

Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace

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ABSTRACT

Amid the cultural, political, and military shifts of post-9-11 American policy, the video game industry has responded with patriotic fervor and released a series of video war games. Virtual war games elicit support for the War on Terror and United States imperialism, providing space where Americans are able to play through their anxiety, anger, and racialized hatred. While commentators cite a post-September 11th climate as the reason for increasing interest and support for the U.S. military, this article underscores the importance of video games as part of the militarization of everyday life and offers insight into the increasingly close-knit relationship between the U.S. military, universities, and the video game industry. Because video games form an important pedagogical project of U.S. war practices, they must be critically analyzed.

My first teaching job led me to a small Catholic college in Oakland, California. Leaving the intellectual environment of Berkeley, I always arrived at this teaching job with enough time to take a deep breath. The 15 minutes before class most often led me to *Twin Cobra*, a classic air combat video game, strategically located right outside my classroom. As a childhood favorite, I had a hard time passing up a trip down memory lane, bombing tanks and shooting down airplanes. As my students entered class, I feverishly worked to break the high score. On a particular day, two students stopped to watch, noting how I was the only professor they knew who played video games. While I initially doubted the veracity of their analysis, the reluctance of teachers to talk about video games reflects the elitist contempt many often have for popular culture, as evidenced by our failure to talk about MTV, wrestling, or video games. Given the literacy of our students concerning popular culture and the centrality of film, music, and video games in their lives, we must begin to develop pedagogies of intervention. Rather than eschew games as irrelevant child's play or lowbrow popular culture, educators must begin to think about ways to use video games as means to teach, destabilize, and elucidate the manner in which games employ and deploy racial, gendered, and national meaning, often reinforcing dominant ideas and the status quo.

The necessities of engaging video games, however, transcend the pedantic and the educational, in terms of the burgeoning relationship between virtual reality and the bloodshed of the real. The promotion of military solutions and the unilateral acceptance of the War on Terror as justification for all military endeavors necessitate greater attention to the cultural promotion of war in the form of a pedagogy of peace that allows for conversations and deconstruction of war video games. As students are bombarded with media messages that promote violence as a solution for conflict, teachers have a responsibility to engage in a pedagogy of peace by teaching students how to read America's games of war.

The importance of critically examining virtual war has increased since September 11th, 2001, amid the militarization of everyday life in television, sports, and video games. "Two things have occurred since 9/11. One is that there has been an interesting trend in the kinds of [video] games released, and the second thing is that 9/11 is so culturally significant that the games take on new meaning. . . . What I find really frightening is that in our playtime, in our leisure time, we're engaging in fictional conflicts that are based on a terrorist threat and never asking questions" (Barron & Huntemann, 2004). Accepting the premise that video games contribute to an acceptance of the militarization of society, I examine the wave of post-9-11 video war games and reflect on their significance as pedagogical lessons about history, policy, race, and militarism. Offering insights into the production and the

textual inscriptions of the games themselves, I also theorize the possibilities and importance of media literacy as a step towards a demilitarization of everyday life.

Although video game sales are a multi-billion dollar industry that attracts well over 100 million aficionados, members of the academic establishment are typically reluctant to talk about how video games promote a culture of violence and misogyny. More often than not, they disparage video games in unflattering terms or damn them with faint praise. One professor went so far as to say that the study of such games reflects the dumbing down of the academy and constitutes a misguided effort to indulge the ignorance, lack of creativity, and absence of sophistication among contemporary students (Carlson, 2003, p. A32). Another suggested that “Horsing around with these games might teach problem solving, but you don’t learn anything about the world” (Carlson, 2003, p. A32). In general, there is a marked failure to recognize video games as sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating ideologies of hegemony. But, in a world where video games—more so than schools, religion, or other forms of popular culture—are teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality identity, such attitudes are myopic and inexcusable. If academics are at all interested in “teach[ing] to transgress” (hooks, 1996), the study of video games must be integrated into courses of all descriptions so that students can begin to understand vital theories of racial formation, hegemony, foreign policy, and history within a context that is very familiar to them. If the task of educators is to help students “reflect upon why they think the way they do; to discover that knowledge is socially constructed, that truth is relative not only to time and place but to class, race, and gender interests as well” (Peterson, 2003, p. 377), then video games provide an ideal text and teaching moment in which educators interested in social justice can deconstruct sources of social meaning and provide tools of analysis and alternative knowledge.

Discursive Possibilities: Pedagogy of Peace

The process of teaching peace through engagement with video games requires entry into a discursive field defined by unbridled celebration and praise of colonization. While such scholars as Anderson (2000), Berger (2002), Gee (2003), Jones (2002), Jenkins (2003), and Turkle (2003) have done significant amount of work about technological improvements in the video game industry, the expansive economic opportunities of virtual reality, the power and centrality of fantasy the effects of violence on children, video games’ impact on learning and children, the deployment or construction of time and space, the idea of video games as a distinct medium, the gender politics and presence of female-based stereotypes, and the ideologies present in video games, critical examination of the relationship between games and the hegemonic practices of the military-entertainment complex are virtually absent (Barron & Huntemann, 2004). In fact, the emerging canon of game studies cites virtual conquering as the basis of video game popularity and power. Jenkins (2003) encapsulates the celebratory side of the emerging field of game studies through his deployment of historically racialized and problematic language: “Now that we’ve colonized physical space, the need to have new frontiers is deeply in the games. [Video Games] expand the universe.” Sadly, there is no recognition that rhetorical tropes such as exploration, discovery, frontier, colonization, and penetration have been used—and continue to be used—to justify Eurocentric imperialism based on the power of becoming and occupying the other.

The present article builds on the work of Jean Baudrillard (1991), Paul Virilio (2000), James Der Derian (2001), and Melani McCalister (2001)—all of whom critically interrogate the ideological, cultural, and material links between war and popular culture. Particularly important is the work of Baudrillard (1991), who argues that “[w]e have created a gigantic apparatus of simulation which allows us to pass to the act ‘in vitro.’ We prefer the exile of the virtual, of which television is the universal mirror to the catastrophe of the real” (p. 28). Claiming that the Gulf War never happened, Baudrillard challenges scholars of video games to explore the ways in which “virtual wars” feed our willingness to “unleash the real world,” while examining the ways virtual warfare contributes to a “hyperrealist logic” in which warfare reflects a desire “to disarm and neutralize but not kill” (pp. 27–29; 41). The blur between real and the fantastically imagined, given the hyper-presence of war on television and within video

games, constructs a war without bloodshed, carnage, or destruction. Virilio (2000) offers similar conclusions, writing about “technical illusionism” and “the strategy of deception” (pp. 1–2). His discussion of the almost overlapping function and mission of governments, military, and media—given their simultaneous reliance on new media information and arms technologies—is especially powerful in cultivating a pedagogy of peace. According to Virilio, video games, as part of the hegemony of new technology, contribute to “fin-de-siècle infantilization,” where our consumption, understanding, and vision of battle has been reduced to a series of images on screen, further demarcating the ambiguous division between the virtual (warfare) and the real (warfare) (pp. 9–11).

Like Baudrillard and Virilio, Der Derian (2001) offers links between material reality (U.S. foreign policy) and ideologies, focusing on the consequences of this blurring process. Chronicling the ways in which war is fought on the virtual battlefields of Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Orlando’s Simulation Triangle (pp. 82–83), he explores the symbiotic relationship between the military and media, in which Marines train on *Doom*, Navy officers consult in the production of popular games, and citizens undifferentially consume the image/ideology of real-time and virtual reality. The erasure of carnage and bloodshed through smart bombs, CNN, video games, and other forms of virtual warfare is making peace increasingly more difficult, necessitating an increased emphasis on popular cultural literacy. Against a background where war takes place within the hyperreal (virtual) and where war-making itself is increasingly virtual and hyperreal, Baudrillard, Virilio, and Der Derian demonstrate the importance of challenging and deconstructing video games as part of a pedagogy of peace.

Military-Academic-Entertainment Triangle

Before examining the textual realities of virtual gaming, as well as the pedagogical possibilities in teaching peace, it is crucial to explore further the relationship between the military establishment and popular culture (Harmon, 2003). In 1998, the alternative rock band Rage Against the Machine warned against the increasing “thin line between entertainment and war” (Turse, 2003). Decrying the often-uttered claims of a liberal media, Rage Against the Machine predicted the post-9-11 collaboration between popular culture and global militarization. One signpost of this is the expanding cooperation between the military and the video game industry. Together, they have constructed “an arm of media culture geared toward preparing young Americans for armed conflict” (Turse, 2003). In 1997, the U.S. Marine Corps signed a deal with Mak Industries to develop the first combat simulation game. In 1998, the Army signed a contract with Mak to develop a sequel to their popular tank simulation game *Spearhead* to be used at the U.S. Army Center and School for Training Purposes. While initially defined as ventures solely for military consumption, recent partnerships have been mutually beneficial, as “the military has embraced entertainment titles at the same time the entertainment industry has embraced the military” (Turse, 2003).

In 2001, the Department of Defense began to use Tom Clancy’s *Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear*, a game featuring secretive operatives disarming (murder) terrorist cells, as part of its military training in how to conduct operations in urban settings. In 2003, the Army unveiled a recruitment tool called *America’s Army*, which was developed at the Naval Postgraduate School in consultation with Epic games and the THX division of Lucas films. Costing taxpayers upwards of eight million dollars, *America’s Army* has been a huge success, with over 1.5 million registered users. The Defense Department has also been closely associated with games such as *Rainbow Six: Raven Shield* and *Socom II: U.S. Navy Seals*, utilizing each as a means to test and train military personnel in leadership skills. In 2003, the Army also signed a \$3.5 million deal with There Inc. to develop a series of virtual military theaters, including a virtual Kuwait City to train soldiers in a simulated attack on the U.S. Embassy there. *Full Spectrum Command*, a simulation PC game used to teach light urban warfare, and *Full Spectrum Warrior* have been created as part of a \$45 million partnership between the Army and the University of Southern California—a partnership that led to the creation of the Institute for Creative Technologies to “support leadership development for U.S. army soldiers” (Turse, 2003).

In the wake of the War on Terror and following the beginning of the second Gulf War, war games have begun to dominate the marketplace (Napoli, 2003). Kuma Reality Games, in conjunction with the Defense Department and a team of military veterans, launched *Kuma: War*. While previous efforts brought game players into foreign theaters of war, this first-person shooter represents the first game to re-create actual military missions. Players can transport themselves to Iraq and participate in the raid that resulted in the assassination of Saddam Hussein's two sons. Players become part of Operation Anaconda, a mission to disarm Al Qaeda and the Taliban in the mountains of Afghanistan. The "realness" of the missions, coupled with the presence of television footage and news anchors narrating each mission, furthers the blurring process between war and entertainment. In September 2004, the marriage between militarization and entertainment reached new heights with the release of *Full Spectrum Warrior* for Microsoft's X-Box system. Developed by the Army's Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, as part of its effort to cultivate future leaders, this game simulator allows a player to become the leader of a light infantry squad conducting military operations in Tazikistan, "a haven for terrorists and extremists."

War video games are no longer purely about training soldiers already enlisted; rather, they are about recruitment and developing future soldiers, while simultaneously generating support among civilian populations for increasing use American military power. Americans of all ages are thus able to participate collectively in the War on Terror and in Operation Iraqi Freedom, just as if they were members of the military. Their trigger happiness becomes a metonym for their happiness with American military efforts (Poole, 2000). With a little money and the switch of a button, the divide between real and virtual—between civilian and military, between domestic and foreign—is erased as we wage war through gaming. Yet most Americans remain on their couches, in their classrooms, and in their offices, providing consent and support through video games—through play.

Video Games and War: Discussing Propaganda and Pedagogy

While I use video games in general to introduce students to a spectrum of concepts and issues, from minstrelsy and cultural appropriation to patriarchy and ideological production, the most effective pedagogical introduction to the militarization of American society has come through discussion of war games. Given the historical moment of 2002–2004—when war was at the center of the national consciousness and where support for foreign policy merged with entertainment in a number of media—it seems prudent to provide tools toward understanding the images, ideology, and meaning of video war games. In the classroom, it is especially apparent how powerful these games can be in promoting an ethos of militarization. I use class time to allow some students to play these games, and I make other students critically analyze what happens to their peers as they play the games. As students scream at their enemies and shout racially tinged epithets that serve to perpetuate ugly stereotypes—and as all things military are adored, glorified, and revered—the classroom becomes a fishbowl where one can see how racial, gender, and national identities are created and reinforced against a backdrop of Manichean violence and Social Darwinism.

Paralleling the shift in American foreign policy from containment and reaction to pre-emptive war, the video game industry has shown its patriotic support with the release of numerous war games. While commentators cite a post-September 11th climate as the basis of widespread support for the U.S. military, it is important to underscore the many ways in which the state garners support for the military. In discussing video games or the role of the military in contemporary American society, students can be led to think about the ideological implications of patriotic support. Whether talking about national holidays or military hardware on display during the Super Bowl, the classroom can be a forum for conversations about the interconnections among foreign policy, popular culture, and patriotism. Video war games reflect a powerful medium to explore the ways in which images elicit consent for the U.S. military.

Games such as *Desert Storm* and *America's Army* allow their players not only to become soldiers from the safety of their own homes, but also provide exposure to the technological marvels of the U.S. military.

Players pilot a Huey helicopter in *Desert Storm* or use an Uzi in *America's Army*. In effect, these games are venues for displaying the technological marvels of military hardware. But we also come away from these games with the sense that our tax dollars have been used productively and wisely to buy the technologically sophisticated military hardware on display—hardware that we, moreover, have been allowed to use. For all intents and purposes, *Desert Storm* and *America's Army* exist as virtual advertisements for the present and future glory of the U.S. Armed Forces.

One of the most popular war games is *Operation Desert Storm*, a game that retells the story of the Gulf War. You are John Conyers, a Rambo-type white infantryman and lone wolf beset with the task of winning the war on your own. As the game progresses, three other soldiers join you (two white and one black); all four players form a small unit that battles the entire Iraqi army. This game allows players to feel as if they were “defending the country” and enables them “to get out frustrations” (Napoli, 2003). The power in this game is not solely in the ability of its players to occupy and conquer foreign lands, in the ability to transpose one’s real fears into historically-based combat, or in the virtual ability “to cause mass carnage on a grand scale . . . through a carpet bombing” (Stallabras, 1993). Rather, it lies in the promotion of war as a legitimate industry whose product is national safety and security. In addition to being fun, war is also portrayed as being safe. In *Conflict Desert Storm*, death is presented as bloodless: you are able to heal yourself and others from virtually any wound. Moreover, the killing of Iraqi soldiers generates very little blood. While others may commend the game for its child-friendly images and the lack of graphic detail, the bloodlessness contributes to an increasing acceptance of war. Within this virtual world, you have the potential to die and kill others without having to face the graphic realities of war.

Stereotypes and War

Racial stereotypes are an intrinsic part of video war games. Whether examining first-person shooters, urban-centered games, or sports games, stereotypical ideas about race abound. War games such as *Desert Storm*, *America's Army*, and *Splinter Cell* portray Arab-Americans as savages, uncivilized warriors, and terrorists. In a very real way, war games construct racialized meaning, thereby providing ideological sanction for America’s War on Terror and its aggression in the Middle East. Accordingly, they can serve, in the classroom, as the basis for conversations about the haunting presence of stereotypes in American society. I begin class by listing a series of racial, national or gendered categories, asking students to write down the sources or bases of such stereotypes. I then have students play a series of war games, ask them to list and describe any stereotypes that may be present, and then link these stereotypes to larger ideological projects such as U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and imperialism, broadly conceived. Not only does this lead to a discussion of why many of them enjoy killing Arabs in the virtual war game world, it also allows students to understand how stereotypical portrayals of national and ethnic groups were instrumental in their decision to support specific governmental policies or actions. Video war games force students to connect ideologies and institutions, images and material reality. Although war may seem harmless on the computer screen, this very harmlessness ironically elicits consent for U.S. foreign policy.

Another central component of the war genre of video games is their presentation of civilians. Civilians are almost completely absent from these games, and only opposing soldiers can be killed by video game players. In general, *Conflict Desert Storm* portrays Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia as countries without people. In this way, the allied war effort is shown not to hurt civilians. American foreign policy is thus portrayed as benign. As part of a pedagogy of peace, I pair these games with more critical glimpses at war, such as documentaries and articles that elucidate the social, cultural, familial, and personal impact of war. Games represent a powerful pedagogical tool in which students can be brought to think about their own imagination of war, its effects around the globe, and the effects of those views on their support for U.S. foreign policy.

As Americans blame Saddam Hussain for 9–11 and forget the legacies of Vietnam, war becomes more and more viable and desirable as a means to conflict resolution. As either decontextualized virtual

warfare or propaganda that paint the United States as a savior without blemishes, video games contribute to a historical myopia legitimizing colonial endeavors. *Conflict Desert Storm* is an attempt to rewrite history in very specific ways. For example, despite the fact that militaries from around the world, including many from Arab nations, participated in the Gulf War, the game chronicles the war as if it was a battle between American/British forces and Iraqi soldiers. The only choice for players is either to become a member the U.S. or British military. No Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or Turkey! *Call to Duty* and *Medal of Honor*, both of which allow players to return to World War II, also fall into a similar trap of erasure. In these two games, black soldiers are completely missing. Selective memory of this kind reinforces hegemonic ideas about western dominance, emphasizing white/western/non-Arab participation. White people are presented as praiseworthy fighters and heroes; blacks are simply missing in action. I like to compare these video war games with pictures and statistical tables that show all-black regiments in World War II and integrated Marine units of today. Again, the classroom becomes a powerful corrective space that inspires critical thought about virtual propaganda.

Transformative Knowledge and Virtual Reality: Teaching to Transgress

Through their presentation of Arabs as uncivilized savages and terrorists, their glorification of the military, and their downplaying of the physical, environmental, and economic harm of war, video war games elicit consent for U.S. domestic and foreign policy. Antonio Gramsci's ideas are useful here. Gramsci argued that, as ruling groups attempt to consolidate power, "they must elaborate and maintain a popular system of ideas and practices, which he called 'common sense,'" ultimately garnering consent for their rule (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 67). Video war games, in disseminating an image of war as bloodless play, consolidate an ethos of militarization under the guise of the "common sense" notion that American safety and security is of paramount importance.

In *Fugitive Cultures: Race, Violence, and Youth*, Henry Giroux (1996) argues that, in a discourse of critical pedagogy, "images do not dissolve reality into another text: on the contrary, representations become central to revealing the structures of power at work in schools, in society, and in the larger global order" (p. 53). The power of popular culture—in this case, video war games—resides in its dominance of representation and its regulation of meanings. Our pedagogy therefore has to clarify these underlying relationships and hidden agendas. As virtual culture becomes a central source of information about the world for students, it is more important than ever that they clearly grasp the ways in which video war games construct images of race, nationality, and military prowess. As Turse (2003) observes, "We need to start analyzing the efforts of blurring the lines between war and entertainment. With more and more 'toys' that double as combat teaching tools, we are subjecting youth to a new powerful form of propaganda! This is less a matter of simple military indoctrination than near immersion in a virtual world of war where armed conflict is not the last, but the first—and indeed the only—resort. The new military-entertainment complex's games may help to produce great battlefield decision-makers, but they strike from debate the most crucial decisions young people can make in regard to the morality of a war—choosing whether or not to fight and for what cause."

Cultural critics are not alone in noting the psychological and cultural impact of war games. Lieutenant Colonel David Grossman, a former Army psychologist, spoke of the way in which he used games to teach military personnel how to kill without hesitation, remorse, or fear. Because "blood, gore and emotions" are erased from such games, soldiers view life as a game and can thus be convinced to kill more readily. "We are teaching children to associate pleasure with human death and suffering. We are rewarding them for killing people. And we are teaching them to like it" (20/20, March 20, 2000). The development and utilization of video war games by the U.S. military is a testament to the pedagogical implications of war games. As games teach soldiers to kill and citizens to support murder without remorse, concerned educators must find ways to offer counter-arguments to a prevailing ethos of American hegemony, the militarization of everyday life, and the all-pervasive rhetoric of warfare. A pedagogy of peace that deconstructs the ideologies behind the images of video war games is one place to begin to find necessary counter-arguments.

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: HUMANITIES STYLE

Leonard, David. "Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace." *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education* 4.4 (2004).
<http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile> (insert access date here).

COLUMBIA ONLINE CITATION: SCIENTIFIC STYLE

Leonard, D. (2004). Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 4(4).
<http://www.utpress.utoronto.ca/journal/ejournals/simile> (insert access date here).

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