were being very, kind of, upset that this had happened. That we had put them through this particular moment. It was affecting people very emotionally.[64]

The shifting gameplay modality of military shooters, including the oscillation between robotic control in *Black Ops II*'s Strike Force missions and drone chaos in its narrative campaign and the stark disparity between what one sees via the "drone stare" versus what one witnesses on the ground in *Spec Ops* introduce pronounced ludic ambivalences that can draw out the dissonances of playing with postmodern war. There is also at least one example of a video game tackling the discontinuity between the American mythology of the idealized warfighter and the reality of conducting highly repetitive and occasionally lethal office work as a drone pilot.

Disruptive Identity: The Banality of Drone Pilot Subjectivity in *Unmanned*

> The obvious benefit to the military is that its recruits come in already partially trained; because of all their time gaming online, young soldiers find it very easy to adapt to using unmanned systems. The video game generation learns very quickly. . . . The typical young PackBot operator just needs about a day and a half of training to get down the basics. Much like with their gaming, they then need only a few weeks after that to figure out all of the moves and reach expert level.
> —Joe Dyer, former Chief Strategy Officer of iRobot Corporation[65]

Unmanned is unlike any other game examined in this book with the exception of Stanley's *Invaders!* art installation or the *September 12th* countergame described in the Introduction. Despite its not being a shooter game, it is worth taking this slight detour because of what *Unmanned* has to say about drones and hegemonic ludic war pleasures.[66] *Unmanned* is a flash-based browser game developed by Molleindustria, the radical video game project of Paolo Pedercini. Pedercini, who currently teaches game design at Carnegie Mellon University, where he and his collaborators are known for crafting online "games" (note the cautionary quotes) and interactive experiences that stand in direct opposition to the tenets of the mainstream games industry.[67] This collective is best known for producing a wide range of provocative and controversial titles: *McDonald's Videogame*, about the operations of the fast food industry; *Operation: Pedopriest*, a game about the Catholic Church's sexual abuse cases; *Faith Fighter*, a 2D street fighting brawler that pits the deities of different faiths against one another; *The Free Culture Game*, about the struggle between copyright laws and free culture; and *The Best Amendment*, a game created in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre and offered as a response to the National Rifle Association's assertion that the only reasonable response to an armed "bad guy" is an armed "good guy." *Unmanned* falls squarely into Molleindustria's leftist oeuvre, focusing on the humdrum existence of a drone operator living in the

American West. The title has been more critically acclaimed than many of Molleindustria's previous endeavors, and it won the 2012 Grand Jury prize at IndieCade, an international festival for independent games.[68]

In *Unmanned*, the gamer plays as a blond-haired, squared-jawed UAV pilot, husband, and father. The game is constructed as a series of mini-games presented in split-screen vignettes. The "action" in *Unmanned*'s levels is anything but spectacular: the player has to shave his face, drive to work, remotely follow a suspected militant, call his wife, and play a few military shooter games with his son. There are also mini-games that take place as the protagonist sleeps, as he runs from irate Middle Easterners and counts sheep. The game contains different conversational threads that result in different narrative pathways, incentivizing multiple playthroughs. *Unmanned* disturbs the image of the noble warfighter by focusing on the monotony of the protagonist's office job and his ordinary day-to-day activities (figure 4.6). Like *Spec Ops: The Line*, this game criticizes not just the machinery of war, but the ways in which video games remediate and celebrate certain combat activities over others.

Unmanned's split-screen visual design and its slow, plodding pace masterfully gesture to a key tension in popular debates about drone operators: namely, the positive, techno-centric "heroic mythology" versus the critical, "anti-heroic mythologies" of remote warfighting. A number of drone scholars—in particular Asaro, Dunn, and Wall and Monahan—have noted how these competing discourses organize ways of understanding the mediated labor of robot pilots. This tension is largely due to the conceptual challenges that advanced robotics pose to traditional notions of warfighting. As Dunn notes: "Paradoxically, at a time when heroism and self-sacrifice have become prominent themes in public discourse as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, drones present warfare as the antithesis of these values. They represent warfare as post-modern and post-heroic."[69] This is because robotics, and remotely controlled unmanned vehicles especially, blur a multitude of ideas that are essential to the popular imaginary of American warfare. Wall and Monahan comment on these contradictions, stating:

> Some of these blurred identities include insurgent and civilian, criminal and undocumented migrant, remotely located pilot and front-line soldier. Not only does the use of military drones destabilize identities and their

Figure 4.6. The unnamed drone pilot hard at work in *Unmanned*.

> representations in both combat and borderzones, but conceptual categories as well are subjected to homogenization of radical difference as borders are refashioned as combat zones and combat zones are constructed as ontological borders between "us" and "them" or "civilization" and "barbarism."[70]

The last point is perhaps the most salient one when thinking about what it means to be a noble warfighter and/or a drone pilot—identities that could either be coterminous or mutually exclusive. For drone apologists, military robotics save (soldiers') lives at reduced costs and allow these warfighters to act swiftly and ethically. Meanwhile, critics typically raise three kinds of objections: that it is immoral and unjustifiable to use unmanned vehicles against foes who cannot retaliate in kind (similar to Gaillott's "asymmetrical objection"); that physical distance contributes to an emotional and empathetic distance; and that the drones' game-like interfaces create "trigger-happy" operators.[71] Interestingly, *Unmanned* tackles all three of these criticisms, while also critiquing militainment that elevates the pro-drone rhetoric.

Unmanned takes place over the course of a working day in the life of a drone pilot, and is bookended by two sleep-dream sequences. In the first, the player must flee from irate Middle Eastern villagers—an old man, a woman, and a child. If the player successfully evades them, he transforms into a UAV and escapes before waking up. In the second, the

pilot tries to fall asleep while counting sheep. During this mini-game the player must click the running sheep at right time so they can leap over a fence; unsuccessful jumps result in an exploding, pixelated sheep. In both dream mini-games the player must deal with work-related demons, either evading ethical culpability for actions or experiencing the anxiety of striking a button at the right time (the mistiming of which results in the death of innocent sheep).

Unmanned is less critical of the human operators who pilot drones than it is of the structures of military command and the ideological appeal of mediated warfighting technologies that contribute to the banalization of war and of killing. Thus, the game takes a similar position as *Ender's Game*, as is argued by Brandt, in regards to operators' deep awareness of their work. For Brandt: "While critics worry that warfare mediated by a screen and joystick leads to a 'Playstation' mentality towards killing, *Ender's Game* presents a theory of remote-control war wherein this technological redistribution of the act of killing does not, in itself, create emotional distance or evacuate the killer's sense of moral agency."[72] The asymmetry of drone warfare is never more apparent in *Unmanned* than when the father and son bond over video games. Indeed, it is telling that the only time that the player is under threat of being shot is when playing a stereotypical military shooter. In this virtual shooting gallery, the player fires at "whack-a-mole"–style targets; however, contrary to the player's paid drone operation, the targets here can fire back. Moreover, the player's soldier avatar in this mini-game can take damage and die. The father and son discuss the differences between dad's work and the game while they play, including the differences between the symmetrical conflict of *Unmanned*'s FPS mini-game and the asymmetrical power of drone operation.

A second common criticism of drone warfare is that the vast physical distance between hunter and hunted contributes to an emotional distance. The bifurcated double panel design of *Unmanned*, with the gameplay action on one side and the dialog on the other, makes the player transition from one side to another and thereby reinforces a general feeling of disconnectedness. Additionally, all of the human relationships in the game are mediated in one form or another: the protagonist and his coworker sit shoulder to shoulder and stare at the same set of monitors, he chats with his wife on the phone during a smoke break, and he plays video games on the couch with his boy. Even the protagonist's moments

alone are mediated by something else, such as the image of himself in the mirror as he shaves, or trying to recall a song's lyrics while driving to work. Pedercini said of his game's major theme:

> Yes, disconnection is a theme that runs all the way through *Unmanned*. It is embedded in the split screen and dual gameplay that reflects the schizophrenic life of the protagonist, and in the characters' lives as well: in the father and son's difficult bonding, in the protagonist's potentially challenging relationship with his wife. It's even hinted in some conversations about the transformation of the battlefield and the changing relationship with the enemy.[73]

And, yet, the game is so compelling and demands multiple playthroughs because of all the missed opportunities to connect with others. In a game that is unrelentingly critical of militarized mediation, *Unmanned* remains remarkably effective at cultivating a desire to humanize our nameless pilot.

Finally, *Unmanned* takes on the popular criticism that drone operation makes pilots "trigger happy" by integrating game-like interfaces into their remote control and viewing technologies. Many shooters borrow the visual design of actual weapon interfaces to lend authenticity to their fictional war stories, even as defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin and Raytheon utilize popular video game controllers to increase the ease of use for drone pilots who have already logged innumerable hours as gamers. *Unmanned* achieves its intertextual criticism of this bi-directional flow of technologies and design techniques by structuring its mini-games according to common game design conventions, as well as by rewarding players with medals for gameplay achievements. Again Pedercini: "*Unmanned* is, into [sic] some extent, about game culture and about seeing your life as a videogame, so I wanted to reference different genres in the various chapters. There is a pseudo-FPS, a pseudo-driving game similar to *F1 Race* for the [Nintendo Entertainment System] . . . and I wanted to have a music game à la *Guitar Hero*."[74] The player is also rewarded with parodic trophies for accomplishing mundane in-game feats. For example, the player earns the "Outstanding Introspection" achievement for selecting the right reflection questions; the "Excellence in Shaving" medal is awarded for a clean shave; the "Driving Operations" medal is earned if the player stays on the road on the way to work;

and the "Honorable Dad Unit" medal is unlocked if the protagonist has a meaningful conversation with his son. The absurd accomplishments punctuating each level lampoon a popular design convention as well as the general push to "gamify" one's daily routines.

Unmanned's unrelenting banality keeps the existential reading of its title in the forefront of one's mind. The question is not simply "What does it mean to remove the human from the vehicle?" but "Does the unmanning of the vehicle dehumanize the target of the drone stare *and* the one who controls its robotic gaze?" Whatever mental health professionals determine about the psychological risks posed to drone operators, the pressure on these military personnel will only increase as the scope and scale of these activities expand.[75] *Unmanned*'s banality is a sad but welcome reminder that humanity is often the first casualty in debates about the political efficacy of remote controlled warfare. Pedercini contends that his game is an "attempt to connect, even if though fiction, to an everyday reality of war that is so carefully removed from our existence. We are living the paradox of being inundated by militaristic entertainment while we barely know about what happens, for example, in Yemen and Somalia where U.S. covert operations are regularly taking place."[76]

Conclusion

Modern military shooters routinely play with multiple layers of mediation and remediation in the service of making their virtual combat pleasurable. This is perhaps no more evident than when players control drones in combat and intelligence-gathering scenarios. The weapon systems featured in franchises like *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Ghost Recon* grant players considerable advantage over their opponents during single-player campaigns and transform opposing human players into scampering targets during multiplayer sessions. But, as this chapter has argued throughout, controlling UAVs to gather battlefield intelligence or to strike down enemies from a safe remove are not always guilt-free gaming pleasures.

The idea that technology will get away from its masters is a compelling dystopian story that has circulated widely in popular science fiction films (the *Terminator* series, *Wargames*, *Transformers*, *Blade Runner*, the *Matrix* trilogy), television shows (*Battlestar Galactica*), and video

games (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [2011], *Mass Effect* [2007], *Metal Gear* [1987], *Borderlands* [2009]). Yet the widespread consternation over drone utilization is no longer the stuff of science fiction. It is science fact. Drones are inherently disruptive technologies because they can be modified and used by terrorists, they also often fail to function as an objective eye in the sky, and they trouble their pilots' access to the brave and noble American warfighting mythology. It makes sense that these problems would find themselves reproduced in popular culture and in video games. Drones likewise continue to be a real diplomatic stumbling block. According to a Pew Research report:

> There remains a widespread perception that the U.S. acts unilaterally and does not consider the interests of other countries. In predominantly Muslim nations, American anti-terrorism efforts are still widely unpopular. And in nearly all countries, there is considerable opposition to a major component of the Obama Administration's anti-terrorism policy: drone strikes. In 17 of 20 countries, more than half disapprove of U.S. drone attacks targeting extremist leaders and groups in nations such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.[77]

This popular opposition will become only more pronounced as the domestic uses of drones increase and the lines separating military and commercial uses further blur. In February 2013, President Obama signed the Federal Aviation Authority Modernization and Reform Act requiring that drones be integrated into domestic airspace by September 2015 (following heavy lobbying from drone manufactures and associated commercial interests).[78] Moreover, according to industry analysts, worldwide spending on military drones will likely increase from $5.6 billion in 2013 to $7.5 billion in 2018, and that cumulative spending on drones could go as high as $89 billion during the next decade.[79]

Drones disrupt the plans and policies of the countries that employ them, just as they can disrupt the hegemonic ludic war pleasures for gamers who play with them. The next chapter continues this line of inquiry by examining the challenges that marketers face when selling the public on playing ludic war during a time of international conflict, as well as the strategies these firms pursue to minimize negative associations that might paint them and their war-wares in a negative light.

5

Marketing Military Realism

Selling the Gameplay Modality of Ludic War

Introduction

This chapter investigates the fine line that video game marketers tread when selling the hegemonic pleasures of ludic war. Marketing materials are vital sites for critical media inquiry because these paratexts prime would-be player-consumers for how they should understand these games and (more importantly for producers' purposes) why gamers should buy them. Contemporary video war games are typically advertised as offering players ever-increasing levels of visual and aural realism and computational verisimilitude. However, because "simulation fever"—a moral panic concerning media modality discussed shortly—is latent in all games and is of particular concern to titles that trade in simulated violence, military shooters are typically packaged in such a way as to celebrate acceptable technological or aesthetic attributes, while sidestepping issues that might spur critical reflection about their inability to model the social reality that attends to worldly conflict.

Commercial video games about military interventions are rarely sold on their ability to prompt gamers into reflecting critically about how the combat scenarios are designed for their enjoyment. Recall that the games examined in the last chapter remain exceptions to this commercial and design truism; *Unmanned* is a noncommercial art game, and *Spec Ops* and *Black Ops II* contain shifting modalities of play that draw attention to their construction as games and the problems posed by robotic war machines, respectively. Instead, one is only supposed to think about select aspects of combat while playing a war game.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare's key marketing paratexts—its production personnel interviews, press reviews, and online video advertisements—prefigure how "military realism" is ideally understood for the best-selling military shooter of 2007.[1] Not only do these market-

ing paratexts generate hype and work to drive sales but, as importantly, they also suggest particular textual readings over others with the goal of insulating *Call of Duty*'s war play from interpretations and criticisms that might link the on-screen action to violence in Iraq and Afghanistan. The story of a television ad campaign will bring these points about pleasure, representation, modality, and play into finer focus.

"Standoff" and Simulation Fever

With the release of the Xbox 360 game console on May 12, 2005, Microsoft launched its "Jump In" series of television and Internet commercials, inviting viewers to join their newest online gaming experience. The "Jump In" campaign was notable for at least two reasons: The ads did not showcase gameplay footage, and they represented diverse groups of people playing together in the real world. The players depicted in these ads included women, the middle-aged, and people of color, demographics not historically associated with video gaming. There was, to be sure, a conspicuous absence of white teenage boys in these spots. The commercials showed public play across urban spaces. In one ad, kids and adults engaged in a citywide water balloon fight; in another, unlikely bystanders literally "jumped" into the action of a Double Dutch jump rope game; a third fast-paced ad showed two groups of young adults bringing their "cops and robbers" game from an apartment to the busy city streets below; and in another ad, hot air balloons delivered a sofa, TV, Xbox 360, and games to a parking lot, turning the onlookers into a gathering of gamers.[2] These live action commercials welcomed gamers of all ages to pick up a controller and join the diverse online play. In fact, the "Jump Rope" spot won the "Best of Show-National" and "Mosaic Award" for multicultural advertising at the 2006 ADDY Award Gala hosted by the American Advertising Federation. Mark Tutssel, the chief creative officer of the advertising agency Leo Burnett Worldwide, praised the spot, saying: "This extreme Double Dutch jump rope jam metaphorically captures the excitement and social aspect of the new generation Xbox 360."[3]

Yet the "Jump In" campaign was not wholly successful. The McCann-Erickson advertising agency responsible for the lauded multicultural "Jump Rope" commercial also produced a spot called "Standoff" that Microsoft elected not to air in the United States. Anticipating possible

domestic backlash, Microsoft ran "Standoff" briefly in Europe instead. A quick description of the ad will explain Microsoft's understandable hesitation.

"Standoff" unfolds in a crowded train terminal.[4] As two young men pass one another, their eyes meet and their glances hold. They continue to stare as they turn to face one another. Suddenly, one man thrusts his arm at the other's face, with his index finger pointed out mimicking a handgun (figure 5.1). The other man quickly responds in kind. Another man standing nearby does the same. This action multiplies quickly, spreading like a virus through the station as the traveling population is transformed into a mob of stationary faux-gun-wielding pedestrians. The terminal is at a standstill—a standoff. The camera cuts aggressively between the multitude of tense faces and stiff arms. Suddenly, the man in the original standoff shouts, "Bang!" and the station erupts into a chorus of mouth-made gunfire. People dive for cover, hide behind tables for protection, and collapse after being "shot." The spot ends, as the others do, with the call for us to "Jump In."

While we can only speculate as to how this ad *might* have been received by U.S. television audiences, we can more easily appraise why it was not aired in the States. The commercial's depiction of a massive game of *Assassin* (also known as *Gotcha*, or *Killer*) provocatively connects the pleasures of mediated gameplay with violence in the real world. That is, play killing and play dying unwittingly but evocatively connect the mediated Xbox video game experience to a moral panic discourse that has hounded the games industry since its emergence in the 1970s. This resilient albeit unsubstantiated concern maintains that video games are the primary driver for a range of violent acts wherein teens or young adults are unable or unwilling to distinguish between right and wrong. The April 20, 1999, massacre at Columbine High School is arguably the most high profile case of heinous crimes that have been supposedly caused, in large part, by violent games.[5] Clearly not wanting to cast its products or services in a negative light by associating it with such controversies, Microsoft shelved the "Standoff" commercial in the United States. But there is perhaps a deeper reason for Microsoft's gun-shy attitude toward the ad—namely, simulation fever.

Video game designer and scholar Ian Bogost, who coined the term, defines "simulation fever" as "the nervous discomfort caused by the

Figure 5.1. Travelers size one another up in Microsoft's "Standoff" ad.

interaction of the game's unit-operational representations of a segment of the real world and the player's subjective understanding of that representation."[6] Because any computational simulation or video game necessarily models some processes and not others, and because there is a potential friction between the way that a process is represented and the way that a user interprets said process, gameplay potentially produces a state of anxiety in the player. Or, to connect this idea directly to this book's concerns: Simulation fever is the uncomfortable slippage of gameplay modality. It is the incongruity between the game's functioning as a textual machine and its imagined connection (or not) to the player's ideas of reality.[7] Of course, games do not always have to engender comfortable mediated experiences, as was argued last chapter. However, video games almost always strive to be consistent and coherent with respect to their own organizing design logic. The contextual understanding of a video game's relation to lived reality explains why, for example, a flight simulator set in New York City where planes pass effortlessly through buildings could engender states of anxiety. This modeling would not only disagree with the user's understanding of physics, but could also rekindle thoughts of the September 11 attacks.

Simulation fever is not an existential ailment restricted to video games; it affects nonmediated games, too. Bogost states:

> Instead of standing outside the world in utter isolation, games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions. There is a gap in the magic circle through which players carry subjectivity in and out of the game space. If the magic circle were really some kind of isolated antithesis to the world it would never be possible to access it at all.[8]

Hence, the depiction of a spontaneous *Assassin* game in the "Standoff" ad proves simulation fever's nascent potentiality in all physical and virtual games, which is especially problematic given the ad's playful representations of violence in a public space after 9/11. According to Bogost, "The idea of simulation fever insinuates seriousness back into play and suggests that games help us expose and explore complicated human conditions, rather than offering mere interruption and diversion."[9] The case of "Standoff" likewise demonstrates that simulation fever and moral panics are serious considerations for game marketers since undesirable gameplay associations jeopardize potential sales by laying bare the medium's representational limitations. All games, mediated or otherwise, must correlate—however incompletely or incoherently—with the player's lived reality. It is this necessary connection to a player's life that is perpetually threatening to break the magic circle's seductive spell. Thus, during those dissonant moments when gameplay processes fail to match an understanding of similar worldly actions, players may consider difficult or complicated aspects of reality and the game's failure to render it accurately.

Video games wherein one can shoot one's friends and be shot at, however fantastic and absurd the depiction of violence, are mediated play that threatens to force gamers into a consideration of actual shooting and actual dying. Thinking about taking another's life demands deep and personal introspection—an activity that is most certainly not within the typical purview of commercial shooters. It is this potential that the marketers of shooters must guard against, lest their products be seen as raising unpleasant, complicated, and ultimately less profitable questions or feelings for their audiences. The "Standoff" ad, by depicting a

scenario in which everyone is an armed enemy, is a type of play that too easily forces considerations of paranoia and violence in a post-9/11 space.

Social Realism versus Technical "Realisticness"

Simulation fever in the case of military-themed gameplay highlights dramatically the fact that military realism is *not* military reality. The former is an aesthetic and discursive category; the latter is an actual state of affairs. As Alexander Galloway argues, near-photorealistic digital representations should not be confused with existential realism. Moreover, video game studies should be careful to define realist games as those that, as Galloway states, "reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice."[10] This chapter adopts Galloway's useful term of "realisticness" understood as a visual and aural "yardstick held up to representation."[11] Commercial military video games use technological and representational realisticness to deliver viscerally affective experiences. These design attributes do not transform them into realist texts, however, because these games often fail to acknowledge soldiers' lived experiences (again, games like *Unmanned* and *Spec Ops* are rare exceptions to this rule). For a game to be existentially realistic, there must be congruence (what Galloway calls his "congruence requirement") between the game's content and the player's subjective context, or "some type of fidelity of context that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one's thumbs, into the game environment and back again."[12] Galloway illustrates his argument with the anti-Israeli occupation combat games *Under Ash* (2001) and *Special Force* (2003), PC titles produced by the Syrian company Dar al-Fikr and by the Lebanese political group Hezbollah, respectively. Unlike most military games produced in the West, these games are realist texts because Palestinian gamers can play through their political battles on the screens before them. Realism, for Galloway, is more dependent on an invested sense of contextual congruence than any textual fidelity to high definition spectacle. That is, these Palestinian first-person shooters are not realist texts because they critique the first-person shooter genre; in fact, they are fairly standard in their gameplay designs. They are instead realist games because they enjoy a deeply

meaningful and personal correspondence between what is played and who plays them. (Galloway would almost certainly label *Unmanned* as a socially realist game.)

The marketing materials examined presently take the opposite tack: They argue only for the fidelity of the text. The advertised pleasures of playing wars past, present, or future is, in actuality, the pleasure of playing with a highly delimited textual realisticness. Most shooters rarely contain elements that might connect players to the lived, everyday realities of warfighting. The marketing of commercial military shooters largely works to collapse the divide between textual realisticness and any lived understandings of "reality" to argue that the given game's attention to technical detail offers all the necessary representational and simulational bona fides to engender an immersive experience available to any who might buy it. Thus the marketing campaigns for post-9/11 military shooters are overwhelmingly concerned with selling only select elements of military realisticness: sophisticated enemy artificial intelligence, military weapons and vehicles that look and act like the real thing, and combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war, both historic and "ripped from today's headlines." The industry promises its dedicated players and its would-be consumers a near-real combat experience, irrespective of the gamer's personal play context. Said differently, military realism purports to tell one all that one would need or want to know about war, privileging a delimited textual gameplay modality over contextual modality that might jeopardize its ludic pleasures.

Post-9/11 shooters' advertising rhetoric of military realism cuts across its varied marketing materials. This chapter examines how three types of paratexts—game production personnel interviews, press reviews, and a viral ad campaign—prefigure how military realism is ideally understood for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. This *Call of Duty* installment presents a valuable case study not only because the game was an extremely popular title across gaming platforms and online gaming services, but also, as was noted in Chapter 2, because it was the first of the storied franchise to be set in the twenty-first century, inviting players to combat post-9/11 terrorists around the globe.[13] In addition to generating excitement for the game and driving sales, *Call of Duty 4*'s marketing paratexts suggest particular readings over others with the goal of inoculating the pleasures of their ludic wars from the threats of simulation fever.

The Political Economic Utility of Video Game Paratexts

In *The Meaning of Video Games*, Steven Jones offers media studies one of its first sustained analyses of gaming paratexts. Building on Gerard Genette's concept of the "paratext," or the "multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception," Jones ably demonstrates that players understand video games as much by the external material conditions of the title's publication and marketing as by its internal narration and gameplay design.[14] This inclusion of marketing efforts, fan texts, walkthroughs, game modifications, and other associated ephemera that swirl around a gaming artifact underscores how meaning-making is always the result of "complex reception histories."[15] Jones is not the first to see the utility of Genette's concept or the power of paratexts to shape how the center text is interpreted. Television scholar Jonathan Gray assesses how marketing hype and press reviews initiate processes of meaning-making before media consumers ever lay their eyes, ears, or fingers on the advertised goods.[16] Gray states:

> In other words, paratexts guide our entry to texts, setting up all sorts of meanings and strategies of interpretation, and proposing ways to make sense of what we will find "inside" the text. When viewed as paratexts, hype and synergy become inherently textual and interpretive . . . to create structures of meaning for texts-to-come.[17]

As Gray later quips of the paratext, it is the "text [that] begins before the text."[18] And because paratexts include officially sanctioned trailers, fan-authored art, and third-party action figures, they have the potential to foreclose or to open up readings and interpretive strategies for different constituencies.

Marketing paratexts are of particular value to cultural producers because they help mitigate against a variety of business risks endemic to new media production. This is especially true for a concentrated and oligopolistic video game industry, where it is estimated that only a scant 3 percent of games ever turn a profit.[19] Video games must depend on paratexual buzz to entice consumers into parting with fifty to sixty dollars for a new console title because industry producers cannot rely princi-

pally on ad revenue, as does the television industry; nor on subscription fees, as do mobile providers; nor can they expect that ancillary products will make their games profitable over time, as is the case with some Hollywood properties.[20] These industry-specific pressures result in a more conservative production environment where design choices too often conform to tested generic formulae and appeal to reliable gamer demographics. The military shooter is, along with sports and role-playing games, one of the stalwart generic categories of console and PC gaming because these titles have been popular among the industry's young, male "hardcore" consumer base. Stephen Kline and his colleages underscore the pressure to produce games like *Call of Duty 4*, stating:

> Software development is a risky business. Most products fail. There are fortunes to be made with pioneering games that break new cultural ground. But for each successful experiment scores crash and burn, taking with them companies and careers. This creates a powerful incentive to stick with the tried and true and ride on the coattails of proven success. The repetitive pattern is reinforced by the fact that game developers are recruited from the ranks of game players. Such asexual reproduction gives game culture a strong tendency to simple self-replication, so that shooting, combat, and fighting themes, once established, repeat and proliferate.[21]

The industry remains comfortable with making its products for and marketing its wares to its hardcore constituency despite the recent successes of the Nintendo Wii console, family friendly franchises like *The Sims* (2000), *Rock Band* (2007), *Wii Sports* (2006), and the *Lego*-brand games, as well as mobile gaming, in attracting more diverse audiences.

Major advertising campaigns are often as homogenous, safe, and one-dimensional as the titles, both of which have been produced by guys, for guys; ads like Microsoft's "Jump In" campaign remain industry anomalies. In *The Business and Culture of Digital Games*, Aphra Kerr calls the myopic discourse that dominates game magazines, websites, and fan forums "hegemonic heterosexual masculinity."[22] In a similar vein, Kline and coauthors argue that game production has long been dominated by a state of "militarized masculinity," which is evident in games across genres and platforms.[23] They note:

> This [production] complex interweaves ingredients that range from shooting and fighting skills to magical spells of destruction, strategic and tactical war games, espionage, and scenarios of exploration and progress culminating in the ability to conquer alien civilizations. The elements are dispersed across a very wide variety of genres of gameplay—"shooters," "action," "strategy," "role playing"—and are often combined in "meta-genre" syntheses—"role playing plus strategy," "sports plus shooting." But taken together they constitute a shared semiotic nexus revolving around issues of war, conquest, and combat that thematically unites games ranging from [*Myth II*:] *Soulblighter* to *Shogun* to *SpecOps*.[24]

Kerr's "hegemonic heterosexual masculinity" and Kline and coauthors' "militarized masculinity" accurately characterize the prevalence of violent and sexist tropes across the industry's texts and paratexts and explain how economic imperatives constrain design experimentation. However, this chapter goes beyond these useful though broad descriptions to outline the specific marketing strategies behind the military realism being sold in a post-9/11 marketplace.

Video game marketing primes gamers for how they should derive their ludic pleasures, and it serves as the preliminary textual interface between producers and consumers. Thanks to a wealth of professional and fan sites, players often have access to early gameplay footage, advanced interviews with production personnel, and press previews by game critics before they ever play the game in question. Kline and colleagues underscore the critical discursive and economic roles played by this paratexual vanguard:

> To say that cultural intermediaries like marketers and designers "dialogue" and "negotiate" with the gaming consumer may seem perverse. But from the point of view of capital, it makes good sense to open up channels to consumers, respond to their criticisms, adapt to their ideas and interests, and translate the information into products. We call this mediated-marketing nexus a negotiation in recognizing that cultural industries especially have been at the forefront of audience and market segmentation research, forging a reflexive circuitry of audience surveillance and an acute awareness of, and responsiveness to, changing preferences, tastes, and subcultures.[25]

Provided there is sufficient time and resources, early gamer feedback may be incorporated into the game design, or the marketing materials may address or preempt outstanding concerns collected from playtesting or feedback posted to online forums. This vital interplay between producers and consumers underscores the fact that production and consumption are not monolithic categories but exist in a dialectical relationship and are connected by a porous techno-social membrane that allow paratexts to move bi-directionally—from producer to consumer, and from consumer to producer.

One can cite numerous cases of this productive back-and-forth dynamic in video game culture. For example, *Counter-Strike* (1999) remains one of the most celebrated computer game modification tales. Originally a community-developed game modification (or mod) for the PC hit *Half-Life* (1998), *Counter-Strike* became such a popular download that *Half-Life*'s publisher, Sierra Entertainment, bought the project and packaged it for retail release. The game's development studio, Valve Software, later hired the mod's designers. The *Halo*-based machinima series *Red vs. Blue* is another example of an unofficially produced fan paratext that was later coopted by the game's marketers to hype the release of *Halo 3* (2007).[26] One additional example of a company responding to its community is the inclusion of the "NoM4D" control scheme in *Call of Duty 4*. Randy "NoM4D" Fitzgerald is an avid gamer who has competed on the Major League Gaming circuit. Fitzgerald has been afflicted with the rare muscle and joint disorder Arthrogryposis since birth, and is paralyzed from the neck down.[27] With the aid of a modified controller, Fitzgerald plays video games with his mouth. The game's developer, Infinity Ward, responded to Fitzgerald's request and programmed a control scheme into the game to meet his physical needs.

The "NoM4D" game controller setting suggests just how valuable maintaining strong ties to a fan community is to video game producers, and the *Counter-Strike* and *Red vs. Blue* examples illustrate how popular fan paratexts are meaning-making (and, in time, could be money-making) texts in their own right. These cases are not just pre-textual window-dressing. Fan paratexts produced by users and advertising paratexts crafted by marketers open channels for communicating concerns valued by each group and may over time be coopted by the other for economic or community-building ends. Yet the fact remains that of-

ficial, publisher-driven game marketing is valuable precisely because it is disseminated *before* a game title hits store shelves and is thus the first word on how the public should understand the ludic experience. Gray argues:

> Ads and hype cannot merely demand our consumption: they must buy it with textuality, creating some form of script and meaning for the product or text in question, giving us some sense that this product or text will offer us something in particular. However, if this is so, then many interactions that we have with texts will be set up and *framed* by the hype that we consume; more than merely pointing us to the text at hand, this hype will have already begun the process of creating textual meaning, serving as the first outpost of interpretation.[28]

Call of Duty 4's personnel interviews, press reviews, and viral ads build excitement for the product by prefiguring how would-be players should expect the game to look and operate according to an advertised aesthetic of military realism, while also attempting to avoid or contain potential interpretive externalities like the simulation fever afflicting Microsoft's "Standoff" ad.

Call of Duty 4 "[Is] Gonna Make a Weak Gamer Soil Himself"

It is standard practice for game producers to grant gaming websites and magazines advanced coverage and "sneak peeks" of products under development during the months and weeks leading up to a game's retail release. Such techniques build buzz, generate interest, and allow producers to extol their wares' virtues before game critics and consumers pass judgment in their columns and with their money. The marketing efforts for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* began in earnest well before its November 5, 2007, North American release date because it was the first of the franchise to deviate from the previous games' popular World War II setting. In a host of interviews conducted for game sites, magazines, and cable programs, Infinity Ward's production personnel heralded the game's aesthetic of military realism, while promising gamers that *Call of Duty 4* would remain faithful to the franchise's successful design formula.

In a series of interviews, Grant Collier, one of the studio heads at Infinity Ward, discusses wide-ranging aspects of the upcoming game, but spends considerable time describing *Call of Duty 4*'s near-real-world setting and political narrative. Collier labors to strike a balance between the game's fictional content and the lived reality of contemporary warfare. For instance, he stresses that the game is not "about the war in Iraq . . . [but instead, *Call of Duty*] is a global conflict" and that the gamer is charged with hunting down a "fictitious villain in a fictitious setting."[29] Collier also rebuffs any characterization of the game as a "tactical shooter," which typically connotes slower pacing and the need to obey strict procedural demands (for example, the Tom Clancy–brand *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* franchises discussed in Chapter 3 are tactical shooters). Instead, he frames *Call of Duty 4* as a combat-oriented action game in the same visceral vein of the previous titles. He states: "It's going to be an action-packed modern game with rapid redeployment of forces . . . players being in multiple locations, being able to see multiple types of conflict. It's the battlefield from the soldier to the satellite, and everything in between."[30] During a co-interview with Collier and Hank Keirsey, *Call of Duty*'s military advisor who will be discussed shortly, Keirsey asks Collier on behalf of a Russian journalist why the Russians are "still" the bad guys since they're "not the Communists anymore."[31] Collier downplays the negative gamer feedback, saying that this narrative choice has irritated a few who have posted on the site's forums, but that it is important to remember that the game is fictionalizing a Russian separatist group. It does not, according to Collier, negatively represent Russians citizens or the Russian military. In these promotional videos, Collier leverages his insights into the game's design and his authoritative status as a knowledgeable production head to shape the expectations of gamers and critics alike, essentially reassuring would-be consumers that the brand's celebrated style of ludic war remains firmly in place even as Infinity Ward takes their franchise and loyal gamers into the twenty-first century.

Having outlined the fictional aspects of the title's enemies and the nonspecific locations of the urban firefights in the Middle East, Collier argues that the game's essential military realism is based on the production team's attention to details like combat tactics, gear, and dialogue, as well as the game's sophisticated visual and audio design. In a particularly

striking promotional video that chronicles Infinity Ward's research process, Collier describes how the production team took an educational field trip to the "Marine Air Ground Combat Center" in Twenty-Nine Palms, California. This video shows Marines training in a mock town alongside the game's artists who are taking notes and recording audio and visual data. The clip then alternates between the recorded live-action exercises and the game development process unfolding on PC monitors to attest to the fidelity between these two worlds. Collier declares emphatically: "Our guys are diehard about being as authentic as possible."[32]

The final segment of this promotional video shows a group of Marines visiting the Infinity Ward studio to playtest a beta version of the game. As Collier tells the story, the visiting Marines were defeated easily during their first few matches. However, once they began communicating and coordinating their assault tactics, they easily outwitted the opposing team of beta testers. Apocryphal or not, the rhetorical power of this final anecdote suggests that even though *Call of Duty 4* was produced outside of the defense community proper, Infinity Ward engineered a title that nevertheless enjoys high degrees of military realism because of the generous input of the armed forces and because it has even been beta-tested by a group of approving soldiers.

Military advisors and subject matter experts play a critical role in the development of war entertainment in general, and in video games in particular. As the members of a production team who ensure that military terminology and protocols find accurate digital expression,[33] they are likewise quite useful for marketing purposes. Hank Keirsey, *Call of Duty 4*'s military advisor, is a good case in point. Like Collier and the other Infinity Ward creatives, Keirsey is the subject of numerous promotional videos posted before and after *Call of Duty 4*'s release. Keirsey, who has decades of experience with the Army infantry and who has taught history at West Point, began working with Infinity Ward during the creation of the first *Call of Duty* title in 2003. Keirsey's testimonials about the game's two-year development cycle and the design team's meticulous data-collection methods lend credence to the marketing materials' claims of authenticity. In one of the more colorful interviews, Keirsey remarks: "The game has approached a level of intensity that's gonna make a weak gamer soil himself. It is that good. It's really got a feel for it."[34] His praise continues:

> Someone asked me, "Could you use this game as a rehearsal tool?" And I actually said, "Absolutely. You could, but it's not the intent of the game." The last thing on the mind of the developers was making anything that could be used by the Department of the Army or anybody else. But what they did by making the game so authentic . . . by getting all the physics exactly right, getting the weapons exactly right, the ballistics right, frankly—you know—if you had a hit squad to go in on Osama bin Laden . . . you could do a hellacious rehearsal. Headset-to-headset, man-to-man. [You] still got to go do it. . . . But the commands, the coordination between people, rehearsing contingencies—[*Call of Duty 4* is] a tremendous engine to do that with. Again, it's unintentional. It just happens to be because [Infinity Ward] made it so close.[35]

Keirsey's testimonial is all the more compelling because of his outsider status as an advisor and because of his personal military experiences—rhetorical strategies that were employed again in the promotion of *Black Ops II* with Oliver North and Peter W. Singer.

Another noteworthy theme in Keirsey's interviews is his belief that the *Call of Duty* games appropriately memorialize soldiers' sacrifices. He was reluctant at first to work for a video game company until he saw their "passion" for creating an authentic military past. Keirsey was also initially attracted to the first *Call of Duty* game because the World War II subject matter "taught something about a generation that did amazing things."[36] He does not feel any different about *Call of Duty 4*'s depiction of today's soldiers, saying: "I enjoy working with these games because I think they're a tribute to the guys that are doing this for real." This suggestion amplifies the supposed military realism by promising players a way of virtually paying tribute to soldiers by buying and playing the game. This is now a fairly standard tactic when marketing contemporary military shooters.[37]

These promotional interviews connect technical elements of military realisticness with the *promised* experiential pleasure of playing ludic war, while also containing simulation-based anxieties that could result from the dissonance between one's knowledge of how modern combat is conducted and how it is modeled in *Call of Duty 4*. Marketing materials generally hold out the promise for some future reward, but press reviews are another kind of paratextual fare entirely and need not establish such

commitments. The reviews of *Call of Duty 4*, while mostly favorable, allude to the anxieties of simulation fever that are largely elided in the developer interviews.

"Moments [in *Call of Duty*] Are Almost Too Real and Painful to Bear"

If the personnel interviews for *Call of Duty 4* are paratextual testimonies that narrate the developers' commitment to military realism during the game's production phase, then the press reviews are the paratextual evaluations by gaming's official taste experts on how the designers have executed their craft. *Call of Duty 4* earned high aggregate scores of 94 for both the Xbox 360 and PS3 on MetaCritic.com, placing it in the top pantheon of best-reviewed games for both systems. But professional critics and reviewers do far more than score and rank a game based on in-house rubrics. Press reviews, which are usually penned before the game's release date but are often embargoed until the game goes on sale, join the chorus of other information that influences how gamers understand a title's place within a genre and marketplace (to say nothing of whether players should part with their money). Furthermore, as elite and experienced players themselves, game critics also suggest how best to interpret titles' content and gameplay experiences. This section surveys how high profile reviews posted within days of *Call of Duty 4*'s November 2007 release offer strategies for understanding the game's ludic pleasures of military realism and how gamers might appreciate the technical sophistication of the simulated violence without succumbing to the game's negative affective elements.

The reviews for *Call of Duty 4* are nearly uniformly pleased with Infinity Ward's decision to transport the franchise from its World War II theaters to modern-day combat zones. Making the title's armed conflict timelier also makes the game more relevant to players' social experiences (potentially increasing its social realism and contextual modality). As Gamespot.com's former editor Jeff Gerstmann puts it, "By bringing things into a fictionalized story that still seems fairly plausible, the developer has made a much heavier game."[38] "Heavier" likely means that the game is more personally affecting for gamers who may know soldiers or for those who may have served or are currently serving.

Besides the diegetic universe's fictional but no less horrifying terror plot, this game saw graphical and gameplay improvements over *Call of Duty 3* (2006). Perhaps not surprisingly, the reviewers are most comfortable with praising the game's technical achievements. For instance, in Hilary Goldstein's review for IGN, the critic writes:

> This is a gorgeous game from top to bottom. It runs almost perfectly, with only a few rare frame rate hiccups, and offers rich details, great texture work, excellent animations for your allies, awesome particle effects, and some stellar lighting. The sound is equally impressive. Combat is loud. The shouts of your allies, the curses of your enemies, the ominous clink of a grenade falling at your feet, all go to creating an immersive experience. You may well lose yourself in combat, drawn in by the visuals and the sound. This is a technically excellent effort that won't disappoint.[39]

And Gamedaily.com's Chris Buffa strikes a similar note in his review:

> To play [*Call of Duty 4*] is to admire it. Not only does it play remarkably well, but it looks and sounds gorgeous. Its powerful scenes of civilians getting executed and buildings crumbling strikes [sic] deep in the hearts of anyone that pays attention to the daily new [sic]. The way soldiers clear rooms and the mission in which you safely bomb terrorists from hundreds of feet in the air reminds us of the shows on the Discovery Channel. We find ourselves both amazed and terrified at the detail, how characters move like actual human beings, how weapons look and sound exactly like their real-life counterparts and the screams of pain, anger and joy.[40]

But perhaps the most literal game review is a video feature produced by IGN-Australia that compares the virtual *Call of Duty 4* guns to their real-world counterparts at a Las Vegas gun store.[41] In this video, the IGN correspondent fires numerous pistols and assault rifles, as the report alternates between the live-action demonstration and the game's firefights. The host explains the pros and cons of each weapon (in terms of accuracy, power, recoil, and so on) and how Infinity Ward brought its digital weapons to life.

This video's quite literal comparison between worldly arms to their ludic proxies assumes an unproblematic correspondence and fidelity be-

tween the real and the virtual. What comparisons like this and, indeed, the marketing efforts of military realism ignore are the implications for how players understand the experiences of the game's virtual soldiers, and how that understanding informs what they know of actual soldiering. This is, in other words, the key difference that Galloway strikes between textual realisticness and social realism; it is also the experiential gulf between textual and contextual modalities introduced in Chapter 1. Marketing paratexts are far more likely to advertise the game's representation of modern war's battlefields and its machinery than it is to sell the gamer on the equally boring and horrifying social reality of conducting war. The parodic news source, *The Onion*, offers perhaps the keenest insight into *Call of Duty*'s inability to model the social reality of war when it reported on the then-fictional *Modern Warfare 3*, in which players will spend most of their time "hauling equipment," "filling out paperwork," and "complaining about how bad the cell phone reception is."[42] (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* was, however, a short-lived joke, as the actual game arrived in stores on November 8, 2011.)

Unlike the production personnel, the game reviewers did grapple with the subjective discomforts of playing a military game during a time of war and with how *Call of Duty 4*'s more haunting moments engender feelings of simulation fever. Chris Buffa of Gamedaily.com echoes Keirsey's comments about the game's brutality as being an interactive testament to the valor and sacrifice of today's soldiers. Buffa states:

> Combat is visceral and unrivaled. You've never experienced anything more vicious and unforgiving. Rockets zip past your head, attack choppers shred nearby houses with gunfire, jets carpet bomb an area, tanks blast through walls and soldiers fall by the hundreds. The insanity, coupled with your character's inability to absorb as may hits as in other games (*Halo 3*, *Bioshock*), causes you to question your actions and rethink strategies. Bottom line, if this game represents even just a fraction of the hell actual soldiers deal with on a day-to-day basis, we have a newfound respect for the armed forces.[43]

Call of Duty 4 has been praised for introducing particularly stark battles and scenes into the single-player narrative in such a way that they underscore the ugliness of war. Recall the game's bleak opening credit

sequence described in Chapters 1 and 2 when President Al-Fulani-the-player is escorted to his televised execution. "Through the eyes of Al-Fulani, you watch as [the terrorist, Khaled] Al-Asad raises a gun to your face; a gunshot rings out and the screen quickly fades to black."[44] Gamepro's Travis Moses punctuates his description of the execution, stating, "Because of [*Call of Duty 4*'s] near-photorealistic visuals, moments such as this are almost too real and painful to bear but it again reinforces Infinity Ward's ability to expertly engage both the body and the mind."[45] Andrew Pfister of EGM/1up.com argues similarly that despite the potential for an unpleasant approximation of current military action in the Middle East—a "delicate issue being addressed in a medium best known for 'dude, blow something up'"—and because of Infinity Ward's pedigree with crafting World War II games, it has struck the right tone of military realism for playing the current Global War on Terror. Pfister notes:

> But as any *Call of Duty* fan can tell you, the people at Infinity Ward are skilled storytellers and masterful scenarists. It's because of this that *Modern Warfare* finds itself in the company of movies like *Black Hawk Down*, rife with intense portrayals of serious and complicated situations that, though perhaps not entirely realistic, still convey to the rest of the non-enlisted world how war might feel: completely f***ed up.[46]

The sacrifice and professionalism of the U.S. Marines and British S.A.S. forces (the two squads the gamer plays as in the single-player campaign) are presented in the press reviews as morally righteous actors even if the limited military interventions themselves fail to enjoy the same mythological gravity as World War II campaigns. The press reviews recognize elements of simulation fever that attend to playing wars ripped from today's headlines and the need for smart design when crafting ludic wars based on recent events. However, the journalists diffuse any concerns over this subjective tension by celebrating the moral virtues of armed service personnel and the ability of Infinity Ward to update its award-winning franchise without falling prey to simulation fever. The main press reviews largely reinforce the claim delivered in *Call of Duty*'s major TV spot: "Wars change. Weapons change. Soldiers don't."

"Very Fun Game, American Scum"

Call of Duty 4's "World Leaders" web videos illustrate just how important fan-authored paratexts have become to the efforts of video game marketers. The amateur-looking "World Leaders" videos star five international politicians typically vilified by the mainstream U.S. news media offering their own reviews of *Call of Duty 4*. Like most video reviews that alternate between a talking head and game footage, these satirical shorts contain archival footage of a leader at a press conference alongside gameplay clips from *Call of Duty 4*. Conspicuously poor broken-English voiceovers play in these off-color spots, and they closely resemble any number of fan videos posted to video sharing sites like YouTube or satirical bits from late night comedy programs like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or *The Colbert Report*. Indeed, the "World Leaders" videos testify to the assumed value of fan-authored texts to help assure a game's success precisely because of what these videos are *not*—namely, fan-authored texts. These pieces were not crafted by a die-hard *Call of Duty* fan, as is suggested by the site's dated appearance; the page's simple layout and repetitive wallpaper background call to mind a MySpace or Geocities page. Rather, the site was engineered by DDB Los Angeles, a successful ad agency, and bankrolled by Activision, the game's publisher.[47] Additional downloadable content such as the desktop wallpaper graphics and AOL Instant Messenger buddy icons featuring the URL hint at site's production origins, as do the web links to Infinity Ward and Activision.

The pseudo-fan created "World Leaders" project impressed the advertising community. The campaign won numerous awards at the 2008 Belding Awards competition, and it garnered the "Most Attention Getters" and "Don't You Wish You'd Thought of This" awards at the 2008 MI6 Video Game Marketing Conference. According to a blog entry by Paul Sears, an account supervisor with DDB LA, the advertisement's goal was to "raise awareness of the game and give gamers a reason to believe that *Call of Duty*'s move from a World War II game to the arena of Modern Warfare was going to make the game even better." Sears continues, posing the rhetorical question: "Who better to endorse *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* than the experts—war hungry world leaders?"[48]

The videos feature Russia's Vladimir Putin, Libya's Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi, Cuba's Fidel Castro, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,

and a media report issued on behalf of North Korea's Kim Jong-Il. The short pieces are bookended by mock broadcasting slates, most are accompanied by some grandiose nationalistic orchestral score, and these absurdist caricatures assume a familiar resemblance to how these leaders are typically represented by the mainstream U.S. press. Unlike the other *Call of Duty* paratexts, these parodic game reviews acknowledge the centrality of play in game culture—a recognition that is largely absent from the earnest military realism discourse, including the aforementioned interviews and the press reviews.

Play, humor, and textual experimentation are not all that easily commensurable with an advertised military realism that supposedly pays tribute to real soldiers and closely models ballistics and combat tactics. Indeed, play is often disruptive, subversive, farcical, and irreverent. These videos acknowledge what the gaming community already knows: that gamers engage in *all manner* of playful behaviors during virtual war sessions that are neither realistic nor particularly militaristic. Despite Sears's blog assertion that "war hungry" world leaders make for the best *Call of Duty* advocates, the videos' repurposed archival footage deflates the production personnel's serious rhetoric of military realism by acknowledging the importance of a vibrant fan community that is absent from *Call of Duty 4*'s major TV spots. The "World Leaders" project signals that fan-authored paratexts are such a critical component for AAA game marketing campaigns that producers can manufacture fan-look-alike paratexts for themselves and for their fans.

Beyond suggesting a politically conscious and creative fan community, the "World Leaders" pieces also complicate the issue of simulation fever. But how would such obviously parodic paratexts contribute to any state of simulation anxiety? The answer lies in the paradoxical nature of play itself; a dynamic interplay of reality and fantasy that is manifest in the "World Leaders" project. First, these videos inject timely political knowledge into the frames of meaning around the *Call of Duty* franchise, offering players worldly referential pleasures external to the fictitious game characters and unnamed settings.[49] The production personnel and the game make it abundantly clear that *Call of Duty 4*'s story and characters are fabricated. Yet the parodic game reviews assume more than a passing familiarity with these leaders' personas. This crafty piece of advertising delivers contemporary political references in

the absurd package of game reviews from world leaders turned game critics.

The videos are thus playfully ambivalent about how the paratextual political truths and the textual representations of military realism offer potentially oppositional readings of the game's depiction of international conflict after 9/11. The videos make this friction clear with the leaders offering their mixed reviews of the game's near-real narrative and setting. For example, Vladimir Putin gives the single-player mission a negative review because the idea of stolen Russian nuclear weapons is a "very implausible story," and he finds the notion "disgusting, like Polish vodka." Similarly, the state-run media correspondent for the late Kim Jong-Il reports that while the "glorious leader" enjoyed certain aspects of the game—saying "Very fun game, American scum"—because the game has nukes, "there is no saving Korea. One star." In Castro's review, the Cuban leader says that he has been absent from public view because he has been playing *Call of Duty* (figure 5.2). Castro praises the game, saying, "Not since baseball has America given us something this exciting." But due to his personal history of health problems and the game's levels of excitement, his brother Raul is not permitted to play at the same time. The fictional "complaints" levied about simulation anxiety are most pronounced in the al-Gaddafi's video. The deposed and late colonel exclaims:

> Game developers! Come on, you say this is an unnamed Arab country? Fictional? This is Libya. It's obviously Tripoli. Pretending this isn't Libya is as stupid as pretending Liberty City isn't New York. If this isn't Libya, then a camel doesn't poop in the desert. [Silence. Person coughing.] Camel? Pooping in the desert? Like a bear? Nevermind.

Near the end of the review, he freezes the action and circles Tripoli's beach with a telestrator tool, exclaiming: "You can practically see the hot babes in their tropical-print burkas!"

The Libyan leader's reference to Liberty City, the New York City lookalike in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2007), is not the only intertextual allusion to game culture in these videos. These reviews repeatedly acknowledge a playful game culture largely ignored by the game's "official" marketing materials. For instance, Putin (whose online gamer handle is "Shoot-

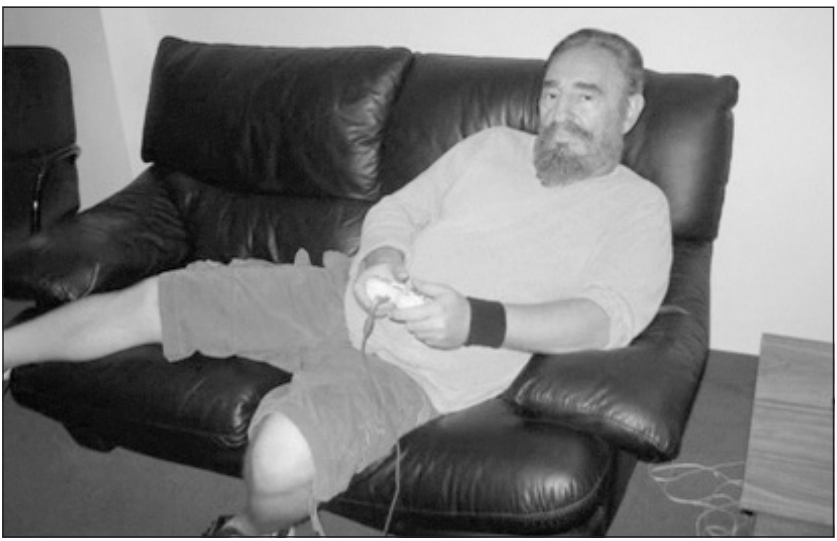


Figure 5.2. Castro playing *Call of Duty 4*.

inPutin187") praises the game's multiplayer design, saying that he has designed his own class of sniper called the "Russian Bear." He boasts: "I am silent but deadly, like a Boris Yeltsin fart." According to President Ahmadinejad, Iran has also used the game's multiplayer customization options to develop a new ability to defeat "the Great Satan." Their army's newest order is that of the "anti-tea-baggers," which will protect their soldiers against having their posthumous faces squatted on by their victors.[50] Ahmadinejad's announcement of this new ability is accompanied by a provocative image of a military medal made from twin tea infuser balls (figure 5.3).

Conclusion

The off-color jokes and insider humor that characterize the "World Leaders" videos are in keeping with Kerr's hegemonic masculinity and Kline and coauthors' militarized masculinity, as this gendered and sexist discourse is aimed at appealing to its target demographic of boys and young men. Moreover, the celebrated liminality between worldly facts and gaming fiction lessens the potency of any critical protests against

Figure 5.3. "Anti-tea-bag" perk from Ahmadinejad's "World Leaders" video.

Call of Duty's representation of postmodern war. These parodic videos are a preemptive volley by Activision against those who might criticize their war games for profiting from contemporary armed conflicts. These advertising paratexts argue that even *if* the advertised game were about real people and places (which the latter games invoke), there is still nothing to be concerned about because *Call of Duty* is a "game." In effect, these spoof reviews complicate the game's politics to obscure its varied strategies of producing its ludic war pleasures. The "World Leaders" videos do not eliminate the potential for simulation fever as much as they stigmatize any allegations of moral panics resulting from taking video games too seriously or confusing the gameplay modality for reality itself.

Simulation fever, however, is not only some cognitive disconnect or textual anxiety that impacts sensitive gamers during gameplay. These simulation-based concerns can negatively impact promotional buzz and sales, making them a legitimate issue for game developers across genres.[51] Comically presenting world leaders as *Call of Duty* gamers injects political levity into a game that is purported by its production

personnel to be distinctly apolitical but viscerally affecting. The logic of Infinity Ward's personnel seems to operate as follows: If military realism is the sum total of all the military details programmed into the game, then omitting key geo-political facts such as real locations and bodies politic means that the game must be politically neutral. The game's marketers, however, understand that meaning-making, hype creation, and sales can be amplified by offering the game community paratexts that acknowledge their insider jokes and by giving them license to disregard potentially uncomfortable complexities of representation. For all of its advertised military realism (that is, its technical realisticness and positive framing of U.S. service personnel), the marketers of *Call of Duty* and other shooters would have you remember that it is, in the end, "just a game." The next chapter turns to interrogating what avid players of video war games mean when they deploy this common refrain and the identity politics and practices that are bound up in becoming a ludic soldier.

6

Promotion of Self in Everyday Strife

Gaming Capital of the Ludic Soldier

Introduction

"Fuck you, noob tube!" Wait. Me? Oh, no. A gamer had called me out publicly in this, the very first night of fieldwork. I had evidently committed some unwritten gameplay foul that marked me as different from the dozens of other gamers playing *Call of Duty* during one of LANopolis's all-night gaming sessions.[1] It would take me some time to realize what I had done to elicit such a barbed response from a young man whom I would later come to know as Lee. I will return to this outburst shortly to answer the related questions: Just what is a "noob tube" exactly? And more significantly, why does something like a noob tube need to exist in ludic war culture?

This chapter analyzes how war-gamers collectively maintain their community of play in a shared physical setting, and the individual actions they take to construct their identities as "hardcore" gamers. [2] Examining how players establish their bona fides as legitimate ludic soldiers and police their community of play will disclose how ludic war's pleasures are integrally connected to the broader circuits of cultural practice analyzed in previous chapters.[3] This chapter's findings are the result of several qualitative data collection methods including over seventy hours of participant observation at LANopolis, a commercial gaming center, during its all-night marathons (10 p.m.–10 a.m.); semi-structured interviews conducted with the center's management and patrons during non-peak afternoon hours; and a focus group with LANopolis's most avid war-gamers. The research questions that guide this contextual play chapter include: What social practices characterize an avid military shooter community?[4] What competencies make one a "good" ludic soldier? And to what extent does the ludic soldier's identity depend on knowledge of worldly combat?

This chapter's tongue-in-cheek title gestures to its two major points of theoretical and methodological inspiration. The first is Erving Goffman's influential *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* wherein the famed sociologist argues for a dramaturgical view of symbolic interactionism.[5] This approach to understanding microscale social interactions contends that people perform for one another like actors on a stage (by choosing their props, costumes, and so on). Yet unlike most stage plays, individuals perform simultaneously as actors and audiences and are therefore engaged in dialectical exchanges wherein actions are constantly being accepted, discredited, or ignored. To look like a gamer at LANopolis, a participant must perform like a gamer, and this performance must be recognized as such by one's peers.

This performance alone, however, is not enough to qualify one as a "good" ludic soldier (as is previewed by the second half of the chapter title). Players must also generate and strategically utilize "gaming capital," or their knowledge of virtual worlds, gaming technologies, fan discourse, and the social rules of play if they wish to stand out in this competitive setting.[6] In the case of military shooters, gaming capital includes the proper use of weapons and equipment, a strategic understanding of a game's maps, winning tactics for various gameplay modes, an appreciation of gaming etiquette, and a knowledge of the underlying hardware technologies that facilitate these battles (among other skills). The cultivation of gaming pleasures in the context of a PC gaming center is predicated on players' abilities to prove their play competencies—that is, to *not* play as a "noob tube"—by leveraging their textual, paratextual, and contextual gaming know-how. Before discussing the gameplay lessons culled from my field observations, interviews, and focus group session, I will narrate briefly the lessons gleaned from scholarship about researching game communities.

Studying Video Game Communities

In the inaugural issue of the journal *Games and Culture*, Tom Boellstorff makes the case for sociology's and anthropology's potential contributions to game studies by providing frameworks for the cultural theorization of play and the methodology of participant observation.[7] Boellstorff contends, citing the work of famed anthropologist Bronislaw

Malinowski, that the value of participant observation (as oxymoronic as the term might sound) is it "allows the researcher to study the gap between what people say they do . . . and what they actually do."[8] Staking these kinds of knowledge claims tempers analyses that might otherwise treat game culture as an overly determinist or structuralist schema radiating only or primarily from the titles' rules of play. "Such theorizations of culture also further the idea that *culture* is to *game* as *context* is to *text*, making it difficult to ask how in some circumstances games can act as contexts for culture."[9] It is precisely for this reason that this project has not framed the context of play (or any gaming paratext for that matter) as emerging from the text, but as overlapping circuits of social practice. These mutually constitutive fields exert pressure on the others but are rarely directly causal. In other words, the gaming text unquestionably shapes its attendant gaming culture, but it is neither the first nor final word about the kinds of practices that imbue games with meaning; that is, the shooter is no base to a ludic war superstructure.

My thinking on how best to conduct my study of a play community built largely around military shooters has been shaped primarily by scholarship that refutes claims of technological determinism without neglecting questions of power and ideology;[10] acknowledges the researcher's interactions with gamers during the fieldwork and its reporting;[11] and assesses how gamers generate social capital through play, as well as the influence of extratextual elements in shaping gaming culture.[12] Although these studies on game communities are not methodologically exhaustive, I suspect that they have been formative for a number of researchers because they share compelling approaches and critical commitments. Curiously, it is a classic study of a tabletop "paper and pencil" fantasy community that has most shaped my thinking about how the ludic war experience represents its own distinct cultural realm.

In *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Gary Alan Fine argues that fantasy role-playing game communities, like those that play *Dungeons and Dragons*, represent an identifiable subculture because their players use cultural elements to construct their own cultural systems. Fine justifies his object of study as follows:

> I researched fantasy role-playing gamers because they seek to develop new and unique cultural systems. Whereas all groups create culture to

> some extent, most of these cultural systems are limited in scope. Fantasy gamers, on the other hand, are explicitly concerned with the development of a cultural system; they judge their satisfaction with the game by the vigor of the culture they created and by the degree to which they can become personally engrossed in it. For a sociologist interested in the interactional components of culture, few groups are better suited to analysis.[13]

Fine later clarifies this point, stating: "It is not that groups *have* culture, rather they *use* culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events."[14] Fantasy gamers, therefore, draw from meaningful personal events and broader cultural phenomena to make their shared adventures resonant and evocative. But unlike open-ended fantasy role-playing, ludic warring is at all times mediated by commercial technologies that are often accompanied by expansive ad campaigns and other interpretive frames. For these reasons, this project has emphasized the power that texts and paratexts wield in the co-creation of a ludic war cultural system.

Shared Fantasy is an inspired piece of research and is an inspirational work for *Playing War* because it takes gaming pleasures seriously while interpreting said experiences critically. Fine remarks:

> For the game to work as an aesthetic experience players must be willing to "bracket" their "natural" selves and enact a fantasy self. They must lose themselves to the game. This engrossment is not total or continuous, but it is what provides for the "fun" within the game. The acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things the players find engrossing.[15]

In other words, inasmuch as gaming experiences are rule-bound, they are not defined solely by their rules. Were this indeed the case, scholars would need only consult a rulebook to understand a given play experience. Instead, all social games are potentially rich research sites because they provide analysts with "natural laboratories" for studying how cultural forces play out in a series of fictional scenarios.[16] Rules say what players can do in a game; they do not say what actually happens or what those actions mean. Or as Fine puts it: "Only through ethnographic

investigation and in-depth interviews can we discover the rules for such games in their behavioral—rather than formal—contexts."[17]

Finally, Fine reminds us that "fantasy gaming is . . . a unique social world, treasured for its uniqueness, but like any social world it is organized in ways that extend beyond its boundaries."[18] This is also the case for war-gaming. As a practical research matter, learning the art of ludic war means using participant observation to identify the practices that gamers value and enforce in their community before conducting interviews and a focus group to ascertain more precisely what these gamers find meaningful about their mediated battles. Keeping this research preamble in mind: Welcome to LANopolis.

The Lay of LANopolis

Entering LANopolis for the first time can be a disorienting experience. The gaming center, which is sandwiched between a liquor store and a dentist office in a strip mall in a medium-sized Texas city, does little to welcome the uninitiated. The signs on the front door state simply, "PC Repair, Upgrades" and "XBOX 360 & PC Gaming." More telling are the interlocking tapestry of faded game posters that cover the large windows on either side of the front door. Not only do these sun-bleached advertisements signal that this is a gaming establishment, but they also function as ad hoc blinds, keeping the sun out of a room that requires limited light and a cool climate.

Inside, LANopolis' main room is a one-thousand-square-foot, L-shaped open space with concrete floors, yellow walls unadorned with pictures or artwork, and high ceilings with exposed ductwork and ceiling fans. The Spartan décor and the lack of illumination generally privilege the technology that populates the space—video screens. Upon first entering the room late one summer evening, I was immediately stunned by the range of concurrent gaming activities and the amount of ambient light emanating from screens throughout the room. The disparate gaming activities, coupled with the lack of signage or a greeter, offer little guidance to newcomers as to where they should go, whom they should approach, or where they might find directions that could otherwise put them at ease.

It is sometimes even difficult for LANopolis's veterans to navigate the throng of bodies during the center's peak hours. There are friends

playing side by side at the stand-up arcade games near the front door, patrons seated shoulder to shoulder at card tables supporting their own desktops and laptops,[19] and on-lookers peering over the backs of gamers playing with the Xbox 360 and Nintendo Wii consoles against the room's rear wall. Once I squeeze my way to LANopolis's main desk and cash register at the center "elbow," I encounter one of the center's few pieces of signage. It is a dry erase board that lists upcoming events, the prices of snacks and drinks ("no outside food or beverages allowed!"), and fees for the various hardware repair services. Along the room's longest wall are twenty high-end PCs loaded with a bevy of popular games. This PC bank is one of the establishment's few immobile features, and it is the main attraction for many of LANopolis's clientele. The game center's layout and its range of services largely match accounts of LAN (local area network) cafés elsewhere.[20]

While the expensive PC equipment is tethered to the room's perimeter, the open floor plan can be reconfigured easily for the clientele's changing needs. For example, card tables and power strips are brought out for the all-night gaming marathons, and other events like tournaments and private parties can easily be hosted at LANopolis. Such spatial malleability serves at least two needs. First, because LANopolis is not always bustling, the small business accommodates a variety of party requests. According to the owner, Thomas Christopherson, a life-long video gamer himself, gaming centers must provide a diversity of services in order to remain financially viable. As if to confirm this maxim, LANopolis's closest competitor twenty miles to the north went out of business while I was conducting this chapter's fieldwork.

The second benefit of the space's flexibility is that it permits the players, especially those at the all-night marathons, to make themselves at home in this otherwise austere space. Moving small tables around, logging onto computers next to their friends, and watching movies and live sporting events on the big screens while sprawled out on beanbag chairs, patrons are encouraged to leisurely consume a wealth of media together. The dynamic space also complements the liminal nature of the gaming experience itself; the movement between worlds is mirrored in players' transition between mediated activities in a transformable gaming center. Catherine Beavis and Claire Charles draw a connection between the LAN café's physical space and the gamers' identity work, stating that "as

'real life' physical locations, LAN cafés provide sites where on- and offline presence, identities and communities overlap and merge as players engage in online play and tournaments with seen and unseen others, and participate in the jointly constructed textual world of the game."[21] LANopolis is, like the play modes and control settings in video games, what the players make it—physically and socially.

While the foregoing description of LANopolis mirrors similar reports about PC cafés and gaming centers elsewhere, the question remains: What is the site's connection to ludic war and hardcore gaming? Quite simply, there is no *necessary* connection between LANopolis, gaming identity, and ludic war. Yet this is not the whole story either. Because this gaming center facilitates social play for a range of games on high-end PCs, and because these computers sport the most popular shooter titles on the market, it provides the sufficient conditions for LAN-based ludic wars to unfold. If ludic warring is a contingent social activity that is militarized through overlapping textual, paratextual, and contextual practices, then ludic LAN war is an amplified version of war play wherein avid gamers have either self-organized (in the case of home LANs) or sought out a commercial setting to host these technically optimized battles.

What's So "Hard" about Hardcore Gamers?

There exists in the minds of gamers and non-gamers alike the image of the hardcore gamer. It is not a flattering one. The following screen capture (figure 6.1) is a convenient point of entry for examining how popular culture imagines this oft-maligned character. First, the hardcore gamer is thought to be obese. He is usually white. He is often slovenly. He is thought to be straight and almost certainly single. He is, not incidentally, a he. And, according to *South Park*'s critically acclaimed episode on obsessive *World of Warcraft* players from which this image is taken, the hardcore gamer "has absolutely no life" (figure 6.1).[22]

The hardcore gamer is the antithesis to the casual gamer. In his book on casual gaming, Jesper Juul sets the gaming stereotypes against one another as follows:

> There is an identifiable *stereotype of a hardcore player* who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large

Figure 6.1. The hardcore gamer in *South Park*'s "Make Love, Not Warcraft" (2006).

> number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games. The *stereotype of the casual player* is the inverted image of the hardcore player: this player has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.[23]

Media scholars Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter strike a similar note, emphasizing the discursive construction of the hardcore demographic:

> The hardcore is a demographic stratus well recognized in game marketing: young men who play intensively, have disposable income, adopt new hardware platforms early, buy as many as twenty-five games a year, are literate about games and conventions, read the game magazines, and form opinions, through word of mouth or online, about games and machines.[24]

I used the *South Park* image (figure 6.1) as an icebreaker for the focus group I conducted in the multipurpose room at the back of LANopolis; the one the regulars call the "*Rock Band* room" because it houses the cluttered menagerie of plastic peripherals used in popular music rhythm games like *Rock Band* (2007) and *Guitar Hero* (2005).[25] When I shared the image with the informants, it evoked instant laughter, with all but the eldest participant recognizing its origins. The gamers agreed that the episode was obviously mocking gamers who could not or would not moderate their obsessive gameplay, with a few adding that they know gamers like the one satirized.

Stereotypes or not, gamer identities do not emerge wholly formed out of the ether.[26] Rather, player categories like "hardcore," "casual," or a point in between such as "core"[27] result from overlapping design, marketing, and play practices. But what exactly puts the "hard" in hardcore gaming? Colloquially speaking, we might say that hardcore players are avid "fans" of video games. Yet I have avoided invoking this term and issues of fandom because hardcore or power gamers,[28] as they are sometimes called, are not necessarily synonymous with video game fans.

As popular a subject as any in media studies, fans and fandom are generally understood within the critical literature as media consumers who evidence some productive output. Fans may invest their time, energy, and emotions[29] into the creation of some novel textual artifact, including modifying or "poaching" existing texts,[30] constructing their own unofficial advertising paratexts,[31] participating in fan communities,[32] or by physically embodying their adoration of fictional characters through costume play (or "cosplay").[33] I do not wish to argue that hardcore gamers cannot be fans, only that they *need not* be fans. Moreover, the gamers I interviewed quite purposefully did not self-identify as "fans." Justifying his own gameplay practices, David, a twenty-three-year-old unemployed LANopolis regular, noted colorfully: "There is a certain enjoyment of getting *really* good at a game—at beating the snot out of it." David is referring to perfecting one's gameplay actions within the virtual world, not to the disparate acts of creativity typically associated with fandom like writing fan fiction or performing cosplay.

Game scholar Hanna Wirman argues rightly that it is not useful to equate all instances of "productivity" in games as being commensurate with fan productivity.[34] As an alternative, Wirman suggests these cat-

egories: (1) *textual productivity*: play acts and game choices; (2) *instrumental productivity*: creating a text or item that assist self/others with gameplay; (3) and *expressive productivity*: creating a text or item that speaks to game culture (that need not have any in-game utility). This is not mere analytic hair-splitting. Striking this medium-sensitive distinction between "gameplay" and "playing with game" makes it clear that consumptive practices do not always transfer from one entertainment medium to another without slippage; hence, medium-specific reassessments of users' actions are necessary. If modality changes across entertainment mediums, it stands to reason that forms of productivity may change as well.[35]

The more "textually productive" a player is in a virtual realm, the more gaming capital that player stands to acquire. Virtual soldiering in LANopolis is primarily expressed as a deep engagement with the games and, far less frequently, as "instrumental productivity" such as creating levels or game mods. Furthermore, little "expressive productivity" occurs at LANopolis for several reasons. First, there is a thoroughgoing emphasis on maximizing one's gameplay time; it is a "pay to play" space, after all. Second, the feminized gendering of fandom dissuades many of these players from wanting to appear overinvested.[36] Finally, military shooters rarely facilitate forms of instrumental or expressive productivity because they do not, as a general design rule, typically possess creation suites and marketplaces that allow gamers to create and trade items. This final difference partly explains why scholars interested in updating and applying Pierre Bourdieu's schemas of cultural capital to video gaming have clustered around role-playing titles, especially massively multiplayer online (or MMO) worlds like *Everquest* (1999) and *World of Warcraft* (2004), and virtual worlds like *Second Life* (2003), where gamers can craft and sell their own digital commodities.[37] These conspicuous objects of labor add value to the player's online profile and are clear embodiments of market capital. But as Thomas Malaby keenly observes, there are whole "economies of practices" in games that are not articulated as user-created content but that still constitute a type of capital. Malaby states:

> Cultural capital is the realization of what a given cultural group finds to be meaningful or important in bodies, objects, and offices. It includes

> those competencies and credentials that individuals or groups acquire over time within a particular historical context and also the objects that become valuable through their association with such meaning. It has three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized.[38]

I am interested in these less conspicuous acts of embodied competencies that enable LANopolis's patrons to call themselves and their comrades "hardcore." There is a clear social benefit in proving one's status as a competent gamer, *not* as a competent fan in this play community.[39] Or, as Wirman observes, "Power gamers tend to find themselves more like professional players than hobbyist game fans."[40] What then, borrowing Wirman's terminology, are the textually productive acts that enable gamers to self-identify and be identified by others as "hardcore?"

Lessons from the Trenches: Fighting for Gaming Capital

What does it mean to be a "good" ludic soldier? And what do avid gamers do to promote themselves in their multiplayer sessions? We are not just talking about gaming capital generally, but are concerned with those conspicuously displayed skills and competencies that are meaningful for gamers of military shooters. Sarah Thornton coins the term "subcultural capital" in discussing the value placed on "hipness" for dance cultures.[41] Thornton's term is conceptually relevant because dance cultures resemble gaming culture in several respects: the groups share similar demographics (teens and young adults); the subcultural capital of both are borne out of middle-class leisure pursuits; and media plays a constitutive role for each group. This final point is especially key. Thornton states:

> For, within the economy of subcultural capital, the media are not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers *vis-à-vis* cultural capital), but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. In other words, the difference being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure.[42]

In the case of the military shooter subculture (to adopt Thornton's terminology), the games are the centerpieces for the creation, maintenance, and circulation of gaming capital. The implication is that games are not just an expressive medium qua games (as algorithmic cultural texts), but that games are an expressive medium qua their gameplay (as techno-cultural practice) that generate and mediate gaming capital for players.[43]

Although cultural capital's immediate value is context dependent, it does not necessarily follow that the knowledge and skills exercised in that setting do not translate to other parts of a person's life (although tracking and assessing that extra-gamic capital is outside this project's concerns). To the first point about its context dependence, Malaby notes:

> Cultural capital is distinctive for its specificity to a context of meaning and practice, such as existing ones associated with nation, class, region, or sources of social separation, and thus its acquisition is not amenable to immediate and isolated transactions. Instead, cultural capital is acquired through the culturally embedded practices of learning, in the informal sense, and authorization, in the official sense. Such exchange generates a feeling of belonging, of identification with a cultural group.[44]

And as Heather Mello[45] observes in her study of fantasy role-playing gamers, in addition to the sense of community that collaborative play engenders, there is learning—what literacy and education scholar James Paul Gee calls "situated cognition"[46]—that may be useful outside of that original site of social interaction. Gaming capital is a productive concept for thinking about how a constellation of gaming practices established around similar games played in a common space contribute to a gaming identity like that of the ludic soldier. The remainder of this chapter explores the social lessons of playing ludic war together including how these gamers construct and police their play community, what shooters tell players about war versus what they elide and omit, and what play styles gamers seek out in their comrades-in-arms.

Pleasurable Lessons: Ludic War's Textual Modality

Textual lessons do not always come easily in hardcore titles. Juul observes that, by privileging a certain inflexibility of design, a game's

difficulty alienates those players who are either unwilling or unable to dedicate the time and energy needed to achieve textual mastery. Typical hardcore game design tacitly assumes that players come to it with a willingness to invest the many hours needed to conquer its computational logic. In return for this investment, the game promises to capture their attention for days, weeks, months, even years.[47] Yet even as LANopolis's gamers expressed a desire to master the textual machinery of games, they also want to learn from them.

The informants' desire to learn something from military shooters is tempered by their belief that these lessons are almost certainly limited in scope. Most of their war "education" (and more than one gamer in the focus group used "air quotes" to describe the learning that takes place in these games) concerns the basic war instruments and field tactics. David remarked: "When I've learned about [new weapons and new technologies], like customizing a firearm, things like that, I didn't learn about it so much from reading. I learned from playing these games. . . . This is [also the case for] old World War II games. I know what a 'grease gun' is because I've played [World War II shooters]." Flashing a knowing smile, Rooster, a twenty-nine-year-old part-time LANopolis employee, chimed in similarly: "Hell, if I hadn't been playing *Counter-Strike* for over a decade, and you were to ask me—'What is a Colt M4A1 carbine?'—I'd probably tell you that it's a kind of Mustang!" This exchange precipitated an intense moment of crosstalk where the participants rifled off factoids concerning current and historical equipment and different nations' Special Forces units.

These gamers also readily concede that military gameplay's lessons are only partly about weapons and historical battles. Gameplay lessons are equally about becoming conversant with the rules and algorithmic systems that mediate those battles. Kevin, twenty-three, the soft-spoken childhood friend of David and another friend, Doyle, noted: "I like that moment when I 'get' the game [referring to experiential flow of gameplay] . . . after that, I find the 'blind-spots,' the places on the map where people just don't know that they're going to be attacked." This comment excited Doyle, who then launched into an extended critique of *Modern Warfare*'s small multiplayer maps that privilege "quick twitch" reflexes and software exploits over time-tested combat strategy. Such games are, in his view, neither fun nor realistic. Doyle proclaimed: "I like a game if, where you die, and you can see [the reason] . . . you learn *those* lessons.

And it's not about having twitch reflexes. And it's not about knowing the map. It's about having this rudimentary knowledge about how things [in war] work." Later in the conversation, Buddy, twenty-two, piggybacked on Doyle's point, noting that well-made games should teach you whether you should commit to a firefight, select another approach, or wait for backup. Buddy is skeptical, however, that even more demanding tactical military shooters like the Tom Clancy-brand games can relay complex military lessons. He enumerated the following field tactics that most military shooters underscore:

> Flanking an enemy is always going to take them by surprise. Suppressing fire is going to keep someone occupied, while someone else outflanks them. High ground is always preferable to being at the bottom of the hill. Those are the very, very basic [tactics]. If I'm a sniper, I want to be up high where I can see everything. A machinegun in cover is better than one out in the middle of a field. But that's keeping it really basic.

Basic as they may be, there is nevertheless an undeniable pleasure that is bound up in the process of enacting these field tactics because they forge an affective connection between one's identity as a hardcore gamer and one's virtual identity as a ludic solider. The emergent linkage between gameplay, tactical knowledge, and martial identity is evident in the stories that the gamers tell one another around LANopolis's backroom table. Pointing to his friends Kevin and David beside him, Doyle reminisced:

> We actually have war stories. Like, I can literally go into the story as if we were in Vietnam. . . . We've had times where we'd secure an area, and we'd "go hunting." And that's what we call it: "hunting." I'd say, we know that there are two guys in the area. "Hunt them down!" And then we'd herd them into areas and shoot them down.

The gaming capital that players enjoy at LANopolis is bound up in the ability to wield situational awareness and coordinate with others to act as a virtual field generals. Doyle continued:

> [David and Kevin] hear me yell at them because I go into a different mode. I literally go into "squad commander." One time I shot one of

> them in the back of the head when he wandered off and wasn't following orders. . . . In these games, it's not just playing the game, it's not fighting everybody. [You know] shooting guys. That's not the excitement. The excitement is taking a chaotic situation like [war] and putting an order to it that I command. Going into a situation where we might be losing, and then all of a sudden through a series of orders and through my own actions . . . I've just had a plan perfectly implemented to wipe out an area and seize it as my own.

David punctuated his friend's story, stating: "Making war your bitch."

David's off-color turn of phrase illustrates the premium that hardcore gamers place on to the ability to control the textual contours of their virtual experiences. The focus group participants remarked more than once about the connection between their support for a hardcore title and the sense that game producers were implementing their collective design suggestions, especially as they pertain to issues of customizability. For example, David, stated: "When [game design] allows for full customization—and I'm not talking about perks shit or load-outs [referring to in-game weapon selection]—but about *your settings* . . . basically, I'm talking about the complete ability to tool your experience to how you see fit. Those are the games that are going to [succeed]." Sitting across the table, Buddy echoed David's point:

> It doesn't matter what game style you like . . . When you find one game that you *really* like, and then the sequel comes out and it's even better . . . and the third one comes out and you're like, "Holy fucking shit!" You can *tell* that [the game producers] took the advice [of gamers]. . . . And when they take the time going into the second or third game, hearing what was said about it and making it into everything you thought it could be . . . [It's great] that they really, really kept in tune with the players. They really listened to [us].

The *Modern Warfare* and Clancy-brand games franchises examined in Chapters 2 and 3 have been designed primarily for hardcore audiences like those in the LANopolis focus group. One of the affective "lessons" that military shooters stress to their hardcore constituency, a point echoed in mainstream marketing materials, is that these virtual wars are designed "for us, by us."

Pleasurable Lessons: Hardcore Boys and Their Hardware Toys

Another major lesson of playing virtual war together is that having the right equipment is perceived as a vital, if not sacred, knowledge in virtual and physical gamespaces. This is the reason why, on my first night in LANopolis, I was accused of being a "noob tube," or someone who improperly uses a grenade launcher. I had deployed it in an unconventional setting—a narrow hallway. My tactical miscalculation was not labeled as a playful form of experimentation, but as a decision that called into question my knowledge of war-gaming and my identity as a "proper" team player. Thus, this public labeling censures and marks the accused as one who either does not belong in that setting—virtual and physical—and/or is ignorant of unofficial but no less operative play protocols.

But I was also surprised to discover that the attendees' preoccupation with understanding weapons and team tactics extends beyond the virtual battlefields to the hardware that runs these wars. This interest is partly motivated by a desire to maximize one's pay-to-play investment at LANopolis, as the owner and the manager are usually the only ones available to field technical questions. Knowing how to troubleshoot a PC or navigate a complex setup screen are useful skills when help is not always immediately available. Moreover, because military shooters are the most resource-demanding titles played at LANopolis, it makes sense that the center's most ardent gamers would hold strong opinions about what hardware facilitates the best ludic war experiences. What follows are two illustrations of how this hardware literacy gets expressed at LANopolis, and how those articulations figure into one's personal sense of gaming capital.

Thomas Christopherson has been LANopolis's owner-operator since the company opened its doors in June of 2006. A broad-shouldered white man in his late thirties, Christopherson wanted to fill what he saw as his city's need for a full-time computer gaming center. Christopherson claims that LANopolis has just over four thousand open accounts, with only a handful of duplicates, and that the all-night events typically attract thirty to forty gamers—an estimate that agrees with my observations. He also sees PC gaming as being unique within gaming culture, and that there is something inherently special about the technology that

makes it more appealing to dedicated gamers. He states: "PC gaming is more complicated. There's more to do. PC games migrate to the consoles. They always have, they always will. If you're serious about gaming you play on a PC. You don't play on a Mac or a console."[48] This sentiment was echoed more colorfully and forcefully by a teenage gamer late one night when he mocked another's computer saying, "Your computer sucks. Macs are gay!" For Christopherson and for many of LANopolis's patrons, quality gaming happens on PCs because the hardware can be constantly upgraded to support the "best" ludic war experiences.

A second example of hardware's connection to gaming capital occurred when I overheard Scott, a young teen with seemingly boundless energy, trying to impress his fellow gamers with his knowledge of PC hardware and his family's affluence. Resting on his knees while propped against a beanbag chair, Scott addressed his peers' backs as they all stared at their respective monitors. Scott did not allow this lack of interest dissuade him from his task at hand, and—with detail that I am unable to reiterate because of its specificity—Scott launched into an argumentative foray explaining exactly how he planned to modify his family's computer which was purportedly worth "at least five thousand dollars." To no one in particular, Scott proposed an alternative plan that would allow him to transform an existing "Alienware" computer, a PC brand designed for high-performance gaming, for just under ten thousand dollars. His plans were met by polite if perfunctory "okays" and "yups" as the older gamers did not pull themselves away from their screens. Scott was not deterred by their lack of enthusiasm. He might not have noticed this fact either, as he was lost in thought, preoccupied with counting out on his hands the various components he needed to build his ideal gaming rig. It is remarkable that Christopherson and Scott, among LANopolis's oldest and youngest players, speak in their own ways to the premium that instrumental, technical literacy enjoys in a space dedicated to bringing "proper" ludic wars to life.

Pleasurable Omissions: Ludic War's Contextual Modality

If LANopolis's hardcore gamers are suspicious of shooters' ability to teach anything more than basic field tactics, then they are categorically dismissive of their ability to convey the emotional and mental toll

of real warfare. And they are thankful for this fact. On the one hand, the ludic soldier identity hinges on the gamer's ability to demonstrate core competencies on the battlefield, which includes a working knowledge of the game's items and play strategies (modality of gaming text). But the ludic identity is, for this play group, likewise predicated on an ability to articulate distinctions regarding how warfare is incompletely represented and simulated on their computer screens (modality as relating to reality). The participants recognize the incommensurability of their desires. On the one hand, they want a game to be more "real" in terms of its graphics or physics engine; recall Galloway's idea of "realisticness" discussed in Chapter 5. And yet, they also want shooters to sidestep or elide war's nastiest existential horrors for the purposes of pleasurable gameplay, which speaks to Galloway's "congruence requirement" for achieving social realism. A critical line of separation, then, between the hardcore gamer and the "fanboy/fangirl" for this LAN community is the presence of a critical perspective applied to adored media texts.

Christopherson and the gamers whom I interviewed see PC gaming as being a cathartic and quasi-therapeutic means for working through one's natural, though distinctly masculine, desires to compete and to exact violence. The owner asks rhetorically: "But what do [war video] games do? They take the pain out of fighting." He pauses, then continues, "But what you can't do is take the fight out of people. We've been doing it for far too long. It's going to come out somehow. At least this way it's safe." He points to the gamers playing behind him during our mid-afternoon interview, noting: "These guys play these games all the time, but we've *never once* had an act of violence [at LANopolis]. It just doesn't happen. If you're being annoying someone might tell you to 'shut up,' but that's it." Violent video gaming is a healthy pursuit for Christopherson. The owner's intuitive beliefs mirror Jeffrey Goldstein's work on violent toy play. After mapping out the general approaches to the topic, Goldstein calls on scholars to conduct more research in natural settings (such as a gaming center) to examine how war toys are taken up. Goldstein notes:

> We can see that many needs may be satisfied in war play, most of them having little or nothing to do with aggression per se. Among them we

> have suggested curiosity; exploration; coping; anxiety and fear reduction; self-regulation of cognitive, emotional, and psychological states; and social identity. All social play occurs simultaneously at different levels of explanation and activity.[49]

During the focus group discussion, LANopolis's players questioned their favorite games' representations of war's ugliness. David noted: "I don't want [military shooters] to be too realistic. Then it's intense for the wrong reasons." He elaborated on this point:

> Video games will always romanticize violence. Always. I don't think playing [shooters] is really like being in war. That's total horseshit. It's like, "that [game] was really competitive and good." It's not so competitive in war. [War is] like, "Please God let me live to see another day." And then the day after that. And the day after that. There is [pauses for effect] *considerably* less pleasure [in war].

Doyle seconded his friend's point stating:

> Unless it's scripted, you'll never see a guy lose a limb and live [in a game]. If the guy loses a limb, he's probably dead. . . . [In a shooter] you either come back perfectly fine, or you're dead. Those are the two polar opposites that you can live with. . . . Death is grisly. But surviving death and missing something from it, is worse. To have a player come back and be missing something—an arm, no legs—that is more grisly for people to see. That is something [game developers] avoid.

These players are clearly aware of game producers' constraints and pressures as they relate to the commodification of war. O'Brien, a short twenty-eight-year-old man with a thin beard and a penchant for understatement, noted, "Throwing in all the actual atrocities of war into a game just isn't fun." Rooster seconded this point, saying: "There's a fine line that all these companies that produce these games have to walk. . . . There's a limit, but you have to still sell the product to the masses." To which O'Brien responded: "Well, preying on people's fears and what's relevant is a good marketing tool."[50] Rooster stated:

> As game companies, they obviously have to [create their titles] in a way that appeals to Americans, and depicts us as the victor, the silent hero, the underdog, whatever the situation is, there's that mystique. And that's what they sell. I don't care if it's real or not. I just care about the enjoyment. There's always going to be those who are offended by everything, especially the cutting-edge military [games]. But that's also how [the companies] sell it. . . . Who doesn't want to imagine themselves as a part of a battalion fighting back invaders?

David was reminded of uncomfortable feelings generated by a mission in the single-player campaign of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010). He described a level where the player creeps through underground tunnels armed with a handgun and flashlight. The level is dark and claustrophobic and features enemy soldiers who leap from the dark armed with guns and knives. It is a haunting level; one that the group agrees is not "fun." David stated:

> The thing that *Black Ops* did was it took all the violence and made it grisly to the point where, well not *really* realistic. . . . [he is interrupted by cross-talk from others about the game engine's ability to render high resolution graphics but David presses on] *but you can still* throw a grenade in a pit and blow a guy's arm and leg off and he's still there alive, rolling on the ground. And that's a lot more disturbing. It's not necessarily "bad," but . . . [trails off in thought].

Jumping somewhat to *Call of Duty*'s defense, but also to that of post-9/11 military shooters generally, Doyle argued that these games can, despite their technological and design limitations, nevertheless convey a sense of existential horror and embodied history. Referring to the Vietcong "tunnel run," Doyle reminded the group that "guys had to go down there with a pistol and a flashlight, and pray to God that there wasn't going to be a guy around the next corner with a knife. And that was something people had to deal with. And, sure, [game developers] can't replicate it perfectly, but that's part of the realism. The trick is [developers] have to find that line." Later, Doyle argued that even if these games fail to replicate the visceral anxiety of hand-to-hand combat, they might

better simulate the perspectival and affective remove of postmodern warfighting technologies. He reflected:

> You learn certain things about perceptions of [those in] the military. . . . When you're doing that AC-130 scene [a well-known level in *Call of Duty 4*]—it's cool, blowing up shit with a 150mm, 100mm, and a 50mm chain gun. But if you pay attention, you notice, [the computer controlled characters] don't give a shit. They're like: "Shoot that guy." Bang! "Shoot that guy." Bang! They don't care because they're in a plane a couple miles up. [The game producers] are making a statement. [They are saying:] "That's what [war] is like now." There are no guys in the field screaming, "Oh my God! We're on fire!" Now there are Predator drone [pilots] in California bombing guys in another country. You have guys who are two miles up, blowing up things casually because it's not an issue for them.

In addition to performing one's knowledge of shooters in gameplay round after round, gaming capital also hinges on a willingness to forge critical distinctions between modalities of gameplay and to navigate ludic war's textual and contextual harmonies and its contradictions. These competencies are, however, less important for these gamers than playing with others in good faith.

Policing the Magic Circles of LANopolis

Playing video games at LANopolis teaches players how to perform as players, and how to police and mark others when they deviate from community norms. Like the hardcore player parodied in the *South Park* episode, the demographic profile of all-night gamers is that they are nearly all young, white, and male. And because LANopolis is such a markedly homosocial space, it plays host to explicit displays of machismo, sexism, racism, and homophobia.[51] At no point in my fieldwork did I see more than six women or girls in LANopolis at any one time. One evening I did play alongside three women who were playing *World of Warcraft*. But like most women at LANopolis, they left well before midnight during the all-night marathons.[52] The paucity of girls and women at LANopolis reflects similar accounts of other gaming centers. For example, Beavis and Charles state that "within LAN cafés and

LAN gaming, girl gamers stand out by virtue of their rarity and physical presence."[53] Upon first entering LANopolis, women and girls are met with protracted male gazes. Those girls and women who do not play generally spend their time watching their boyfriends play or watching a movie or television program. More than once I found myself seated on the couch next to the only girls in LANopolis while taking periodic breaks from the frenetic, team-based fighting. Tracy—a late-teen with long brown hair and a love of texting—and I both sighed as the monitor we were watching was changed from TBS's running of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) to an input channel for another Xbox 360 setup. When asked about LANopolis's conspicuous lack of female gamers, Christopherson replied:

> Some women come in here, but not many. Often they're either girlfriends, or they're mothers dropping off their kids. They'll hang out and play the arcade games—*Dance, Dance, Revolution* or *Rock Band*—but no they're not playing *Call of Duty* or *Team Fortress 2* [another team-based, first-person shooter game]. That's combat, that's what the guys play. With women and gaming, they're into the more exclusively social games. They want to talk and trade and strategize. Yeah, they want to talk. . . . They'll probably talk you to death. [Laughs to himself.]

Because women, girls, LGBT players, and gamers of color are so notably absent, certain social conventions are jettisoned to make room for a discourse that privileges domination over egalitarianism. LANopolis's gamers deal with infractions of gaming etiquette, as well as more general social violations, in ways that reveal the social values of this gaming configuration. It stands to reason that the quickly alternating defensive and offensive postures in shooters, along with the gameplay hierarchies that are established after repeated battles, escape their virtual bounds and become reinscribed in the gamers' exchanges with one another. Of course, when asked about it, most say that they are "just playing," "being silly," "having a good time," or that "it's just a game." This chapter complicates these common refrains, arguing that the barbed LAN discourse communicates more than gamers purport and that their exchanges are a means of policing their play community. There are at least three social violations that I have witnessed at LANopolis—playful, tolerable, and

inviolable—which are categorized according to the response to the infraction, not the infraction proper.

Playful transgressions are exchanges in which gamers humorously irritate or provoke one another. These verbal and virtual sparring matches (or "trash talking") are understood to be joking by all and are part of the experience of playing against one another generally. For instance, during a warm-up round of *Counter-Strike*, Sam yelled, "Knife fight!" indicating that all the participating combatants were to use only their knives. The rest of the players quickly parroted the call. However, this self-imposed edict was quickly abandoned after Sam's opponent shot him with an assault rifle. He yelled incredulously, "You shot me, bitch!" To which Lee responded, "Well, don't bring a knife to a gun fight!" "But we're playing knife fight!," Sam pleaded. This exchange was met with collective laughter.

Another playful transgression is the mocking or "flaming" of games that are not sufficiently masculine or are deemed to be substandard such as those that cater to casual gamers because of their ease of use and lighter subject matter. One evening a young man began playing *Super Smash Bros. Brawl* (2008), a popular cartoonish fighting game for Nintendo's Wii system, against LANopolis's back wall. After a few moments he was the target of ribbing from nearby PC users who contend the game and its system is for "babies and sissies."

Tolerable transgressions are off-color conversations and banter that are generally not heard or sanctioned in public settings. The majority of these expressions are, on their face, little more than name-calling. Yet these exchanges are "tolerable" for the assembled players because they are labeling one another as marginalized or presently absent groups. And because nearly all the players at the all-night gaming sessions are white boys and men who identify as straight, the verbal jabs are often racist, homophobic, and/or sexist.

For example, when playing *Call of Duty 4* as the "Op-For" (the opposing force) whose avatars are depicted as Arab, Lee and his team often erupt in a celebratory Arabic Zalghouta chant (sounds like "Yalalalalalala!"), mimicking the impassioned cries of Middle Easterners often depicted in films and in news coverage, a performance reminiscent of kids making stereotypical Native American "hoots" in games of "Cowboys and Indians." A second example happens late into the night

as the women depart and as the younger boys become self-conscious and hyperaware of the space's increasingly homosocial constitution. The younger gamers describe LANopolis as a "sausage porkfest" and warn one another not to fall asleep for fear of being "made gay" (that is, sexually assaulted). One last troubling example is that the verb "rape" is often used to describe the domination of one player at the hands of another. As Lee was divvying up the available players while spearheading an informal *Call of Duty* tournament, he quipped to a teammate, "I'm glad we're together. I don't like to rape my friends." Sadly, this ugly threat is neither isolated to LANopolis nor to the gameplay of shooters.[54]

The third category—*inviolable transgressions*—includes expressions that are a direct affront to the gamers themselves or violate sacrosanct play principles. Bobby, a black teen with shiny short dreadlocks, confronted an acquaintance when he overheard the latter boy say, "Fuck dat nigga!" Although this charged phrase was not directed at Bobby, he nevertheless intervened and asked the white boy, "What do you mean?" Realizing quickly what he had said, the white boy replied, "Nothing. Nevermind." To which Bobby said, "Alright, but watch it." Wanting to put the issue to rest, the white boy responded, "We're cool, we're cool."

Another sacrosanct rule is the prohibition against cheating, either by performing a software hack or by surreptitiously watching someone else's screen to gain an unfair play advantage—a practice known as "screen peeking" or "screen hacking." Periodically, shouts of "Hack!" and "Hacking!" spread in LANopolis, at which point gamers sitting at the PCs along the wall turn to see if anyone holds an unfair advantage over what is perceived to be private information. There is a similar unofficial ban on "griefing," or purposefully ruining the game for all involved by wildly deviating from the rules, as in deliberately getting killed or killing one's teammates. This is a particularly sensitive point that the focus group participants discuss at length in the following section. In all likelihood, Lee called me a "noob tube" because he thought that I was purposefully causing trouble when I fired my rocket-propelled grenade in a narrow hallway. Although I did not know what I was doing at the time, I was shocked at how quickly I was called out for my online behavior in this offline space. I continue to be stunned by the behaviors that elicit pushback and the manifold slurs that fly under the proverbial radar precisely because they are about people outside of LANopolis.

From "Griefing" to Support: Differing Play Styles of the Ludic Soldier

There is arguably no gameplay lesson more evident than the need to communicate with teammates when engaged in multiplayer ludic war. During my first multiplayer battle in *Call of Duty 4*, I teamed up with a young man of a slight build named Germ, who sported small round glasses and messy brown hair. Many players in LANopolis go by their online handles, and Germ is no different.[55] After inviting me to join his team, and without taking his eyes off his own screen, Germ coached me through what equipment choices I ought to make to best complement his (now) four-man force. We were competing against a proficient two-person team, led by Lee, a portly man in his early twenties who would soon label me a "noob tube." Lee, who is no stranger to LANopolis or to *Call of Duty* multiplayer games, enjoys boasting of his virtual exploits to his dispatched enemies, his teammates, and anyone within earshot. During our pitched battles with Lee's outnumbered but well-coordinated team, Germ would often lean over and point to various elements on my screen suggesting where I might hide, find good firing positions, and otherwise try to outmaneuver Lee and his teammate. I was surprised to find that knowing your opponent is almost as useful as being familiar with the game and its control system.[56] Throughout this and the following battles, we would often find ourselves celebrating our team play. Phrases like "Dude, nice kill!" and "Thanks, you saved my ass!" are common exclamations during LANopolis's battles.[57]

There are diverging play styles that elicit vociferous responses from the focus group participants. These players complain about having to "babysit" novice players (or "noobs"); coping with players who are feigning idiocy to engender everything from humor to ill-will ("trolls"); coping with teammates and opponents who cannot deal with losing ("rage quitters"); and having to play with those who wait at key map points to take advantage of unsuspecting players ("campers"). Still, none of these play styles is as irksome for LANopolis's discussants as that of "griefers." A "griefer" is one who deliberately harasses and provokes others and does little else. In shooter games they might destroy their team's vehicles, kill teammates on purpose, or allow themselves to be easily killed by the enemy force, thus inflating the opposing team's score—a despised prac-

tice known as "feeding." Rooster sees griefing as an unacceptable form of trolling, and says of it: "[Griefing] is not tolerated. You know, you can call me a bitch, a snitch, a whatever. But I'm going to report your ass [to the server administrator or game service] because you're making my game experience and others un-enjoyable."

There is a persistently blurry line between failing to exercise situational awareness and purposefully playing like a noob. Fox, a silver mustachioed fifty-one-year-old, and one of the gaming center's oldest players, offered this note about novice war play:

> My excruciating pet peeve is when you're in the main tank [in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2* (2010)], and you switch to the machine gun, and some jackass jumps in and rips [the tank] out there [into battle]. [That player] doesn't understand Guderian, or any other [war] theory. And so he goes through all the infantry way too far, and gets blown up in ten seconds. [58]

To which Rooster quickly added: "Which usually results in Fox screaming some type of invective at the monitor for about a minute." The gaming center's elder readily conceded this addendum, clarifying that he generally yells, "Fucking idiots!" LANopolis's gamers believe that experienced players can quickly differentiate new players from those who are, in David's words, "just dicking around."

Griefing is anathema to cultivating good will in multiplayer games, including LANopolis's ludic battlescapes. Cooperative play is, instead, the gameplay style that these patrons value most, and it is the clearest route to earning and maintaining one's gaming capital. According to the focus group participants, reliable teammates are preferable to those who might be better players but poorer communicators. This suggests that for LANopolis's hardcore gamers, their own textual productivity and the gameplay performance of others is not a strictly instrumentalist endeavor since they would rather grow social bonds and interpersonal connections than be guaranteed wins round after round. The group's gamers look for at least three elements in others that indicate a sense of personal investment: communication skills, an ability to discriminate among gamers' play styles, and a willingness to support teammates.

A point that emerged again and again across the discussions and interviews was a desire to find and befriend "support gamers." Doyle

voiced what he looks for in others in these terms: "If I could put it in one simple phrase: 'Give a shit. Give a shit about what you're doing.'" He continued: "Doing fan fiction, making mods, that's kind of like an unrelated thing that you enjoy about the game." This is yet another sign that these gamers privilege in-game skills to other forms of game-oriented productivity. David offered his own definition of the cooperative or support gamer, saying:

> A support gamer can go into any category. They can be casual. They can be hardcore, a power gamer. But it's the kind of person who plays a game with a headset, and doesn't use it to blare music, or mouth-off, or swear constantly throughout the game. . . . Someone who really actually works together and tries to find other gamers who have that respect and actually have good enough communication skills to work together as a cohesive unit.

Buddy punctuated this point, saying: "It's all about communication. . . . [It's like] hey, there's a sniper over there I need you guys to run around there, throw a grenade in, and fuck his shit up." Encouraging skillful communication and a shared situational awareness during these battles are not only a means to an end; rather, thoughtful communication is perceived as a necessary component for growing one's reputation as a good teammate and improving the community of play. Channeling Johan Huizinga's thoughts on the "spoil-sport,"[59] Doyle observes:

> You've got to have that empathy as if you are there. Because you are wasting everyone else's time if you are focused on being goofy. . . . [Video gaming] is like any other sport. You want everybody to be "in" the game. It may be "just a game," but people want to actually play in the game. Not, play in the game and have [some guy] do whatever he wants.

Logging innumerable hours of gameplay enables players to make increasingly fine distinctions between their preferred play style and that of others. According to Fox, "Real players will start to discriminate and try to classify themselves [relative to other gamers]." His earlier tank anecdote illustrates that in an environment where communication cues are not always clear (because, for example, not all players have head-

sets, accidents and misunderstandings occur, there are varying levels of competencies), hardcore gamers can, over time, read others' play styles and make choices to group-up accordingly. O'Brien enjoys discovering players of a similar caliber online or meeting them in LANopolis for the first time. Playing shooters give them a set of shared experiences that become the foundation for their relationship. But for veteran players like Fox and Rooster, who are more interested in the game proper than making friends, discrimination is the key reading strategy to avoid being hamstrung by poor teammates and for insulating one's own gameplay pleasures and productivity from, as Rooster noted, "all the trash."

The ability to discriminate between play styles and communicate fluidly with teammates are key traits that hardcore gamers cultivate for themselves and seek out in others. Yet these characteristics are not as prized as those rare players who raise the performance of others. Buddy summarized his feelings on this point: "I think what makes you a good player, is to take that little dipshit that's on your team and to pull out a victory." Fox, who is more taciturn than his effusive, younger squad mates, said this about his own performance as a "good" ludic soldier in *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*:

> [It's fun] when you find something that you can exploit. Or, that you can use to dominate the field; to bring success to the team. *That's* a good experience. [For example, in *Battlefield*] you can use the [tank's] machine gun to dominate two or three of the four flags. You know, and not just rack up the kills, but also annihilate . . . the [other players'] strategy. You're above average as a player, so that other average players [on your team] can come through and play and succeed. . . . [participant crosstalk] . . . [If you're playing well] two or three players who would outrank you now have to team-up . . . and come across the map to get to you, to try and overcome the apparent advantage of the team.

Selfless gameplay is perceived to be a rarity in competitive, team-based games. And perhaps this is especially the case in military shooters where the objective is often to rack up more kills than your opponents. Even if a title's game modes are not strictly zero-sum affairs, many players act as if they are. Rooster reflected about the dearth of selfless players, saying:

> It's a really rare breed [of gamer], I wish there were more of them. The people that derive their enjoyment of the game not from their killstreak [their number of consecutive kills], not from how awesome they did, but they know . . . at the end of the match, when their team won, they know that they were badass. They say: "I kept this guy alive. I did this, I did that. [Sure,] my KDR [kill-death ratio] is in the pits, but my team won and I helped out." Those kind of people . . . that don't want to go for the gold and are totally happy to be in the background and help everybody else, those kind of players, I wish there were more of them. [60]

Rooster's extended response clearly struck a chord with the other gamers seated around the table, with a few of his peers saying, "amen."

Conclusion

Clearly, the foregoing discussion is particular to LANopolis and is not generalizable to other gaming venues or player populations. One can easily imagine, and some have no doubt played at, arcade-like venues that differ considerably from LANopolis. It also bears repeating that there were and continue to be play opportunities besides the popular military shooters titles at this gaming center. Yet what makes LANopolis so intriguing as a research site is the way that publicly performed ludic warring dominates and marginalizes other gaming experiences and substantially prefigures how virtual combatants ought to play with one another. In LANopolis, ludic war commonly escapes its mediated bounds to become an operative and regulatory force in the patrons' play lives. The games, the players, and the mode of technological connectivity of the LAN itself coalesce to overdetermine a social milieu that is "trigger-happy" when it comes to policing its ludic wars.

For LANopolis's dedicated gamers, the pleasures of growing one's own gaming capital is inextricably tied to the promotion of like-minded gamers. Skillful on- and offline player-to-player communications, sharing detailed knowledge of games and play strategies, the ability to read diverse gameplay styles, and being a selfless teammate are valued competencies of the "hardcore" ludic soldier. These players value these competencies especially now that gaming is a mainstream phenomenon. As Rooster noted of video gaming with a distinct tone of derision, "*Every-*

body does it." The influx of new players to LANopolis has underscored the desire for avid gamers to surround themselves with like-minded players who are willing to foster close-knit communities of play. These gamers grow their gaming capital as a virtual band of brothers to keep the dregs of multiplayer shooters at bay—players whom O'Brien colorfully called "all your assholes, dicks, and pussies."

After playing alongside and speaking with LANopolis's regulars, it became evident to me that playing first- and third-person military shooters is in many ways commensurate with other mediated and nonmediated multiplayer game experiences. There are valued rules of play that transcend genres and gaming platforms that speak to shared ideals of social etiquette and public comportment (such as not cheating or griefing). There are, however, genre and medium-specific characteristics that make the military shooter gameplay a distinctly charged media experience—textually and contextually. There are the manifold ludic pleasures of war spectacle itself. As Buddy readily admitted, "I like explosions. I like grenades, C4, calling in air strikes, everything . . . big booms. [Repeating for emphasis] Big booms!" There are also ludic pleasures of *not* seeing the realities of war, as well as the pleasures of the games' connections to other militainment. As David said:

> Beyond the obviousness of the fact that playing war will never be like living war, the big differences are the huge explosions, the plane crashes, chases, tank sequence, infiltrating underground bases. Shit like that. It's not particularly realistic. It's awesome . . . and it's fun to be immersed in such a gripping, cinematic event. But it's not realistic.

There are also the distinct pleasures of playing war together. Moreover, because these games are immersive, visceral, and immediate (as opposed to the perspectival and strategic remove of real-time strategy games, for instance), communication, coordination, timing, and ultimately trust become force multipliers in deciding the outcomes of these virtual wars. Working together toward a common purpose in frenetic online firefights also grows gaming capital that strengthens social bonds and the shared sense of player empathy. The "good" ludic soldier is not someone who fights only in the game, but someone who fights across games to forge a stronger community of play. As David noted: "Being a

good gamer [is trying to] consolidate the community, for whatever game or genre you're playing in. It's not necessarily your responsibility, but the hallmark of a good gamer is someone who sees [novice gamers] and will help them out, and coach them. . . . It's something that comes with experience." O'Brien agreed with David, but thought "good gaming" is more rudimentary still, saying: "Having a good attitude and being a good citizen. If everyone around you is doing the same thing, it is going to result in the most fun experience for everyone." Being a competent, selfless gamer enables the communicative team to dominate in the game and protect themselves from the vitriol that pervades online venues, even when they are the ones engaging in this behavior.[61] David spoke to these interrelated points, saying: "[It] helps to plant the seed, of really working as a cooperative gamer, as a community, as a single unit. . . . The community also [offsets the feeling] when you get [insulted] by a twelve-year-old raggin' about your mom, or whatever."

I want to conclude this chapter with a gamer's botched attempt at humor because, like the categories of transgressions identified earlier, it represents the unsavory flipside of community-building efforts. If there are insiders, there must be outsiders. As Lee returns to his PC with another energy drink in hand during one of the summer's all-night gaming sessions, he tells a joke to the gamer sitting next to him. "You know," begins Lee, taking a comically loud slurp from his tall beverage, "I like my C4 [an explosive device popular in many combat games], like I like my women." He pauses for dramatic effect, but then blanks. He fumbles unsuccessfully for the punch line, evoking premature laughter from his small audience. "Wait, hold on," he protests, as he struggles to formulate the joke's conclusion, while wiping excess energy drink from his lip. "I know," he continues, "I like them in small, tight packages that are ready to blow." He then punctuates this belabored finale by using his hands to mimic a mushroom explosion with its accompanying sound. Donning a self-satisfied grin and his oversized earphones, Lee returns to his gaming menu and preps for the next firefight. This clumsy and off-color joke epitomizes many of my participant observations about the way that the three-way nexus of shooters, high-end gaming hardware, and a self-identifying "hardcore" male gaming community engender a social environment that operates under an unwritten but understood code that polices play inside and outside of its virtual battlefields.

Conclusion

The Ludification of War Culture

Army of One
—The U.S. Army's Recruiting Slogan, 2001–2006

Pwn (verb): Pronunciation: (pôn). Originally a misspelling of the word "own" as in to totally have a skillful advantage over someone or something. Pwn is to more than just own; to pwn.
—UrbanDictionary.com

An Army of Pwn

I parked a few blocks from the Dallas Convention Center and began making my way toward the massive complex. Unsure of which way to go, I shadowed a group of teenage boys who looked like they might be gamers. My instincts proved right. As we neared the public park adjacent to the convention center, our group merged with other adults and teens who were here to watch and, in many cases, compete in Major League Gaming's (MLG) 2011 inaugural pro-circuit event. This Sunday was the third and final day of the opening weekend's competition, and, like the thousands of other gamer-attendees, I was eager to see which players and teams would prevail in the event's three tournament games: the real-time strategy *StarCraft II* (2010), the sci-fi shooter *Halo: Reach* (2010), and the military shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010). The MLG is LANopolis on proverbial steroids. But instead of facilitating networked gameplay for dozens of players, this space accommodates hundreds. Another key difference: Here, gamers play for money.

The screen-filled convention space hosts three main areas. The first section houses the corporate sponsors' kiosks and booths. Gaming hardware and peripheral companies like Alienware, Astro, and Sony invite

attendees to demo their newest gear and games, while snack and refreshment companies like WarHeads candy, Stride gum, Nos energy drink, and Dr. Pepper liberally distribute free samples of their sugary goods. The room's middle section contains rows upon rows of networked PCs and game consoles that have been linked for competitive play. The MLG's red-shirted officials and onlookers, including myself, watch from partitioned aisles as gamers compete to ascend in the tournament standings. And in the room's final section, giant speakers fill the air with booming sports-style play-by-play commentary, narrating the martial spectacle on one of three large projection screens. Here, hundreds of attendees cheer on the nation's best players as they compete for thousands of dollars and league sponsorship.

I begin the Conclusion with this brief description of a growing electronic sport league's commodification of video gameplay because it offers a dramatic counter-example to the *Invaders!* art installation described in the Introduction. These antithetical bookends showcase the vast spectrum of play states and experiences that video war games might engender, and how these titles, their communities, and their associated interests—ranging from the artistic to the corporate—have been and might yet be coopted for dissimilar ends. On the one hand, military shooters enjoy such intense fanfare that the amateur DIY tournaments that were once hosted in living rooms and in college dormitories have given way to professional gaming leagues that monetize the ludic war experience by transforming it into a spectator sport.[1] On the other hand, there are *Invaders!* and similar interventions that critique virtual combat's pleasures by injecting uncomfortable realities into their escapist realms.

The through-line that tethers organized e-sports to antiwar art pieces and winds through the innumerable post-9/11 war games in between is the hegemonic pleasure of ludic war play. Recall that one of the initial questions that set *Playing War* into motion was: Why do military shooters succeed in the marketplace at a moment when most militainment struggles or fails? The answer, as has been argued throughout, is the shooter's unique modality of play in concert with its broader circuits of constitutive practices, including the interplay of the titles' gameplay conventions (text), the discourse of its advertising ephemera (paratext), and the collective actions of player communities (context). The case

study design was selected because media culture and media pleasures are impossibly messy things. This project has endeavored to interpret the video game critically as a techno-cultural apparatus that contains its own medium-specific affordances and interacts uniquely within broader economic and cultural fields.

To review, at the heart of this project is the simple idea that gameplay matters because it affords us the experiential license and technological means to experiment with our choices, our futures, and even ourselves. Another fundamental point is that the "media modality" of video games illuminates the manner in which these texts are, first, thought to correspond to reality (or not) and, second, possess medium-specific traits that facilitate immersive states of play. Modality is a generative term for arriving at a historicized, critical analysis of gaming pleasure because it highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between the discursive aspects of media (modality as context) and gaming's specific machinations as an interactive and expressive apparatus (modality as text). The second half of Chapter 1 compares two military games produced decades apart to demonstrate the manifold ways that ludic war has changed over time, while pointing to those aesthetic structures of form that endure.[2] It is a limited snapshot comparison, but one that makes clear the utility of media modality as a diachronic tool for critical gameplay analysis.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 bring gameplay modality to bear on a handful of best-selling shooter franchises to demonstrate how they cultivate their ludic pleasures. For instance, the changing avatar identities in the *Modern Warfare* games examined in Chapter 2 promote an immersive narrative subjectivity that creates an empathetic bond between the player and the characters, while dramatizing the human sacrifices demanded of America's counterinsurgency efforts. In Chapter 3, the Clancy shooters' modeling of tactics and space and its depiction of its cybernetic soldiers demonstrate procedurally that America must possess the right tools and the political willingness to engage in preemptive war wherever the fight takes us to ensure that the promises of American exceptionalism after 9/11 are secured. Finally, the shooter's usual hegemonic pleasures are problematized by the games explored in Chapter 4, where immersion takes a backseat to dissonance. These games underscore our fraught relationship to remote-controlled drones and critique the ten-

dency in shooters to blindly celebrate robotic warfare. Irrespective of a game's ideological makeup, military shooters resonate because they connect with the sights and sounds of contemporary reportage and reproduce the narrative themes and character tropes established in extant militainment.

Yet understanding gaming pleasures as the dynamic product of computational designs with some connection to the real will only take a critical analysis so far. Fortunately, modality's utility as an analytic concept is not limited to close readings alone. Questions of modality should and must be expanded to gaming ephemera and audience studies when researching ludic pleasures. For this reason, the project's latter chapters assess the extra-/paratextual and contextual pleasures of ludic war by examining marketing strategies and a player community where social bonds are forged during intense, late-night gaming marathons.

Chapter 5 explains the commercial tensions of selling the ludic war experience to a world at war. In particular, this chapter explores the marketing strategies Activision pursued to pre-frame *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* for a diverse game-buying constituency. Successfully advertising the ludic war experience demands that marketers rhetorically construct a constrained notion of "military realism" so that gamers can play with the assurance that grim realities will not intrude into their fictions.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I describe the gameplay lessons I learned within the walls of LANopolis, and how the center's regulars see their virtual combat as relating or not to worldly strife. The multiplayer competitions that shooters facilitate significantly color the rules of social comportment and shared values that gain expression in this gaming center. When LANopolis's gamers discuss what they enjoy most about military shooters and their community, they reflect on the preferred practices for maintaining their "hardcore" identities and what they look for in other gamers. These players are keenly aware of the complexities of enjoying shooters during a time of war and share their thoughts on how they negotiate ludic war play's pleasures. Together, these textual, paratextual, and contextual practices coalesce to bring the ludic war gaming subculture into being. Moreover, its commercial successes are due to an experiential modality that engenders medium-specific pleasures that other War on Terror militainment often fails to produce.

The Ludification of War Culture

This is the point at which we can return to Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling" invoked in the Introduction. Again, Williams's elusive but provocative cultural hypothesis concerns how a historical moment's events and experiential processes are broadly felt, and why these diffuse but widely held feelings are integrally and necessarily connected to society's interlocking cultural formations. Or, to update Williams' phrasing in light of this project's concerns, the ludic war feeling represents *an interactive structure of pleasure* that enables gamers to find political satisfaction in taking up virtual arms against enemies of the state.

But ludic war's structure of pleasure is more than a multifaceted techno-cultural apparatus that links gameplay experiences with post-9/11 anxieties; it also makes available to consumers a form of virtual citizenship that reflects the prevailing mode of postmodern warfighting and the economic imperatives of late capitalism. Political economist Dallas Smythe proposed the idea of the "audience commodity" to describe the way that media users, especially television audiences, have been bundled and delivered by broadcasters to advertisers as veritable commodities.[3] Ludic war's affecting structure of feeling accomplishes a similar though less systematic feat by engendering an engaging subjectivity that interpellates gamers as ludic soldiers and coaches them on how to be good consumers. If Smythe's "audience commodity" describes how television delivers viewers to advertisers, then we might say that the majority of post-9/11 shooters deliver gamers to the military-entertainment complex. These virtual soldiers are not necessarily more susceptible to defense interests than other media consumers, but they do interact with defense ideologies and with the soft power of the state in a manner that is different from that of consumers of fixed media militainment. Perhaps the better question is not "What are the ludic structures *of* feeling?" but rather, "What are the ludic structures *for* feeling?" Future research should pursue this line of inquiry to see if and to what extent gamers internalize the stories and values that American militainment propagate.

In addition to their "ticking time bomb" narratives, battlefield perspectives, controllable drones, navigable storymaps, et cetera, post-9/11 shooters are affecting experiences because they enjoy an epistemological credibility borne of the video game's basic computational form. In his

summary of play's competing conceptual frameworks, Jonathan Dovey discusses the power of simulation to establish truth claims:

> Contemporary ludic culture produces simulation as a ground of knowledge just as 19th century capitalism was based upon observational empiricism. The simulation operates in the subjunctive mode of "If this (action/event/behavior) then what are the chances of that (reaction)." Moreover a simulation and a game are remarkably similar processes, they are both dynamic rule bound systems according to whose terms we agree to let a model stand in for, or become, reality. Simulation emerges as the knowledge mechanism for ludic culture.[4]

If war simulations are epistemologically convincing because of their perceived efficacy in modeling future combat scenarios, then the popularity of post-9/11 military shooters is attributable to the way their elements (avatars, narratives, combat, and so on) create interactive structures for the production of pleasure—that is, how it is they make virtual war fun.

Playing War has endeavored to connect identity, technology, and play practices across its chapters because gameplay shapes our understanding of the world around us, the political mythologies that color those experiences, and ultimately, notions of the self. The "playful identity"[5] at the core of military shooters is that of the ludic soldier. But while ludic war's interactive structure of pleasure is integral to the creation and maintenance of its core identity, the cultural and epistemological logic of this combative identity and its attendant political mythology are not restricted to the world of gaming.

The video game form and the shooter genre have spread this ludic subjectivity to non-game technological platforms and to non-play spaces. That is, instead of postmodern war's production logics and older military entertainment exercising a one-way ideological influence on the modality of shooters, it is worth thinking in these final pages about the ways that shooters have, in their own way, encouraged citizen-soldiers to become ludic soldiers or, how the modern state has changed from hailing its subjects with war spectacle to hailing it with war play. Turning our attention at this late juncture to the broader "ludification" of post-9/11 media and war culture has the added benefit of widening the scope of the analysis beyond gaming proper to assess

the diffuse but related practices by which the twentieth-century citizen-soldier is transforming into the twenty-first century ludic soldier.[6] The following examples are intended to be illustrative of this transformation but not exhaustive.

As I discovered during my trip to Dallas, today's professional gamers compete head-to-head as ludic mercenaries in the MLG's screen-filled trenches, where they and their firefights are commoditized as spectator sport.[7] The ludic soldier subjectivity is also an adoptable, tourist-like identity at the U.S. military's "Virtual Army Experience" where would-be recruits can sign up to "play Army" at this traveling road show.[8] Moreover, the ludic soldier identity can be purchased by the virtual round at the National Infantry Museum and Soldier Center in Columbus, Georgia, where visitors take their best shot on the Engagement Skills Trainer 2000 (EST2000)—the same virtual firing range system that is used by the U.S. Infantry School, the Army National Guard, and the Army Reserve for marksmanship training. In a space that is dedicated to memorializing the bravery of America's foot soldiers, museum-goers can adopt the soldier's popular weaponized, down-the-sights view. Of course, looking down the barrel of these modified M4 carbine rifles is simply a physical analog to the experience that shooter games have been selling for decades. As if confirming this point, located immediately downstairs from the EST 2000 is the Infantry Museum's combat simulation room. In this dark room, two gaming set-ups invite patrons to escort humanitarian aid workers out of hostile territory. But, while the virtual firing range upstairs demands judicious shot selection and provides a detailed report card on one's shooting performance, there is no reason to exercise caution in these "simulations" because the ammunition is limitless, and no friendlies or civilians can be harmed by errant gunfire. Or, as one of the two women supervising the exhibit told me, "The aiming on these guns is pretty off, so just go 'Rambo' and shoot anything that moves" (figure C.1).[9] The virtual combat exhibits are carnival-style shooting galleries complete with modified paintball guns, imprecise targeting, and a paper-thin narrative pretext that excuses the wanton screen violence. In an institutional space that is otherwise dedicated to consecrating the nationalistic identity of the United States's infantry from the Revolutionary War to the War on Terror, even the state cannot resist the urge to transform war history into war play.

Figure C.1. Museum attendees engage in virtual combat on the Virtual Army Experience simulator.

The ludic soldier subject position is a flexible and multifarious identity position, but one that uniquely expresses the broader ludification of war and media culture,[10] whether it is as for-profit sport, as an immersive recruitment road show, or as codified memory in a museum's interactive exhibit. It is likewise a new media identity formation that maintains ontological linkages to its citizen-soldier antecedent, along with technological connections to the video game's increasingly popular cultural and control logics. Even if one never picks up a joystick to play a military shooter or a virtual assault rifle in a museum, the ludic soldier identity and its attendant nationalistic pleasures inform gamers and non-gamers alike about the United States's political promise and military might in the new century. Indeed, *Playing War* differs from previous examinations of war games by focusing on the role that mediated play has in suturing the citizen's identity to the national imaginary and its military power fantasies. This is why this book has examined how ludic war gains its meaningfulness and cultural currency when gameplay modalities intersect with human practices. Games scholar Joost

Raessens supports this complex view of gaming, stating: "Computer games are not just a game, never just a business strategy for maximizing profit, but always also a *battlefield* where the possibility to realize specific, bottom-up, heterogeneous forms of participatory media culture is at stake."[11] All video games are proverbial "battlefields" because games are always already culture. Furthermore, because games make goal-oriented demands of the player including (most significantly) a call to action, the player's identity is implicated in the cultural issues playing out on screen.

One of the persistent challenges of this project has been the question of where to begin and where to end, as has determining which objects and events would receive attention versus those that must be set aside. There are certainly other tacks one could have pursued to assess the pleasures of military shooters. One could have selected different games, supporting paratexts, or historical endpoints. The titles and gaming moments contained herein span the period from the 9/11 attacks to Obama's pronouncement of the end of the Global War on Terror. But I am ultimately less concerned with periodizing post-9/11 gameplay into a discrete timeframe than I am in analyzing these popular playthings to make sense of a historical moment. If we are searching for metaphors, video games are modern day palimpsests; they are interactive records that possess layers upon layers of creative practices and that contain—like the faint and hidden writing on ancient parchment—earlier iterations of code, mechanics, and cultural beliefs about citizenship, patriotism, sacrifice, and government power.[12]

Playing War has to a lesser extent also been an examination of political mythology. Vincent Mosco reminds us that "to understand a myth involves more than proving it false. It means figuring out why the myth exists, why it is so important to people, what it means, and what it tells us about people's hopes and dreams."[13] The interactive structure of pleasure that makes ludic warring fun at a time of international conflict perpetuates a distinct mythology about the nation-state. I have argued for media modality's utility in thinking about the meaningfulness of video games because it discloses the ways interactive fictions reveal all-too-real truths about prevailing cultural mythologies. Games are powerful vessels for the exploration of nationalistic myths because they make us the centerpiece of that "premediated" experience; we are the ludic sol-

dier who is the bulwark against the outside terroristic forces; we are the engine, driving the game's narrative and bearing witness firsthand to the consequences of our choices. In these moments, we do more than reflect on battlefield strategies—we enact national aspirations and work through collective nightmares. We save the day in *Modern Warfare*, but not before dying innumerable deaths as multiple characters. We save the president and domestic infrastructure in Tom Clancy's *Vegas* series, but not before innocent civilians are gunned down in U.S. streets, hotels, and casinos. And we command advanced unmanned vehicles and cyborg land forces in *Black Ops II*, only to have these same technologies turned against us.

It took the U.S. military roughly ten years after the attacks of September 11 to find and kill its "public enemy #1." But it took ludic war culture less than a week to recreate Osama bin Laden's assassination. On May 2, 2011, a team of Navy SEALs (SEAL Team Six) assassinated bin Laden, who had been hiding, perhaps for years, in a large compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Five days later, this infamous residence was a downloadable level for *Counter-Strike*.[14] At the same time, the game studio behind *Kuma\War*, an online game firm that had been publishing levels based on the after-action reports of soldiers fighting in Iraq, published its final level: "The Death of Osama bin Laden." This free-to-play level is the conclusion to the company's digitized War on Terror series.[15] Soon thereafter, SEAL Team Six made an appearance in the initial marketing materials for Activision's *Modern Warfare 3*.[16] And less than three weeks after the death of al-Qaeda's leader, defense contractor Raytheon and Motion Reality crafted an immersive 3-D simulation of the raid to demo at the 2011 Special Operations Forces Industry Conference.[17]

The timing of these responses is remarkable but not unprecedented. Gamer culture had, after all, produced and circulated a wealth of "kill bin Laden" games after the September 11 attacks.[18] What is perhaps notable about the relationship between bin Laden and video games this time around is the speed with which his death was commodified. Bin Laden's assassination was an invitation to nationalistic grandstanding, with cable news channels broadcasting Americans chanting "U.S.A., U.S.A.!" in city streets, and it quickly became a ready-made opportunity to capitalize on the conclusion to the War on Terror "story."

In the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, the Twin Towers fell again, and again, and again, in an endless loop of media replay. The mediated, remediated, and eventually premediated trauma of the coordinated terrorist attacks quickly became a rallying point for collective national unity and international support, even as the attacks were mobilized as justification for a new aggressive brand of foreign policy that demanded preemptive American military action against real and imagined threats. Over a decade later, Osama bin Laden's assassination offered the narrative capstone for the War on Terror, yet this was a convenient political conclusion, at best. The United States's longest war will live on through the military's clandestine drone strikes, and it will endure virtually in the cultural industries' post-post-9/11 ludic wars. For as complexly textured a historical snapshot of cultural anxieties and political aspirations as post-9/11 military shooters offer, video games are equally about the future. This simple point cannot be underestimated. The future-facing orientation of games is not some glib truism, but is an essential experiential quality of the medium. These playthings entice gamers into projecting their wills to shape those events that have not yet occurred, be they aligning *Tetris*'s cascading, interlocking bricks or saving the United States from foreign Others. Unlike the textual apparatuses of other entertainment media, the "game gaze" of the ludic apparatus is always about looking toward future possibilities and states of being.[19] The transformative promise of video games lies in their ability to provoke gamers into playing with the present while keeping an eye to the future, so that we might understand the world as it is currently imagined and imagine the world as it might become.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 *Invaders!* had actually debuted the year before at the Laboral Art Center in Gijón, Spain, and is only the most recent iteration of a project that Douglas Edric Stanley has been working on since the 9/11 attacks. It (and he) hadn't come under severe criticism or garnered the attention of the popular press until its short-lived exhibition at the 2008 Leipzig Games Convention in Leipzig, Germany.
Figure I.1 source: Douglas Edric Stanley, "Invaders," installation, 2008, *abstract machine* (blog), http://www.abstractmachine.net/blog/30-years-of-invasions/; reprinted with permission.

2 I have elected to use the compound word "gameplay" instead of the separated "game play" partly because that is how it commonly appears in industry and academic discourse. I also prefer the former construction because it suggests that the mediated experience is the fusion of the gaming device and the person playing it. As digital culture scholar Sherry Turkle observes, games cannot wield their experiential holding power if one does not actually play the game. See Turkle, *The Second Self*. Likewise, there "is no game without a player" and thus no game without play; see Ermi and Mäyrä, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience."

3 If any historical periodization demands an asterisk, it is this one. Unfortunately, 2014 is only a provisional end date for the War on Terror. In a May 23, 2013, address to the National Defense University at Fort McNair, President Barack Obama made the case for bringing an end to the vague and amorphous decade-plus "war," stating, "We must define our effort not as a boundless 'global war on terror'—but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America." Obama, "Remarks." Obama has stated that he has no plans to reauthorize the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) that granted the government wide liberties in pursuing terrorists across the globe. See Serwer, "Will Congress End the War on Terror?" However, sectarian fighting in Iraqi cities between Sunni ISIS rebels (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and the Shi'ite-led government may force Obama to reauthorize the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force in Iraq. It is unclear whether these events will mean an end to the War on Terror, or if it will live on under a different name. See Calabresi, "The War on Terror Is Over—Long Live the War on Terror."

4 Patrick Crogan argues a similar point about the generational divides in video game research in *Gameplay Mode*, xiii.

5 For an examination of Defense Department–produced games, see Payne, "Manufacturing Militainment," 238.
6 For more on the production histories of these recruitment and training games, see Mead, *War Play*.
7 The United States is not alone. Most governments sanction few games for commercial release.
8 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
9 Ibid., 6.
10 Ibid., ch. 10.
11 Ibid., 204.
12 Smith, *Nationalism*, 60.
13 Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 5.
14 Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*, 13–14.
15 Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.*, 6.
16 Ibid., 42.
17 Ibid., 16.
18 The authors' notion of "Empire" is based on Hardt and Negri's formulation in *Empire*.
19 Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xxix.
20 Galloway, *Gaming*, 6.
21 Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*, 39.
22 Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 306–307. Ryan defines a successful game broadly as "a *global design that warrants an active and pleasurable participation of the player in the game-world*—the term *world* being taken here not as the sum of imagined objects but in a non-figurative sense, as the delimited space and time in which the game takes place" (ibid., 181, emphasis in original).
23 Suits, *The Grasshopper*.
24 Galloway analogizes the formal difference between games and countergames, in part, to the split between classical Hollywood filmmaking's continuity editing that hides artifice and experimental films that destroy cinematic illusions by highlighting the filmmaking apparatus. For more on countergames and countergaming, see Galloway, *Gaming*, ch. 5.
25 French philosopher and influential play theorist Roger Caillois makes the important distinction in his work between *ludus* and *paidia*, which he positions at opposite ends of the play spectrum. See Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*.
26 Ian Bogost describes a game's "possibility space" as that which we explore when interacting with a game's controls and its rules in *Persuasive Games*, 43. Bogost's conceptualization is owed to Salen and Zimmerman's definition of play as "the free space of movement within a more rigid structure" in *Rules of Play*, 28.
27 Juul, *Half-Real*.
28 Luckham, "Armament Culture," 1.
29 Ibid., 1.
30 Ibid., 4.

31 For abridged production histories on early video games' place in the military-entertainment production web, see Huntemann and Payne, *Joystick Soldiers*, 1–18; and Huntemann and Payne, "Militarism and Online Games," 828–834.

32 Luckham, "Armament Culture," 2.

33 Levidow and Robins, "Towards a Military Information Society?," 176.

34 The work on media convergence is a sprawling literature. However, the following pieces are representative of how media scholars have wrestled with the topic's research challenges. See Gray, "Introduction—In Focus"; Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Marshall, *New Media Cultures*; Ruggill, "Convergence."

There is also a rapidly growing list of scholarly anthologies that track media convergence during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These collections include: Caldwell and Everett, eds., *New Media*; Kackman et al., eds., *Flow TV*; Harries, ed., *The New Media Book*; Spigel and Olsson, eds., *Television After TV*; Staiger and Hake, eds., *Convergence Media History*.

35 Examples of media research that foregrounds practice include: Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life*; Couldry, "Theorizing Media as Practice"; Wilson, *Understanding Media Users*.

36 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3–4.

37 Ibid., 16.

38 Couldry, "Theorizing Media as Practice," 119.

39 Couldry notes, "We need the perspective of practice to help us address how media are embedded in the interlocking fabric of social and cultural life" (ibid., 129).

40 Galloway, *Gaming*, 2, emphasis in original.

41 Roig et al., "Videogame as Media Practice," 89.

Additionally, thinking of *video games as practice* has at least three research implications: First, it "allows locating video games in the context of other practices related to the cultural industries and media consumption"; second, games can be understood as their own media activity that is "characterized by hybridizing audiovisual representational practices and game cultures"; and third, games should be situated with respect to larger social actions/formations for players and non-players alike (ibid., 100).

42 Ibid., 101.

43 Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*.

44 Of course, raising this point risks reproducing the false dilemma that has long plagued media studies. For an excellent overview of the productive connections between cultural studies and critical political economy, see Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*.

In the realm of game studies, Michael Nitsche proposes a similarly comprehensive system for assessing how multiple planes of interaction inform how games are experienced as space. Nitsche states of his approach: "None of these layers alone is enough to support a rich game world. That is why the argument will concentrate not on a separation between these layers but on their interconnections and overlaps to understand how they work in combination" (*Video Game Spaces*, 17).

45 Citing and reimagining previous schemas for the study of ludic war culture is neither intended to enter into long-standing debates between research camps, nor is it about privileging one approach over another. Rather, these efforts are cited as evidence of a general desire to overcome these divides by explaining how an appreciation of textuality in concert with economic, industrial, and cultural forces bears on media pleasures.

46 This recommendation is similar to one made by Thomas Malaby, who pushes for a highly contextualized and contingent definition of what it means to be a "game," and what it is games are capable of producing, culturally speaking. See Malaby, "Beyond Play," 95.

47 Ken S. McAllister argues as much in *Game Work*, where he demonstrates the rhetorical dimensions and the dialectical contradictions that exist between designing computer games and playing them.

48 Comprehensive discourse histories by Barbara O'Connor and Elisabeth Klaus, and Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich, and Pat Brereton narrate the persistent challenges of reaching a definitional consensus regarding pleasure even within media studies. See O'Connor and Klaus, "Pleasure and Meaningful Discourse," 369; and Kerr, Kücklich, and Brereton, "New Media–New Pleasures?," 63.

O'Connor and Klaus suggest that tracking meaning-making processes is one viable path for linking user pleasures with questions of ideology and hegemony, stating:

"Emotion and cognition, entertainment and information, pleasure and ideology, fact and fiction all seem to be intimately linked in the process of sense-making. Pleasure directs cognitive processes and determines attention and selective awareness. It is the emotional, sensual and imaginative feeling that leads audiences to actively turn to and process a given content. This is a pre-requisite for understanding—without selective attention no cognition would be possible—but at the same time it limits the scope of people's interpretive practices because pleasure is socially embedded and intimately linked to social relations of dominancy and cultural hegemony" (O'Connor and Klaus, "Pleasure and Meaningful Discourse," 381).

49 Fiske, *Television Culture*.

50 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguities of Play*.

51 Simon Frith, "Music for Pleasure," *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* 3 (1982): 493, quoted in O'Connor and Klaus, "Pleasure and Meaningful Discourse," 371, emphasis added.

52 Kerr, Kücklich, and Brereton, "New Media–New Pleasures," 69.

53 Again, I do not wish to make the case that affect studies is *in any way* incommensurate with game studies or play theory. In fact, James Ash bridges the two by arguing that successful video games regularly modulate affect though their technical design. See Ash, "Attention, Videogames and the Retentional Economies of Affective Amplification."

54 Or, as O'Connor and Klaus note in "Pleasure and Meaningful Discourse," "Pleasurableness of a media event is not arbitrary, but is linked to social positionings and contexts of media use" (382).

55 Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, ch. 3.

56 Ibid., 49.

57 Ibid.

58 For more on the differing conceptualizations and operationalizations of interactivity, see McMillian and Downes, "Defining Interactivity," 157; Rafaeli, "Interactivity," 110; Kiousis, "Interactivity," 355.

59 There is little consensus among new media and game scholars concerning the conceptual utility of "interactivity." For example, new media scholar Janet Murray—whose field-defining work I return to in the next chapter—observes that computational media really has participatory and procedural affordances, and that there are substantial differences between actions that are merely interactive (she offers the example of games of chance as simplified actions with effects) and mediated opportunities for exercising agency and intentionality in a digital domain. See Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

Media theorists Lev Manovich and Alexander Galloway largely avoid the term because they see interactivity as mischaracterizing the computational and programmable nature of new media and video games and because it carries unproductive discursive baggage. See Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, and Galloway, *Gaming*. Specifically, Manovich contends there is a problematic conflation between the psychological processes of interacting with media generally (i.e., all media are interactive in a psychological sense) with the medium-specific demands of programmable media. And Galloway, who hails from a media studies background, wants to avoid the murky "active audience" debates to address the medium's dialectical relationship with gamers.

Still others, like Aphra Kerr et al. and Julian Kücklich, posit that interactivity ought to be discarded or replaced with neologisms (Kücklich suggests "playability") that more clearly make sense of human play in these textual encounters. Kerr et al. contend that "interactivity" is more likely a marketing term than a structural characteristic of new media because of the way that it has been coopted by the cultural industries. See Kerr et al., "New Media–New Pleasures?," and Kücklich, "From Interactivity to Playability," 232.

However even the authors' preferred term "play" is not immune to commercial forces and interests (Kerr et al., "New Media–New Pleasures?," 72–73). Indeed, according to P. David Marshall, "play has been increasingly colonized by the culture industries well beyond childhood in recognition of its heightened importance in the formation of the audience's pleasures at the beginning of the new millennium" ("The New Intertextual Commodity," 69).

60 For a summary of interactivity's clumsy and hyperbolic rhetorical deployment by technological utopianists in the press, see Kline et al., *Digital Play*, 14.

61 Aarseth, *Cybertext*.
62 Marshall, "The New Intertextual Commodity."
63 Russell Richards positions interactivity similarly, stating that it is a "contextualizing facility that mediates between environments and content and users and enables the *generation* of further content" ("Users, Interactivity, and Generation," 532, emphasis in original).
64 Aarseth coins the term "ergodic," a combination of the Greek words *ergon* for "work" and *hodos* for "path," to describe the "nontrivial effort [that] is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (*Cybertext*, 1).
65 Ibid., 112–113.
66 Ibid., 113.
67 For additional research on identification and learning, see Gee, *Why Video Games are Good for Your Soul*; Newman, *Playing with Videogames*; Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*.
68 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 4.
69 Marshall, "The New Intertextual Commodity," 80.
70 Cover, "Audience Inter/active," 139.
71 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 42.
72 Marshall, "The New Intertextual Commodity"; Roig et al., "Videogame as Media Practice."
73 Harries, *The New Media Book*, 172.
74 Aarseth, *Cybertext*.
75 Stahl, *Militainment, Inc*.
76 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*.
77 As games journalist Michael McWhertor observes, *Invaders!* makes for a distinctly unpleasant experience. See McWhertor, "Hands On."
78 Stanley, "Some Context."
79 Ibid.
80 Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* can be played here: http://www.newsgaming.com/games/index12.htm.
81 Chan, "Dead-in-Iraq," 272.
82 For additional analyses of military countergames, see the essays in Huntemann and Payne, *Joystick Soldiers*, part 5.
83 I take up this point fully in Chapter 1. See Hammond, *Media, War, and Postmodernity*.
84 Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 10.
85 Ibid., 9.
86 Gibson, *Warrior Dreams*.
87 Ibid., 10.
88 Ibid.
89 Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 15.
90 Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*.
91 Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 306–307.

92 Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 4.

93 Faludi observes: "Taken individually, the various impulses that surfaced after 9/11—the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of helpless girls—might seem random expressions of some profound cultural derangement. But taken together, they form a coherent and inexorable whole, the cumulative elements of a national fantasy in which we are deeply invested, our elaborately constructed myth of invincibility" (ibid., 14).

94 Melnick, *9/11 Culture*, 6.

95 Ibid.

96 See Fiala, *The Just War Myth*, and McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*.

97 Smicker, "Future Combat, Combating Futures," 106.

98 Grusin, *Premediation*.

99 Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*.

100 Grusin, *Premediation*, 8.

101 For an excellent history and theoretical handling of the complex relationship among simulation, war, and the military, see Crogan's, *Gameplay Mode*.

102 Samet, "Can an American Soldier Ever Die in Vain?," 74.

103 Grusin, *Premediation*, 4.

104 Peters, "*Time* Lends Cover for Apocalyptic Image."

105 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*.

David Simpson contends that the "degree to which the structure of feeling is not articulated to the point of 'theoretical satisfaction,' despite its deployment throughout twenty years of major critical work, suggests a strong resistance to such theorization" ("Raymond Williams," 43). Sean Matthews agrees with this, positing that the "suggestive, provisional, even vague quality of the [structure of feeling] is in fact therefore its virtue" ("Change and Theory in Raymond Williams's Structure of Feeling," 191).

106 Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.

107 Ibid., 132–133.

108 Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*.

109 Kackman et al., "Introduction."

110 Swallwell and Wilson, "Introduction," 6–7.

111 According to case study expert Robert Yin: "The holistic design is advantageous . . . when the relevant theory underlying the case study is itself of a holistic nature" (*Case Study Research*, 45).

112 Ruggill and McAllister, *Gaming Matters*.

113 King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*.

114 Kahn, "Sacrificial Nation."

CHAPTER 1. NINTENDO WAR 2.0

1 Barkan, *Blue Wizard Is About to Die*, 73.

2 Carruthers, "No One's Looking," 71.
3 Corliss, "Where Are the War Movies?"
4 These box office sales figures come from Box Office Mojo (boxofficemojo.com).
5 Kubba, "*Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* Rakes in $500 Million in First Day."
6 Sliwinski, "*Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* Sales Reach $1 Billion in 15 Days."
7 This also means that *Modern Warfare 2* earned more money during its first five days on store shelves than Hollywood blockbusters like *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and *The Dark Knight* ("which holds the U.S. box-office record with $203.8 million in first five-day sales," according to Don Reisinger). It bears noting that I do not mean to equate box office receipts to game sales, as they are not equivalent media purchases or experiences. I am instead interested in the differing sales trajectories between games and films. See Reisinger, "*Modern Warfare 2* Tops Entertainment Industry, Not Just Games."
8 Jongewaard, "*Call of Duty: Black Ops* in 1 of 8 U.S. Households." For additional information on Activision's financial take with recent *Call of Duty* games during the first twenty-four hours, see Johnson, "*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* Destroys Records"; Activision Publishing press release, "*Call of Duty: Black Ops* Sets New Opening Day Sales Record"; Snider, "*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* Sets First-Day Record"; LeJacq, "*Call of Duty: Blacks* [sic] *Ops 2* Sales Top $400 Million in First-Day Sales"; Griffiths, "Activision Boasts $1 Billion 'Call of Duty: Ghosts' Day One Sales."
9 Suellentrop, "War Games."
10 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*; McMahan, "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence."
11 Aarseth, *Cybertext*; Grodal, "Video Games and the Pleasures of Control."
12 Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*; Bryce and Rutter, "Spectacle of the Deathmatch"; Galloway, *Gaming*.
13 Brooker, "Camera-Eye, CG-Eye," 122.
14 Nieborg, "Am I Mod or Not?"; Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games*.
15 Lowood, "Impotence and Agency."
16 Machin and Van Leeuwen, "Computer Games as Political Discourse."
17 Mirrlees, "Digital Militainment by Design," 161; Smicker, "Future Combat, Combating Futures."
18 Thomson, "From Underdog to Overmatch," 92.
19 King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, 20.
20 Gray, *Postmodern War*.
21 Ibid., 22.
22 Virilio, "Infowar." Virilio employs a diverse range of terminology (e.g., "pure war," "infowar," and "electronic war") when he discusses contemporary warfare. For example, he calls Vietnam history's first electronic war due in large part to the electronic-acoustic "MacNamara Line" that was developed by researchers at Harvard and MIT; see Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 82.
23 Kittler, "On the History of the Theory of Information Warfare," 176.

24 Hammond, *Media, War, and Postmodernity*, 18.

25 There remains *considerable* theoretical variation and disagreement within this group. See, for example, Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*; Gray, *Peace, War, and Computers*; Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* and *Media Culture*.

26 Mary Kaldor compares the "new wars" of low intensity conflict between small groups (ethnic groups, terrorist organizations) with the "old wars" of large nation-states. See Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

27 Hammond, *Media, War, and Postmodernity*, 11.

28 Laidi, *A World without Meaning*.

29 Hammond, *Media, War, and Postmodernity*, 14.

30 Ibid., 35.

31 Ibid., 57.

32 Ibid.

33 Cloud, *Control and Consolation in American Culture and Politics*, 1.

34 Hammond, *Media, War, and Postmodernity*, 58. It bears noting, however, that these low-intensity conflicts are viable interventions because newer technologies allow for minimal loss of life and just-in-time military assemblage, even if these same technologies themselves do not offer any moralistic or ethical foundation for their deployment.

35 Ibid., 59.

36 Zucchino, "Army Stage-Managed Fall of Hussein Statue."

37 Taylor, "Documenting the Return of the U.S. War Dead."

38 Barstow and Stein, "Under Bush, a New Age of Prepackaged TV News."

39 Kampfner, "The Truth about Jessica."

40 Laurence, "Was the Pin-Up Boy of Bush's War on Terror Assassinated?"

41 Rampton and Stauber, "As Others See Us," 9.

42 The term "New Pearl Harbor" has been used by the Bush administration's apologists and its critics; see also Mahajan, *The New Crusade*, 11–12.

43 Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon*, 77.

44 King, "Play, Modality and Claims of Realism in *Full Spectrum Warrior*," 53.

45 King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders.*

46 Hodge and Tripp, *Children and Television*, 104.

47 A message's modality is predicated on a range of markers that differ across mediums. These modality markers are elements that work together and/or are at odds with one another to produce a perception of a message's ontological realness. These markers include elements as varied as three-dimensionality, color, detail, movement, music, sound effects, etc. Individuals' modality judgments, or their beliefs about a message's connection to reality, are based on a range of these medium-specific modality markers; i.e., the modality markers for spoken language are different than those of body language, visual media, sound, etc. The modality (and the markers) for visual and photographic messages and media are thought to be generally quite high, since the sign and referent are often either indistinguishable or are highly indexical. Or as James Monoco observes, "The power of language sys-

tems is that there is a very great difference between the signifier and the signified; the power of film is that there is not" (*How to Read a Film*, 158).

48 Hodge and Tripp, *Children and Television*, 106.

49 Hodge and Kress, *Social Semiotics*. A slightly related concept might be the parodic "truthiness." Truthiness—which was popularized by comedian Steven Colbert and was named the 2006 "word of the year" by Merriam-Webster—includes "truth that comes from the gut" and those concepts and ideas that one wishes to be true, even though they may not be so factually.

50 Ibid., 147.

51 The argument made by King and Krzywinska in *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders* echoes a similar point made by Hodge and Kress in *Social Semiotics*: "Different genres, whether classified by medium (e.g., comic, cartoon, film, TV, painting) or by content (e.g., Western, Science Fiction, Romance, news) establish sets of modality markers, and an overall modality value that acts as a base-line for the genre. The baseline can be different for different kinds of viewer/reader, and for different texts or moments within texts, but these differences themselves acquire significance from their relationship to the genre's basic modality value" (142).

52 King and Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, 21.

53 Ibid., 22.

54 There remain those critics who frame all first-person shooters as "murder simulators," irrespective of narrative or diegetic content. For example, Colonel Dave Grossman uses this colorful phrase to describe the process by which video games train gamers to kill without remorse. His book, *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, embraces many of the typical moral panics around first-person shooters.

55 A number of game scholars have invoked anthropologist Victor Turner's notion of "liminality" when describing how the gameplay act experientially straddles worlds. See Turner, *From Ritual to Theater*.

56 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 14–15, emphasis in original.

57 Galloway, *Gaming*.

58 Galloway cites numerous Hollywood studio films that use extended first-person sequences: Buster Keaton's *Go West* (1925), Alfred Hitchcock's *Topaz* (1969), and, most notably, Robert Montgomery's *Lady in the Lake* (1947), which is shot entirely from the subjective point of view.

59 For an excellent history on *Doom*, see Pinchbeck, *Doom: Scarydarkfast*.

60 Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon*.

61 Figure 1.6 source: Petty Officer 1st Class Sean Mulligan, "U.S. Army Soldiers in a Door during a Combat Mission," photograph, December 23, 2007, Department of Defense Public Domain.

62 Kurtz, "Ideology and Interpellation in the First-Person Shooter," 113.

63 King, "Play, Modality and Claims of Realism in *Full Spectrum Warrior*," 53.

64 Blumenthal, "Electronic-Games Race," 180.

65 For more on the economic logic of coin-operated arcade game design, see Kocurek, "Coin-Drop Capitalism."

66 A *Newsweek* magazine piece colorfully describes *Missile Command* as follows: "If there is one game that requires the 'right stuff,' this is it. Your mission is to protect six cities by destroying enemy missiles with missiles of your own. Your arsenal includes three separate bases for launching your counterattack, each with its own control button; a fourth control aims your shots. As the war progresses, the enemy gets faster and more accurate—he [sic] even throws a few 'smart Tombs' [sic] your way. One good strategy: saturate the air with a line of explosions to absorb the first wave of enemy fire, then block subsequent offensives with smaller bursts. As long as at least one of your cities survives, the game will continue. *Missile Command* graphics are lively and colorful. Video warriors especially enjoy the machine's victory celebration. The screen explodes into red and triumphantly flashes an epitaph for civilization as we know it: 'The End.' Any teen-ager who regularly scores above 100,000 should be required to submit his name and address to the U.S. Air Force" (Gelman, "In Arcadia," 91).

67 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.

68 Ibid., 110–111.

69 Wolf, *Medium of the Video Game*, 50.

70 According to Mark J. P. Wolf, "The player-character surrogate in the video game is, in a very concrete sense, the external object into which the player is absorbed, which receives the player's will to activity. This may help to explain why the majority of player-character surrogates in video games are character-based" (ibid., 60).

71 Of course, immersion proper is not predicated exclusively on graphical representation. Muntfort's *Twisty Little Passages* documents how text adventures and role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* can be extremely immersive. Abstraction in video games, as Wolf observes, can be quite engrossing and mentally stimulating as well since the players mentally fill in the representational gaps. In a horrifying realization of this, *Missile Command*'s own programmer, Dave Theurer, had nightmares for half a year following the game's production; see Barkan, *Blue Wizard Is About to Die*, 140.

72 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

73 Ibid., 129.

74 Gameplay actions and existential phenomenology share numerous concerns in addition to intentionality: player freedom, contextual affordances, and experiential flow, among others. For an exploratory discussion regarding these points of overlap, see Payne, "Interpreting Gameplay through Existential Ludology."

75 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 145.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., 146.

78 Ibid., 135.

79 Ibid., 181.

80 Regrettably, there are those games that quite purposefully trade in gross representations, drawing the ire of politicians, activists, and players. These games are

an ugly but real part of video game history. Two of the more infamous titles are *Custer's Revenge* (1982) made for the Atari 2600, wherein the player gets points for raping a captive Native American woman while dodging arrows, and the Flash-based Internet game, *Border Patrol* (no date), that has the player shooting Mexican stereotypes like the "Mexican Nationalist," the "Drug Smuggler," and the "Breeder" before they enter the United States. However, there are also video games that are used to train and educate users on a variety of subjects (e.g., the "serious games movement"), and some modified military games are even used to treat cases of post-traumatic stress disorder. Educational and "serious" games demonstrate that transformation, like media interactivity, is not a strictly technological event.

81 Herz, *Joystick Nation*, 64.

82 Poole, *Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*, 36.

83 Galloway, *Gaming*, 69.

84 Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 309.

85 Thompson, "Fear & Loathing in America."

86 As Murray rightly observes: "These pleasures [those emerging from immersion, agency, and transformation] are in some ways continuous with the pleasures of traditional media and in some ways unique. Certainly the combination of pleasures, like the combination of properties of the digital medium itself, is completely novel" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 181).

87 Nye, "Propaganda Isn't the Way: Soft Power." See also Nye, *Bound to Lead*, and Nye, *Soft Power*

CHAPTER 2. THE FIRST-PERSONAL SHOOTER

1 O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 78.

2 Despite their different emphases, the RMA remains the progenitor of Counterinsurgency. Mirzoeff notes, "Counterinsurgency is the permanent continuation of the RMA" ("War is Culture," 1738).

3 The term "the long war"—which initially referred to the protracted battle against non-state terrorists in the wake of 9/11—has since been used in a variety of popular and military publications, though some officials dislike its connotation of the previous decades-long Cold War. See Pernin et al., *Unfolding the Future of the Long War*, for an extended discussion concerning the term's definitional challenges.

4 Mirzoeff, "Counterinsurgency," 1737, emphasis added.

5 Mirzoeff, "On Visuality," 53.

6 Virilio, *War and Cinema*.

7 For more on this long-standing connection between simulation and war-planning, see Crogan, *Gameplay Mode*.

8 Mirzoeff, "Counterinsurgency," 1741, emphasis added.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 1737.

11 *Time* magazine dubbed the Iraq War the "YouTube War" for its vast array of video depictions created by media firms, soldiers, and civilians, which have been posted to the video-sharing site of the same name. See Cox, "The YouTube War."
12 Dooley, *Roger Scruton*, 158, emphasis added.
13 Game review discourse receives sustained attention in Chapter 5.
14 These figures were tabulated using the sales data on the Video Game Chartz website: http://www.vgchartz.com.
15 Rieke and Boon, "Postmortem—*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*," 25.
16 Ibid., 26.
17 Ibid., 25.
18 Kahn, "Sacrificial Nation."
19 Marvin, "Theorizing the Flagbody," 120.
20 There are at least three reasons to believe that Infinity Ward was purposefully courting controversy with the inclusion of the "No Russian" level. First, the game includes the option to skip the objectionable level and continue through the campaign mode. Second, the player can advance through the level without shooting civilians (the level is terminated, however, if the undercover player fires on the terrorists). And the third reason to think that the studio was generating hype is that details about this level were "leaked" in the final weeks before the game's release.
21 Cut-scenes are common story elements in games that advance the narrative while game information (e.g., levels, assets, etc.) loads in the background.
22 *Modern Warfare 2* (Xbox 360 version).
23 Orwell, *1984*, 182.
24 The first level is named for the "ghillie suit"—a camouflage outfit commonly worn by military snipers.
25 This reemerges as a major theme in *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*.
26 Perhaps due to the unqualified success of the first game, the studio's sense of changing public sentiment or because of the second game's more outlandish plot, Infinity Ward did not eschew naming and recreating real locales in *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* (e.g., Washington, D.C., Rio de Janeiro, Afghanistan) as they had in the first.
27 *Modern Warfare 2* (Xbox 360 version).
28 This phrase's origin is unknown, but is commonly attributed to Winston Churchill.
29 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
30 Ibid., ch. 10.
31 O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 80–81.
32 This design disconnect in video games between the narrative and gameplay is commonly referred to as "ludo-narrative dissonance." For more on this design challenge, see Payne, "War Bytes," 265.
33 There are, for instance, role-playing video games where players can make moral choices that then shape subsequent narrative and non-player characters' responses.

CHAPTER 3. FIGHTING THE GOOD (PREEMPTIVE) FIGHT

1 Bush, "Full Text: Bush's National Security Strategy."

2 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, ix.

3 Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*.

4 See McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*; Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism*.

American exceptionalism has a long history with some diverging definitions. Most generally it describes the idea that the "United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; not only unique but also superior among nations. . . . The belief in American exceptionalism forms a core element of American national identity and American nationalism" (McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 1). Furthermore, the discourse of American exceptionalism is said to have two dominant themes or threads; the first is an idealistic, supportive "city on the hill," while the second is a more militant, expansive country guided by the forces of "manifest destiny" and the creation of a new world order (ibid., 2).

5 Weber, *Targets of Opportunity*, 94, emphasis in original.

6 Ibid., 96.

7 Hodgson, *Myth of American Exceptionalism*, 100.

8 Thomas, "Review of *Clear and Present Danger*."

9 The exception to this rule is his collaboration with Red Storm Entertainment's production of the first *Rainbow Six* game in 1998. See Upton, "Red Storm Entertainment's *Rainbow Six*," 252.

10 The publishing giant elected to acquire all of the "intellectual property rights to the Tom Clancy name, on a perpetual basis and free of all related future royalty payments, for use in video games and ancillary products including related books, movies and merchandising products" because the firm projected that it would save on royalties, which would "have an average positive impact on Ubisoft's operating income of a minimum of 5 million Euros per year." See Terdiman, "Ubisoft Buys Tom Clancy's Name."

11 As was noted in the Introduction, the *Ghost Recon* and *Rainbow Six* series are squad-based tactical shooters; the *Splinter Cell* games concern solitary stealth and espionage; *Endwar* (2009) is a real-time strategy game; and *H.A.W.X.* (2009) is an aerial assault game. That is, while many of Clancy's franchises unfold in ostensibly similar diegetic worlds with similarly contrived save-the-U.S. plots and characters, playing as a member of a counterterrorist team engaged in close-quarters combat is a wholly different experience from conducting the impersonal war planning integral to a strategy game, or unleashing powerful munitions from an aircraft onto ground targets. These differing mechanics and stories structure users' interactions and directly shape those gameplay modalities.

12 Gibson, *The Perfect War*.

13 Gray, *Postmodern War*; Martin, *An Empire of Indifference*.

14 See Arquilla and Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars*; Mirrlees, "Digital Militainment by Design"; Smicker, "Future Combat, Combating Futures"; Hay, "Extreme Makeover."

15 Martin, *An Empire of Indifference*, 77. Martin explains how the Revolution in Military Affairs and military procurement began reflecting the "new economy" of the 1990s: "But the RMA, which boasts to remove labor from the scene of battle, provided cover for substantial reductions in active duty military personnel not unlike the outsourcing and downsizing of labor that drove the new economy. Between 1987 and 1999 the army reduced its ranks by over 300,000, the navy by over 200,000, and the air force by nearly a quarter-million. The 1990s saw demobilization of six divisions (from eighteen to twelve) and the loss of a known enemy. Subsequently, planning would need to be oriented toward using a more concentrated force for any number of kinds of intervention" (ibid.).

16 Instruction manual, *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*, 3.

17 Garson offers this useful genre description: "Technothrillers are often a form of military fiction, with players who are soldiers, sailors, pilots. The novel serves as a subordinate backdrop to display advancements and projections of weaponry and war. Actual war, possible war, or averted war is fought on the pages of the technothriller. . . . The crises and solutions in most technothrillers are mechanical. People may make mistakes, but the focus of the plot is on the machinery not on human limitations. The 'good' characters in technothrillers are clearly delineated, are on the 'right' side and, in the military fiction, are superpatriots" (Garson, *Tom Clancy*, 36).

18 See Gibson, *The Perfect War*.

19 See Hixson, "'Red Storm Rising'"; Delgado, "Technico-Military Thrills and the Technology of Terror"; Hill, "Tom Clancy, *24*, and the Language of Autocracy."

Walter Hixson sees Clancy's novels as celebrating the "cult of national security" that posits that the United States is best served by an executive branch that controls foreign policy using whatever means necessary, including subversive, covert, and constitutionally questionable, if not patently illegal, operations ("Red Storm Rising," 605–606). Emphasizing a similar point, Delgado contends that the government's celebrated exercises of power in Clancy's work, specifically the CIA's ability to "disappear" people, represents their primary textual power and pleasure—that is, their show of physical force is through the power of disappearance ("Technico-Military Thrills," 127–128). And Andrew Hill views Clancy's work and similar technothriller fiction, like the television series *24*, as justifying government-backed torture and domestic authoritarianism under the auspices of combating and preventing stateside terrorism. Hill argues: "In Tom Clancy, readers are initiated into the 'insider world' of the military and intelligence communities through technical language; in *24*, the language of technowar is translated visually, literally and formally presenting the War on Terror as a high-tech information war" ("Language of Autocracy," 136).

20 Buchanan, *Fredric Jameson*, 74.

21 Wainwright, "A Fantasy Fit for a President," 7.

22 Ibid.

23 Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 117.

24 Garson, *Tom Clancy*, 8.

25 Cooper, "Interview: Tom Clancy."

26 Matthew Hill sees a substantial thematic overlap between Clancy's signature heroes and *24*'s Jack Bauer. Hill notes: "We see in the novels of Tom Clancy and in *24* the convergence of two powerful mythologies of warfare: that of the American frontier hero, independent, innovative, hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer, and that of technowar, the conceptualization of war as a high-tech, scientific production process. . . . These complementary mythologies create in these texts a cult of the technowarrior, in which those with the 'right' knowledge, the 'right' technology, and the 'right' willingness to use them are elevated to the status of infallible guardians of the sacred order of American culture" ("Language of Autocracy," 140).

27 Martin, "Tom Clancy Series Tops 55 Million Units Sold."

28 Instruction manual, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* (Xbox 360 version), 3.

29 Figure 3.1 source: U.S. Federal Government, "Global Information Grid Operational View-1," illustration, April 2, 2008, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gig_ov1.jpg.

30 In 2009, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates ordered the $160 billion Future Combat Systems program dismantled, and its technologies repurposed for existing Army-wide modernization efforts; see Osborn, "FCS is Dead; Programs Live On." This decision was part of Gates's pragmatic effort to change the Pentagon's focus on fighting future wars via programs epitomized by the Revolution in Military Affairs, with the need to fight today's wars. See Shachtman, "Take Back the Pentagon," 116.

31 *Advanced Warfighter* also advances its narrative via the HUD instead of relying on discrete "cutscenes," or pre-rendered interstitial cinematic sequences, which keeps the player firmly immersed in that world from that soldier's position.

32 Thomson rightly notes that "in computer games, the development of the hero narrative from underdog to overmatch, and the representation of war which they present, has therefore mirrored developments in real U.S. military policy and the way in which the U.S. fights its wars" ("From Underdog to Overmatch," 96).

33 Ibid., 97.

34 In his study of player identity in role-playing video games, Zach Waggoner argues that making choices is a critical affective component for understanding how players connect with video games and their virtual characters. He strikes a key distinction between agents and avatars, players' two main types of in-game digital proxies. Players can modify avatars in terms of their appearance or their function, whereas agents cannot be altered (e.g., *Pac Man*, *Frogger*). The Clancy warriors—

Mitchell, Keller, and Bishop—are avatars since they can be outfitted with a range of weapons and can be accompanied by teammates with different proficiencies. In turn, these personalized choices inform and shape how the gamer approaches the mission and explores the game space. See Waggoner, *My Avatar, My Self*.

35 Franklin, *War Stars*, 219.

36 For example, the Air Force's "It's not science fiction" campaign, which melds high-fidelity computer generated worlds with footage of human operators and soldiers, purposefully conflates the actual and the virtual. The ads suggest that the Air Force's current generation of warfighting technologies are more advanced than they are in practice, and more closely resemble futuristic video game gear. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiB3vrhPDNs&feature=related; and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfAHw1kTpvY&feature=channel

37 Martin, *An Empire of Indifference*, 77.

38 Ibid., 76.

39 Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, 62.

40 *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas* (Xbox 360 version).

41 Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces*, 227–232.

42 Ibid., 230.

43 Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, 65, emphasis in original.

44 Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces*, ch. 11.

45 Ibid., 183.

46 Bishop has no stated first name because the player chooses the avatar's gender at the beginning of the game.

47 Meaning that no matter how well the gamer plays, the hostages cannot be saved.

48 De Matos, "*Rainbow Six Vegas 2* Shoots Up MLG Inspired Map."

49 George W. Bush, "Bush Warns Iraq to Disarm."

50 Holland, "Tough Talk on Pakistan from Obama."

51 In political theory, the "state of exception" is the sovereign's ability to violate, ignore, or transcend the rule of law under the auspices of ensuring the public good. Contrary to its name, the state of exception is anything but exceptional, having now become ordinary; it is "the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2). The state of exception does not concern only what is or is not legal for a given regime, but it begs foundational questions about the definitional and operational limits of the law itself—confusing, for instance, the distinctions among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government—and how ostensibly illegal or extra-legal government actions are situated in relation to the law (e.g., extraordinary rendition and detention, so-called "enhanced interrogation techniques," and powers granted under the October 6, 2001 USA Patriot Act). Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben notes: "The state of exception is not a dictatorship . . . but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated" (ibid., 50).

CHAPTER 4. THROUGH A DRONE, DARKLY

1 Benjamin and Mancias, "Did You Hear the Joke About the Predator Drone that Bombed?"
2 Virilio, *The Original Accident*, 10.
3 Kennedy, "Seeing and Believing," 265.
4 For a history of the "Situation Room" meme, see: http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/the-situation-room. Brad Kim, "The Situation Room," knowyourmeme.com.
5 Figure 4.1 source: Cytherians, "Obama Situation Room—Hunting Osama bin Laden," doctored image (Situation Room meme), http://i716.photobucket.com/albums/ww169/cytherians/fringe/Obama_Situation-Room_Observer-800.jpg.
6 Kennedy, "Seeing and Believing," 268.
7 See Gusterson, *People of the Bomb*; Wall and Monahan, "Surveillance and Violence from Afar."
8 Kennedy, "Seeing and Believing," 270–271.
9 No public records are available on how many times *Unmanned* has been played or downloaded.
10 Dunn, "Drones," 1237.
11 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 13.
12 Horowitz, "The Looming Robotics Gap," 63.
13 Singer, *Wired for War*.
14 Ibid., 194.
15 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 17.
16 Bumiller and Shanker, "War Evolves with Drones."
17 For an excellent cultural history on the place of large-scale military weapons in the American imaginary, see Franklin, *War Stars*.
18 These are the three main tasks of armed drones, according to Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 18.
19 Contrary to popularly received wisdom and cable news punditry, the Global War on Terror that began under the Bush Administration has, in fact, been expanded in important but perhaps less obvious ways under Obama's watch. America's deployment of drones in Pakistan offers the best case study of Obama's emergent doctrine of robotic warfare. As Nick Turse notes: "Beginning as a highly-circumscribed drone assassination campaign backed by limited cross-border commando raids under the Bush administration, U.S. operations in Pakistan have expanded into something close to a full-scale robotic war, complemented by cross-border helicopter attacks, CIA-funded 'kill teams' of Afghan proxy forces, as well as boots-on-the-ground missions by elite special operations forces, including the SEAL raid that killed Osama bin Laden" (*The Changing Face of Empire*, 3–4).
20 Benjamin writes: "Founded in 1980, the JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) specializes in secret, small-scale operations. Since 9/11 its primary mission has been to identify and destroy perceived terrorists and terror cells worldwide. It is credited as the group that oversaw the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. In

addition to dispatching clandestine troops, it has a drone hit team that it operates with the help of contracted mercenaries. It has carried out deadly strikes in Yemen and Somalia, but like the CIA, it refuses to disclose any aspect of its counterterrorism operations" (*Drone Warfare*, 62).

21 Ibid., 61.

22 Ibid., 57.

23 Benson, "U.S. Airstrikes in Pakistan Called 'Very Effective.'"

24 Singer, *Wired for War*, 221.

25 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 203.

26 Nick Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire*, 22.

27 Turse, "Prisons, Drones, and Black Ops in Afghanistan."

28 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 63–64.

29 Finn, "A Future for Drones."

30 Singer, *Wired for War*, 231.

31 Dunn, "Drones," 1238.

32 The unmanned robotic drone is, obviously, a huge milestone in our military-civilian, techno-historical timeline. But there is a long history connecting military and civilian uses of media for the purposes of strategic planning, spatial mapping, and geo-location. There is likewise a growing body of critical literature across academic disciplines, including media studies, geography studies, history of technology studies, and surveillance studies, which tracks how these changes have transformed our understanding of the world, and what mix of social and political forces brought these influential technologies into being. For work that frames the CIA's famous U-2 spy plane as a new media apparatus (and an important antecedent to today's drones), see Hinsman, "Undetected Media." For an analysis of how targeted marketing technologies and GPS systems have militarized the consumer identity of U.S. citizens, see Kaplan, "Precision Targets." And for work that demonstrates how satellite photography, photographic recon, and image interpretation were rhetorically deployed by the military brass to prove America's battlefield control during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, see Harris, "The Omniscient Eye," 101.

33 Dunn, "Drones," 1239.

34 Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst*, 92.

35 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 22.

36 Ibid., 24.

37 Boyle, "The Costs and Consequences of Drone Warfare," 1.

38 Ibid., 4.

39 Asaro, "The Labor of Surveillance and Bureaucratized Killing," 220.

40 Brandt, "Cyborg Agency and Individual Trauma."

41 Wall and Monahan, "Surveillance and Violence from Afar," 249.

42 Ibid., 250.

43 It bears noting that game critic Robert Rath singled out these same games for reflection in his "Critical Intel" series. See Rath, "Killer Robots and Collateral Damage."

44 Quoted in Singer, *Wired for War*, 197.
45 Ibid., 196.
46 For more on this horrifying tale, see Hosken et al., "9 Killed in Army Horror"; Shachtman, "Robot Cannon Kills 9, Wounds 14."
47 Oliver North is not the first controversial historical figure to appear in the *Black Ops* series. The first title, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), featured Robert McNamara, the former secretary of defense during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.
48 This loss of control over the robotic fleet is previewed by the player's *Manchurian Candidate*–like battles to control Alex Mason, a Special Forces operative who was tortured and "re-programmed" by Soviets. In these moments, the player must furiously tap a button to resist killing a preprogrammed target planted by Russian brainwashing.
49 Dunn, "Drones," 1243.
50 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 81–82.
51 Dunn, "Drones," 1244.
52 Singer, *Wired for War*, 215.
53 For a more detailed examination of *Spec Ops: The Line*, see Payne "War Bytes."
54 Although it is more of a stealth action game than a shooter, another interesting example of a commercial, fourth-wall breaking military-themed title is *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001). See Higgins, "'Turn the Game Console Off Right Now!'"
55 Wall and Monahan, "Surveillance and Violence from Afar," 250.
56 This level is quite similar to the "Death from Above" level in the 2007 blockbuster *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, one of the games discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.
57 Wall and Monahan, "Surveillance and Violence from Afar," 246.
58 Klepek, "This Is All Your Fault."
59 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 61.
60 Becker and Shane, "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will," 3.
61 Turse, *The Changing Face of Empire*, 25.
62 Benjamin, *Drone Warfare*, 26.
63 Galliott, "Closing with Completeness," 355.
64 Pitts, "Don't Be a Hero."
65 Singer, *Wired for War*, 365.
66 To play Molleindustria's games, go to: www.molleindustria.org
67 Pedercini was inspired to create *Unmanned* after reading Singer's *Wired for War*, but he was also motivated to make the game for personal and professional reasons. In an interview with *Ars Technica*, Pedercini said: "I just officially became a U.S. taxpayer and I started to feel more directly implicated in these distant events. Not to mention that my employer, Carnegie Mellon University, gets a good deal of funding from the Department of Defense due to research in robotics." See Orland, "*Unmanned* Presents a Nuanced, Psychological Perspective on Modern Warfare."

68 Indie Game Reviewer, "IndieCade 2012 Indie Game Award Winners."
69 Dunn, "Drones," 1238.
70 Wall and Monahan, "Surveillance and Violence from Afar," 250–251.
71 Asaro, "The Labor of Surveillance and Bureaucratized Killing," 200.
72 Brandt, "Cyborg Agency and Individual Trauma," paragraph 17.
73 Orland, "*Unmanned* Presents a Nuanced, Psychological Perspective," paragraph 9.
74 Ibid., paragraph 14.
75 For example, the new "Gorgon Stare" technology, which promises to offer an exponentially wider view of a targeted area—supposedly up to an entire city—will likewise demand a massive increase in analysts to decipher the data feeds. While it takes about nineteen specialists to process the data of a single drone feed, the Gorgon Stare will demand upwards of two thousand trained professionals. See Bumiller and Shanker, "War Evolves with Drones," paragraph 21.
76 Orland, "*Unmanned* Presents a Nuanced, Psychological Perspective," paragraph 10.
77 Pew Research: Global Attitudes Project, "Global Opinion of Obama Slips."
78 Dunn, "Drones," 1240.
79 Horowitz, "The Looming Robotics Gap," 64.

CHAPTER 5. MARKETING MILITARY REALISM

1 Klepek, "NPD Fallout."
2 Microsoft, "Jump In" (commercial), YouTube, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFATqCfmgDM&feature=PlayList&p=582758959394B8FC&playnext=1&index=2.
3 Rose, "Xbox 360 'Jump In' Promo Wins Addy"; Thorsen, "Xbox 360 TV Spot Wins Addy."
4 McCann-Erickson, "Standoff" (2005), YouTube video, posted by "mundodasmarcas," September 27, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUU096QLeOA.
5 Video game violence has been blamed for crimes ranging from theft to murder to suicide. For additional examples of how games have been implicated in these crimes, see Calvert, "Families Sue over GTAIII-Inspired Shootings"; Benedetti, "Were Video Games to Blame for Massacre?"; Buncombe, "*Grand Theft Auto IV* Is Pulled from Thai Shops after Killing of Taxi Driver"; Turner, "Daniel Petric Killed Mother, Shot Father."
6 Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 136.
7 Media modality is, as Geoff King usefully reminds us, an "attitude toward an activity and how that activity is situated in relation to what is understood to be the real world" ("Play, Modality and Claims of Realism in *Full Spectrum Warrior*," 53).
8 Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 135.
9 Ibid., 136.
10 Galloway, *Gaming*, 75.
11 Ibid., 73.
12 Ibid., 78.

13 According to Video Game Chartz (vgchartz.com), Activision has sold over 17 million units of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles. The sales numbers are higher if one includes the PC and Nintendo DS numbers. It was also the second most played multiplayer game on Xbox Live in 2008 after *Halo 3*. See Klepek, "Microsoft Reveals Most Popular Xbox 360 Online Games for 2008."
14 Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games*, 7.
15 Ibid., 93.
16 See Gray, "Television Pre-Views and the Meaning of Hype," and Gray, "The Reviews Are In."
17 Gray, "Television Pre-Views and the Meaning of Hype," 38.
18 Ibid., 46.
19 Kerr, *The Business and Culture of Digital Games*, 45. It is unclear how this number would need to be adjusted given the rise of indie game development since Kerr published her work.
20 Some game franchises are produced with subscription services and expansion modules in mind, such as the popular massively multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* (2004).
21 Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 251.
22 Kerr, *Business and Culture of Digital Games*, 100.
23 Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 254–255.
24 Ibid., 255.
25 Ibid., 252.
26 Beginning in 2003, Rooster-Teeth Productions began creating satirical videos using the *Halo* game engine, and distributed these shorts online. The series had become such a fan favorite that by 2007 Microsoft commissioned Rooster-Teeth Productions to create ads hyping the release of *Halo 3*, which grossed over $170 million during its first twenty-four hours. See Geddes, "*Halo 3* Racks Up Record Sales."
27 See Carter, "Amazing Pro Gamer NoM4D Plays with Just His Lips and Chin."
28 Gray, "Television Pre-Views and the Meaning of Hype," 34, emphasis in original.
29 Collier, "Evolution of a Storyline."
30 Ibid.
31 Collier and Keirsey, "*Call of Duty 4* Authenticity and Leveling System Interview."
32 Ibid.
33 See Payne, "Manufacturing Militainment."
34 Keirsey, "*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Interview 4."
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 See Davison, "*Medal of Honor*: Redux."
38 Gerstmann, "*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Review."
39 Goldstein, "*Call of Duty 4: Collector's Edition* Review."
40 Buffa, "*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Review."
41 "Guns of War."

42 "Ultra-Realistic Modern Warfare Game."
43 Buffa, "*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* Review."
44 Moses, "*Call of Duty 4*: The Best Shooter of 2007."
45 Ibid.
46 Pfister, "*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Xbox 360)," censored in original.
47 Conducting a WhoIS request of the website's URL reveals that the site is registered to Activision Publishing.
48 Sears, "Case Study–*Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*."
49 Interestingly, *Call of Duty 4*'s sequels unfold in named locales.
50 "Teabagging" in video games is when one player places his or her avatar over another and repeatedly squats over the dead avatar's face. Because many shooter games allow the defeated player to be a spectator after his or her virtual death, victorious players can add insult to injury by performing this act of dominance.
51 One non-military shooter example is the outcry over the publicity materials for the action-horror game, *Resident Evil 5* (2009). The early trailers for this cross-platform and multimedia franchise show Chris Redfield, a white Special Operations officer, shooting Africans who have been infected with destructive parasites. Fans and non-fans voiced their concerns about the game's depiction of a white American shooting diseased black Africans. The game's Japanese publisher Capcom denied any malicious intent and quickly introduced light-skinned infected people into subsequent game trailers. Controversy erupted in this case because early game footage was read as allegories of colonization and the African AIDS epidemic. For a longer discussion of this PR dilemma, see Kramer, "Is Capcom Racist?" And for an examination of how racial imaginings are shaped by industrial pressures, see Freedman, "Resident Racist."

CHAPTER 6. PROMOTION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY STRIFE

1 LANopolis is the pseudonym for my research site. All of the research participants' names and gaming handles have been changed to protect their identities.
2 Please note that I am not interested in explaining the pleasures of identity formation vis-à-vis a media psychology approach. For social science research on the psychological pleasures of first-person perspective and gaming control, see Jansz, "The Emotional Appeal of Violent Video Games for Adolescent Males"; Jansz and Tanis, "Appeal of Playing Online First Person Shooter Games"; Vorderer, Hartmann, and Klimmt, "Explaining the Enjoyment of Playing Video Games"; Vorderer and Bryant, *Playing Video Games*.
3 I am restricting my remarks about the gameplay at this center to military shooters because they are among the most popular titles played by the patrons. Doing so also productively limits my observations to the ludic war activity examined over the preceding chapters. It bears underscoring, however, that this is *not* the only play activity that unfolds in this multimedia gaming center.
4 Popular military-themed shooters at LANopolis include the usual suspects: the *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Counter-Strike* franchises.

5 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
6 Mia Consalvo is relying on Bourdieu's schemas of symbolic capital. For more on gaming and symbolic capital, see Consalvo, *Cheating*; Bourdieu, *Distinction*; and Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital."
7 Boellstorff, "A Ludicrous Discipline?" 29.
8 Ibid., 32.
9 Ibid., 31–32, emphasis in original.
10 See Turkle, *The Second Self*; Kinder, *Playing with Power*.
11 See Taylor, *Play between Worlds*; Pearce, *Communities of Play*.
12 See Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*; Consalvo, *Cheating*; Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games*.
13 Fine, *Shared Fantasy*, 229.
14 Ibid., 239, emphasis in original.
15 Ibid., 4.
16 Ibid., paraphrased from 233.
17 Ibid., 236.
18 Ibid., 242.
19 Some patrons bring in their own computers rigs during the BYOC, or "bring your own computer," events to take advantage of the site's fast connectivity and social setting.
20 See Beavis, Nixon, and Atkinson, "LAN Cafés"; Jansz and Martens, "Gaming at a LAN Event"; Beavis and Charles, "Would the 'Real' Girl Gamer Please Stand Up?"
21 Beavis and Charles, "Would the 'Real' Girl Gamer Please Stand Up?," 693.
22 Parker and Stone, "Make Love, Not Warcraft."
23 Juul, *A Casual Revolution*, 8, emphasis in original.
24 Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 80.
25 The focus group session lasted from 10:00 p.m. until midnight, ending before the beginning of that evening's adult "all-night" LAN party, which ran from midnight on Saturday until noon on Sunday. The focus group participants are all white men who ranged in age from twenty-two to fifty-one, with the average age being twenty-eight. These gamers are all regulars at LANopolis and represent the business's core game-playing constituency.
26 For an extended analysis of the casual-hardcore divide, see Boyer, "L337 Soccer Moms"; Juul, *A Casual Revolution*.
27 Curiously, the focus group referenced a segment of gamers between the "hardcore" and "casual" categories that has seemingly escaped the critical literature. They call this moderate group "core gamers," or simply, "the core." This is a catch-all for those players who are conversant generally with video games, but who do not self-identify as either casual players or heavy users. "Doyle," a short, twenty-three-year old, enumerated these groupings: "'Casual gamers' are those who play on a whim. 'Core gamers' are guys who play games regularly. And 'hardcore gamers' are those who have dedicated themselves to a single game, a few games, or a particular genre." The six other gamers at the table nodded in agreement with

this typology, and concurred that they viewed others at the table as prototypical hardcore gamers.

28 Interestingly, the "hardcore" label is usually applied to masculine game genres, while "power gamers" often describes dedicated MMO (massively multiplayer online) players (who are assumed to be more social and female). With the exception of one participant, the gamers in the LANopolis focus group did not prefer the term "power" (or "grinders") to describe themselves, but they did not think it necessarily pejorative either.

29 Sandvoss, *Fans*.

30 Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*.

31 Gray, *Show Sold Separately*.

32 Abercrombie and Longhurst, *Audiences*.

33 Hills, *Fan Cultures*.

34 Wirman, "'I Am Not a Fan, I Just Play a Lot.'"

35 Gamers in multiplayer settings have also been called "co-creative" agents because their acts contribute to the co-creation of unique gaming experiences. For example, a massively multiplayer role-playing game is a palpably different experience when the server is full than when it is not. For more analyses of these co-creative acts, see Morris, "Co-Creative Media"; Dovey and Kennedy, *Game Cultures*.

36 Although these particular players do not shy away from labeling themselves "hardcore" or "avid," they overwhelmingly detest the so-called "fanboy." In their minds, the fanboy differs from the average fan insofar as the former is perceived as being too close to the media object and as guarding the property with an unhealthy, quasi-religious fanaticism. The fanboy is simply, for Doyle, "someone you just don't want to deal with." Wirman observes that "while fandom has been seen as a feminized identity in the Western societies, power and hardcore gaming is usually related to rather masculine issues such as high technical competence, competition and 'hard work'" ("'I'm Not a fan, I Just Play a Lot,'" 382). This is certainly the case for this group of players who see fanboys and fangirls in a negative light, as well as having uncomfortable gendered connotations for LANopolis's gamers.

37 See Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*; Malaby, "Parlaying Value"; Williams et al., "From Tree House to Barracks."

38 Malaby, "Parlaying Value," 155.

39 One could extend Malaby's analysis of shooters to include Bourdieu's other two subcategories of cultural capital by looking, for example, at how Major League Gaming sponsors elite players, conferring on them "institutionalized credentials" or at the cultural capital that accrued to the amateur design team behind *Counter-Strike*, originally a fan-authored level modification, after the Valve Corporation game studio purchased their work, making it an officially sanctioned "objectified artifact."

40 Wirman, "'I am Not a Fan, I Just Play a Lot,'" 382.

41 Thornton, *Club Cultures*.

42 Ibid., 13–14, emphasis in original.

43 Studies by Heather Mello and by Christopher Walsh and Thomas Apperley have been useful guides for this chapter's operationalizing of gaming capital as focus group discussion prompts, and for thinking about whether the embodied competencies and cultural capital expressed and earned in a play space might contribute to human or social capital outside the LAN's virtual battlefields. See Mello, "Invoking the Avatar"; Walsh and Apperley, "Gaming Capital."

44 Malaby, "Parlaying Value," 155.

45 Mello, "Invoking the Avatar," 175–195.

46 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*.

47 Interestingly, Juul observes that hardcore players and casual games are flexible with respect to available time and design, whereas casual players and hardcore games are less forgiving in terms of the their time demands and ease of use (*A Casual Revolution*, ch. 2).

48 The belief that gaming "begins" with PCs is no longer the case, as console titles commonly migrate to PCs and Macs after being developed for the Xbox, Playstation, and Nintendo consoles. As a side note, Christopherson blames the PR beating that PCs have taken on journalists whom he sees as ardent Mac devotees. "The Mac elite are also popular journalists. They love their Macs. It's a cult. That's why PCs are so disparaged. But they don't know what they're talking about. Gaming doesn't happen on Macs."

49 Goldstein, "Aggressive Toy Play," 141.

50 An exception to this marketing truism is a broadcast TV spot for *Modern Warfare: Black Ops* (2010). Tellingly, the spot is titled "There's a Soldier in All of Us," and it shows a diverse group of people playing a live-action shooter game. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pblj3JHF-Jo

51 In *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*, Derek Burrill examines the digital subjectivity of boyish masculinity that is cultivated across video game texts and gameplay interactions. I take a different research tack, however, because I want to understand the shared values of a common play space. Burrill's approach focuses on subjectivity as it is reinscribed across texts and spaces, not social values that emerge from shared practices in a common gamespace. See his Chapter 3 for an examination of the theoretical aspects of arcade space. Furthermore, I would do a disservice to my descriptive account, to say nothing of gender studies' rich theoretical insights, were I to rehearse the literature and shoehorn in its critical commitments at this late juncture. Fortunately, critical analyses of masculinity in video games and gaming culture are finally being written. See, for example, the work of Derek Burrill and Tanner Higgin (tannerhiggin.com), Carly Kocurek's *Coin-Operated Americans*, and the anthology *Identity Matters: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Game Studies*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm.

52 The least scientific but perhaps most telling gender marker in LANopolis was the state of the toilet in its single, unisex bathroom. At no point after midnight did I

ever see the lid in the down position, and by the early morning hours gamers did not feel the need to shut the door behind them.

53 Beavis and Charles, "Would the 'Real' Girl Gamer Please Stand Up?," 693.

54 Fortunately, there has been increased attention paid to explicit and implicit forms of sexism in games and in gaming culture. Anita Sarkeesian's video series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" has attracted a good deal of media attention to issues of female representation and the online harassment of women and LGBT gamers. The classic piece on online harassment remains Julian Dibbell's "A Rape in Cyberspace." And, for a contemporary analysis of these acts, see Tucker, "Griefing: Policing Masculinity in Online Games."

55 FYI: My personal gamer moniker is "Ludology." No gamers have yet called me out on my "meta" nickname, but they also do not address me as "Ludology." They prefer the shorter "Lude" instead.

56 Our team's on- and offline communications are in line with Tony Manninen's observations concerning the diversity of peer-to-peer communications in a multiplayer environment. See Manninen, "Interaction Manifestations in Multi-Player Games."

57 Another notable example of ludic collaboration occurred one evening between two teenage friends, Sam and Max, who were both deeply immersed in a combat game that they had never played before. (I believe that the game they were playing was *Unreal Tournament 3*, a fantasy combat game that is both similar to and different from military-themed games. While there are important textual and generic differences, I believe that the shared, collaborative learning is not necessarily game or genre-specific). Max was certain that he could move his character into a more advantageous spot on the map by using his rocket launcher as a propulsion device. Sam, who was not initially convinced of this seemingly suicidal scheme, scooted his chair to Max's computer to solve this riddle collaboratively. After a few minutes of experimenting, the earlier trials of which resulted in Max killing his avatar, the pair successfully launched Max's character onto a narrow, hard-to-reach ledge. This success was celebrated with raised fists, and with Sam's shouting, "Fuckin' sweet rocket jump!"

58 Heinz Guderian was a World War II German general and armored warfare theorist.

59 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 11.

60 KDR, or "kill-death ratio," is a common shorthand metric by which gamers judge their own performance and that of others in multiplayer games.

61 The gamers did not discuss the ethics of actions conducted within the games' single-player, narrative campaigns. I do not want to speculate too far on this point, but it is likely that because players are acutely aware of playing with others versus playing alone, the "patriotic" sacrifices conducted in the single-player campaigns are equivalent to playing a role for narrative cohesion. The actions in multiplayer sessions with other humans, however, can contribute potentially to a richer sense of community and are thus held in higher regard than actions under-

taken when nobody is watching. Sacrificial citizenship makes sense as a concept in a narrative setting; it makes less conceptual sense for multiplayer settings.

CONCLUSION

1 The MLG is not the only professional U.S. gaming league in existence, though it is almost certainly the largest. Other large tournaments include the fighting game-focused Evolution Championship Series and the International Cyber Games tournament founded in Seoul, South Korea.

2 Murray's "immersion, agency, and transformation." See Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck, 97–182*.

3 Smythe, *Dependency Road*, 22–51. For an updated critique of the "audience commodity" concept, see Caraway, "Audience Labor in the New Media Environment," 693.

4 Dovey, "How Do You Play?," 136.

5 See, for example, Joost Raessens's "Playful Identities: From Narrative to Ludic Self-Construction," a project in which he and his collaborators examine the reflexive construction of identity through different interactive technologies (http://www.playful-identities.nl).

6 Roger Stahl's work is valuable *precisely* because it demonstrates how the reigning military mythology is not just a ludic affair. With that in mind, this project maintains that shooters offer the clearest articulation of the how the military and its citizenry are imagined in popular culture, and why they are envisioned thusly. See Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.*

7 For an excellent scholarly treatment of the rise of electronic sports leagues, see Taylor, *Raising the Stakes*.

8 See Huntemann and Payne, "Introduction."

9 Figure 7.1 source: Sgt. David Turner, "Virtual Army Experience," photograph, 2010, U.S. Army, http://www.army.mil/article/39243/Virtual_Army_Experience_lets_civilians_experience_combat.

10 Following the lead of Joost Raessens, I prefer the admittedly clunky "ludification" to the no less awkward term "gamification" because the former suggests how the play spirit is thoroughly imbricated in the everyday practices of cultural production and consumption thanks to a spate of digital communication and information technologies and a vibrant participatory culture. See Raessens, "Computer Games as Participatory Media Culture."

"Gamification," meanwhile, is the act of introducing rules and scoring systems to non-game activities as a motivational prompt (see McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, for a popularization of this term). In other words, ludification is about media culture's increasingly playful processes of being, whereas gamification is applied design; one is about ontology and identity, the other hands-on praxis. This is an admittedly generous handling of gamification, which some argue represents nothing more than advanced marketing techniques that exploit gaming's reward, with gamification really being "pointification." For trenchant

critiques of gamification, see Bogost, "Persuasive Games"; Robertson, "Can't Play, Won't Play."

11 Raessens, "Computer Games as Participatory Media Culture," 383–384, my emphasis.

12 For a compelling example of video game archeology, see Guins, *Game After*.

13 Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*, 29

14 Fletch, "Bin Laden Compound."

15 "War Is Over! 106 Missions Later, Gamers Take Down Bin Laden in Final Episode of Kuma\War II."

16 Totilo, "What are SEAL Team Six and Black Tuesday Doing in *Modern Warfare 3*?,"

17 Ackerman, "Bin Laden Compound Now a Virtual Training Ground for Commandos."

18 Lowood, "Impotence and Agency."

19 Atkins, "What Are We Really Looking At?," 127.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Thomas Payne is Assistant Professor in the Telecommunication and Film Department at the University of Alabama. He is also the co-editor of the anthologies *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* and *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*.