

PATRIOT GAMES

INTERACTIVE MEDIA,
LUDIC SIMULACRA, AND
THE VIRTUALISATION OF
GEOPOLITICAL VIOLENCE

INTRODUCTION

“Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter.”

- Oscar Wilde, *The Picture Of Dorian Gray*

When Oscar Wilde said “Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter” (Wilde, Wilde and Wilde, 1991), he was alluding to the fact that, imperceptibly, in every brush stroke and mark of the pen, we transfer something of ourselves onto the canvas. Just as this is true of traditional art, it is true of digital art. We do not create in a vacuum - our biases, prejudices, politics, and personal history are carried with us into that which we create. It naturally follows that this should also be true of interactive media. Video games are often marketed and received as being sterile, objective, apolitical systems - white goods like dishwashers or toasters - and this sterility is often closely reflected in the naming for the technology itself (“play station”, “entertainment system”, etc.). I categorically reject this assertion. I believe many of these apparently neutral mainstream games contain within them a set of, almost invisible, but nonetheless pernicious, conservative neoliberal values. I also believe that many companies producing games and interactive media often carry out highly political actions under the false pretences of political neutrality. In this thesis I aim to look at interactive media as a source, and indeed a cultural focal point, of traditionalist conservative and neoliberal political discourse. For the purposes of discussion, I will be defining any piece of media which stands to affect its audience politically, intentionally or otherwise, as a piece of propaganda. To quote Chomsky; “The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

Where the very most that a piece of non-interactive media, such as a novel or film can do to impart a political message onto the viewer, is to construct a set of circumstances which cause one or more characters to arrive at a desired conclusion, games can go much further. Games are unique, and pose a unique danger, by their ability to arrange systems and parameters that specifically require certain politically-driven actions in order to succeed. A book or movie can say “this is what I believe” - a game can create an alternate, virtual paradigm, in which *only* that belief is rational and valid. Video games of this sort present geopolitical simulacra that are never actually acknowledged as such: SimCity’s (Maxis, 2013) “total freedom to create” extends only as far as medium to large scale settlements with industrial economies, and for a supposedly semi-accurate historical simulation, Sid Meier’s Civilization (Firaxis Games, 2010) is oddly fixated on contemporary western neoliberal win-states (military expansionism, global cultural export, and recognition as a UN superpower). Add to this the fact that many games, perhaps as a result of their roots in corporate America, have obvious ties to political agendas in the real world: The popular “Call of Duty” (Activision, 2003-2016) and “Battlefield” (EA Dice, 2002-2016) war-simulation franchises make obvious geopolitical parallels within their story and gameplay, but what many don’t realise is that the US arms trade has an active stake in their continued success. The appearance of any real-world firearm or military vehicle in a game has to be licensed, and few games license more weapons in

this way than Call of Duty and Battlefield. Moreover, the last several iterations of the Call of Duty franchise were released to north american audiences bundled with discount coupons and promotional materials for the purchase of firearms in the real world. It's been pointed out by several academics, researchers, and statisticians, that a direct correlation can be drawn between release windows of war-simulation games, and surges in enlistment figures for western armed services (Hsu, 2010) (Beekman, 2014) (Pearson, 2015). As though it wasn't unsettling enough that the US Army has its own officially licensed series of first-person shooter video games, apparently the self-evidently simplistic worldview of war games in general is having a very direct effect on the relationship between players and the military. Though never successfully corroborated, many have proposed that mainstream videogames' obsession with violence can negatively affect players, and while worthy of discussion, far more pertinent to me is the idea that many violent games' subject material has a normalising effect on real-world geopolitical violence.

In the following text I aim to explore and evidence the contention that video games have contributed to a phenomenon of post-fact - perhaps best described by Adam Curtis as "hyper-normalisation" - in our global political/news culture. That is to say; how, and to what extent, did video games help create and cement the cultural backdrop for the war on terror, the resurgence of white nationalism, and the bolstering of extreme right-wing politics in America and Western Europe. Every era of history has a sort of political background radiation - in the Reagan/Thatcher era this was communism, "the reds", the cold-war - and this background radiation sets the tone for political engagement, and establishes a set of base assumptions for media coverage and for the cultural dissemination of the above. Today this background radiation represents a fairly specific brand of xenophobia, more often than not directed at those of islamic faith, those of brown skin, those of middle-eastern descent. In the height of the Bush administration, and later in the Obama administration, the media played a critical role in popularising this widely-held cultural fear, and in establishing arab muslims as a political bogeyman. I'd propose that videogames, in particular, were instrumental in normalising the geopolitical violence of the "forever war" on terror, and moreover, have been exploited as a recruitment tool by the powers waging it. My thesis draws stylistic and typographical influence from declassified military documents - cold, apathetic accounts of state-sponsored violence - as this is what I wish my thesis to describe; a clear and detailed overview of what I regard to be the irrefutably political nature of video games, and their increasing significance in modern theatres of war. My bibliography will also be arranged in a style intended to evoke war memorial placards, in keeping with the tone and topic.

SECTION 1:

A P O L I T I C A L C O N T E X T F O R
S O F T W A R E A N D V I D E O G A M E S

SECTION 1

“...software is not neutral. Different software embeds different philosophies, and these philosophies, as they become ubiquitous, become invisible.”

- **Zadie Smith, Generation Why?**

Unbeknownst to many of their consumers, large games developers are structured much like any other software company: employees operate under managers, who operate under a board of directors, who serve the interest of shareholders (a top-down hierarchical structure that originated in the states, but is now standard virtually everywhere). In this structure, managers and employees are legally beholden to their board of directors, and moreover, to company shareholders. Any action which might knowingly endanger profits for shareholders is actually illegal for employees of these companies to consider or undertake. This legislation is broad enough to prohibit actions which could be considered an ethical necessity, or critical to the public good, and as a result a large number of companies are frequently in negligent (or sometimes even actively malicious) breach of fundamental software ethics. This self-serving and highly risk-averse corporate structure has harmed the general public in countless notable cases: the near-universal price-fixing by commercial airline companies (Hewitt, 2015), the 2011 Olympus scandal (Greenfeld, 2012), the Volkswagen emission fixing (Hotten, 2015), BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill (Pallardy, 2016), and the decades upon decades of lies told by cigarette companies about the health-risks of their products (Cummings, 2007), to give just a few examples. While the harm done by video game and software companies is of course (generally) much less dramatic, the same conflict of interests can be easily observed. It's also perhaps worth specifically noting that the boards of many video game companies are mostly composed of individuals who themselves don't, nor ever would, play video games recreationally. The late Satoru Iwata, fourth president and CEO of Nintendo, is something of a notable exception, lauded both posthumously and throughout his career for having such a genuine connection to the things his company produced. To quote from his 2005 Game Developer's Conference opening speech, "On my business card, I am a corporate president. In my mind, I am a game developer. But in my heart, I am a gamer." (Iwata, 2005).

In many industries the single greatest risk of harm can occur when a previously open platform or ecosystem becomes privately-owned (a notable recent example being the California drought, caused primarily by the increased privatisation of once-public reservoirs, rather than simply by changing weather phenomena, as many wrongly assumed). Games and software are actually fairly unique in this sense; the advent of digital distribution and the death of the physical format means that there are essentially no longer any open platforms for distribution, and the market itself is privately controlled (and therein highly susceptible to monopolies, censorship, and unethical practices). Apple in particular has an ongoing policy of banning politically-motivated games from its app store. Most recently the technology giant saw fit to remove "Liyla and The Shadows of War" (Rasheed Abueideh, 2016) - a 2-dimensional platformer about a child living through the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Apple's justification for its removal was "We view Apps different than books or songs, which we do not curate...If you want to criticize a religion, write a book. If you want to describe sex, write a book or a song, or create a medical App. It can get complicated, but we have decided to not allow certain kinds of content in the App Store." (Statt, 2017). This refusal of "game"

categorisation comes despite Liyla having won a number of games industry awards and accolades, including (but not limited to) one for visual excellence. Other affected titles have included the satirical micro-sim "Sweatshop" (Littleloud, 2011), and perhaps most tellingly "Phone Story" (Molleindustria, 2011), which was allegedly removed for its portrayal of child labour, despite the app's explicit and stated intention being to raise awareness of child labour in Apple's own factories. In these cases, Apple's thin veneer of apoliticism is intentionally misleading, and essentially a cover story under which to protect monied interests and shutter public discussion. Even for those who see no problem with Apple exercising strict quality/content control over their app store, it's hard to deny that their veritable monopoly could easily restrict creative freedom, particularly in light of the corporate legislation and structure I previously outlined. Censoring games (and indeed other forms of software) that are anti-western, anti-capitalist, or explicitly anti-Apple, is clearly in Apple's best financial interests, and in spite of their apparent claim that "games are not for politics", other explicitly-political apps such as "National Rifle Association: Target Practise" (NRA, 2013) remain quite conspicuously unaffected by these bans.

It is important to note however that, as Apple alluded to in their statement on Liyla and The Shadows Of War, games are not books, nor even anything like books. When a sentence is typed or written for a novel or essay, there are a finite number of ways that sentence can be interpreted, and the relationship between the sentence and its meaning can be described as linear (absurdist, postmodern, post-structuralist and deconstructivist literature notwithstanding). Books are read differently by different people, and in light of their personal, political, and cultural context, but the words themselves are static, fixed, and they do not, generally speaking, react to the reader. Games are nothing like this. Where the written word is monologue, games and interactive entertainment are a form of conversation; they react to their audience, and crucially, they are defined by the nature of their reaction - the specificities of the relationship between input, system, and output. This distinction might seem obvious to some, but is crucial to understanding the political context for software and games: the way a system imparts meaning is entirely dissimilar to that of written language, and the rules of the system (rather than solely its output) need to be examined in order for its meaning to be understood. This phenomenon was perhaps most notably described by Ian Bogost as "proceduralism" in his 2011 book "How To Do Things With Videogames" (Bogost, 2011), but is also often referred to as "mechanics as message", "mechanics as meaning", or "mechanics as metaphor". It's easy to look at straightforward examples like Rod Humble's "The Marriage" (Humble, 2006) or Jason Rohrer's "Passage" (Rohrer, 2007) to understand proceduralism. In "The Marriage" two coloured squares react to the player's input, to each other, and to the surrounding play area - growing larger or smaller, and changing in colour - and the player is tasked with continually preventing either square from growing too large, or too brightly coloured, either of which results in a game over. Although abstract, the title's systems clearly reflect their designer's view of marriage as a continual balancing act between two individuals with different (but closely correlated) needs, and it's easy to see how the game's systems are just as central to its message as the surrounding presentation (in this case, simply the game's title). In "Passage" the player moves their on-screen avatar through a series of corridors, is temporarily accompanied by a second character, eventually begins to slow down, and finally stops, replaced by a digital tombstone. Though very simplistic, the game is clearly intended as a metaphor for the journey through life - starting and ending alone, but with companionship along the way - and the game's visual presentation is intended to reflect the nature of memory (the corridor in-front and behind the player is distorted, and takes up disproportionately less screen-space than their current location).

This same principle of proceduralism, and our understanding of a system's message through it, must also necessarily be carried into more complex interactive media. In Activision's popular Call of Duty franchise, and in particular the "Modern Warfare" installments therein, many player VS enemy encounters take on a wave-based gameplay structure - that is to say, within a set area, a

continually-replenished stream of enemy combatants are instantiated for the player to attempt to overcome. This wave-based gameplay structure is nothing new - in actual fact many of the earliest commercial video games, such as Taito Corporation's "Space Invaders" (Taito Corporation, 1978), employ a wave-based approach - what *is* new however, is the emergent, perhaps unintended commentary, made by its interaction with a story set in the real world vis a vis proceduralism. What's conveyed by the wave-based structure is a set of key assumptions about the player's opponent - that they are innumerable, that they are alien, and that not only are individuals effectively expendable, but that their express purpose is to die in combat - in the context of Space Invaders, this gunning down of a homogenous, seemingly-endless mass of opponents is basically harmless, but in the context of a modern military simulation that attempts to mirror the war on terror, it is extremely alarming. Much of our western news coverage of the conflict in the middle east hinged upon the false assumption that arab bodies, arab deaths, arab suffering, simply didn't matter in the same way that those of white westerners would, and to see this rather blatant xenophobia reflected so uncritically in a piece of media intended as light entertainment is nothing short of disturbing.

Ironically, these very visibly conservative, militaristic games, seem to be most popular amongst a core demographic loudly calling for "people to stop politicising games" (a complaint usually made in reference to a surge in liberal/progressive politics in the independent games scene, and in popular games discourse and critique). The problem with this reactionary stance is that it's fundamentally a mischaracterisation of media. All media has political context: even claiming a so-called "apolitical" position is essentially a tacit approval of the status quo. A piece of art could be created by a lone cave-dwelling hermit in the outer hebrides, and critics would still be perfectly justified in wanting to analyse it within a political context (in this specific example, perhaps anarcho-individualism would be most appropriate). Often in this same context, the beginnings of an argument are made by developers (or even consumers) against these kinds of proceduralist interpretations. The argument proposes that the implications I've described are an unintended product of necessity rather than intent, that the systems simply had to be arranged thusly, and so it is unreasonable to read into them - that any interpretation of the effects of these interacting systems must simply be the product of one's own bias, rather than anything inherent in the interaction itself. This is an appeal to general ignorance, both of software development, and of basic dialectics, and quite obviously so. Best practice aside, there is no reason why a piece of software could or should only be arranged in one configuration, as opposed to countless conceivable others - software is not, as is often supposed, a set of building blocks that can only be stacked a finite number of ways. Additionally, the contention that a text - be it literature, film, music, or indeed video games - should only reasonably be interpreted and studied according to the author's best wishes, quite brazenly ignores some half a century of literary theory, most notably Roland Barthes's now near-universally recognised "Death Of The Author" framework for literary criticism, from his 1967 essay of the same name. To quote directly from him, "Literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes" (Barthes, 1967). What's sadly entirely omitted in these aforementioned arguments is actually rather a significant problem that underscores much of the dissonance around what video games appear to be portraying, versus how their audience relates to and consumes them. This problem was summed up rather nicely by Erik Kain as "Violence in video games is often just a form of puzzle-solving" (Forbes.com, 2017), and is often exacerbated by a problem my English Literature studying friend noted, quite insightfully: video games, even those designed to be played by children, really don't know how to tell stories without the use of violence.

SECTION 2:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO
POLITICAL AND LUDIC SIMULACRA

SECTION 2

“Hauntology does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.”

– **Frederic Jameson, Ghostly Demarcations**

A simulacrum is, in its simplest form, a forgery or imitation based upon a “real” original. Frederic Jameson (Massumi, Brian, 2007) gave the example of photorealistic painting as a simulacrum, wherein a painter attempts to imitate a photograph which, of course, is itself merely an imperfect representation of the original authentic view. The simulacra is important, in that it illustrates that the relationship between reality and perception isn’t strictly linear - we’re all familiar with René Magritte’s “The Treachery Of Images” (Magritte 1928), and how “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” effectively illustrated the point at which the physical world, and our subjective experiences of it, begin to diverge. In the context of philosophy, social theorist Jean Baudrillard used simulacra to mean something quite specific to postmodernity, and something I find increasingly relevant in today’s ever more uncertain geopolitical world. Baudrillard states “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth - it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” (Baudrillard, 1994). Essentially, Baudrillard poses that the simulacrum is a sort of pseudo-truth - not a lie or a falsehood as such, but a statement whose trueness isn’t at all impeded by its unreality. Vis a vis Magritte; there may never have been a pipe at all. This phenomena is often referred to as “the hyperreal”, and we see it more and more frequently in our contemporary political discourse. In the leadup to the European Referendum, Boris Johnson’s claim that “We send £350m a week to Europe” was widely criticised for being misleading, but still managed to dominate much of the EU debate itself, and serve as the basis for a great many pro-leave arguments. During his electoral campaign trail Donald Trump made a seemingly endless list of outlandish claims - about Mexico, about the CIA, about Barack Obama - and continues to do so as president. In examples like these, it isn’t so much that the likes of Trump and Johnson knowingly misrepresent the truth - they merely regard the truth as being functionally irrelevant to the claims they make. This is, as Jameson alluded to in his concept for hauntology (distilling previous ideas from Derrida), reality betraying those who regard it as their experiential bedrock. What figures like Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and Vladimir Putin have discovered is that within the modern political landscape, what’s true isn’t nearly as important as what’s galvanizing - a statement’s validity now quite demonstrably matters less than its power to incense those who hear it - and this fact ought to utterly terrify us.

In the context of games, the simulacrum is important, as any game that attempts to mirror or model a real-world location, event, or setting, is a simulacrum, as per Frederic Jameson’s aforementioned example. It’s important to note however, that the simulacrum in games can also

take on an entirely different form: that of the simulation. A digital model or representation of a real-world system in a game, be it anything from Microsoft Flight Simulator X (Microsoft, 2006), to The Sims (Maxis, 2000), is definitively a simulacrum. The Sims in particular serves as a great example of how, not only is the simulacrum *not definitively* political, but indeed, the misinterpretation of the simulacrum as apolitical can lead to entirely wrongfooted readings of media as politically inert. Developed by Maxis and Electronic Arts, The Sims has stuck to an easily recognisable gameplay pattern, one which has slowly increased in fidelity and scope over its many iterations. It can be summed up loosely as follows: build and decorate a house, get a job, save money, buy nicer furniture, get a better job, find a spouse, have children, retire. On a surface level, The Sims looks very much like a shallow celebration of contemporary capitalist living - an aspirational software toy for the western middle-classes. It was however, originally intended as a rather damning satire of american suburban living - the creeping existential discomfort of late capitalism's hyper-consumerism laid bare in interactive form. When one remains mindful of the original intent, the anti-materialist politics of The Sims seem pretty blatant - more expensive furniture and traditionally upper-class leisure activities yield greater happiness for your sims than cheaper and more accessible alternatives. You likely wouldn't learn any of this information from talking to the series' fans, who mostly seem to revel in its slapstick commercialism. "Gamers" as a subculture haven't historically been all that receptive to irony, or all that critical of this familiar brand of aspirational commercialism. Perhaps unsurprisingly so when the gaming industry is itself built on bi-annual upgrades and planned-obsolescence.

Even some ludic simulacra which contain explicit political commentary aren't entirely straightforward. Frontier Developments' massively multiplayer online space-trading and combat sim "Elite: Dangerous" (Frontier Dev, 2014) is, by all accounts, a game laden with political language. Elite: Dangerous players pledge allegiance to one of six factions, each paralleling a real-world political ideology (Monarchy, Anarchy, Contemporary Liberalism, Communism, etc.) and perform services for said faction, resulting in the player earning promotions and personal accreditation, as well as the expansion of controlled interstellar territory for the player's faction (represented in-game by a sort of 3-dimensional heatmap). Since its original 1984 installment on the BBC Micro computer system, Elite has very deliberately straddled a line of moral ambiguity; players can choose to explore and trade peacefully and within traditional ethical norms, but are in fact able to progress much more quickly by trading in black market commodities such as narcotics, arms, and slaves, or even by employing theft and piracy in order to antagonise and swindle other real-world players. Curiously, even supposedly socialist factions can advance and expand only through these same military/trade methods, and the political leaders of each faction are essential non-entities as far as the gameplay itself is concerned. Whether by choice or necessity, no single action in Elite is irreversible - territory changes hands almost constantly, players receive relatively little punishment for breaking the law (if caught), and there is no permanent death. Despite its apparent political broadness, Elite's systems far more closely resemble a sort of vague libertarian dystopia, and like libertarianism itself, its assumption that political support and expansionism can be modeled through purely linear, apathetic systems betrays a rather fundamental naivety.

As a piece of speculative fiction, Elite's desire to demand so little of its players leaves it feeling thematically weightless, not least of all due to its total lack of comment or moral condemnation of immoral play on a mechanical or systemic level. In particular, the fact that the trading of slaves is represented purely numerically - alongside that of object commodities like spices and rare metals - feels uncomfortably brazen, and more than a little tasteless. On the other hand, genuine acts of kindness and charity still occur within the game's cold dystopia: Members of the Elite community often pool currency in order to purchase new spaceships for players who they feel were unjustly attacked, several groups exist to organise surprisingly dedicated and hugely time-consuming expeditions to unexplored areas of the game's virtual universe, and (perhaps most

strikingly of all) a volunteer group called The Fuel Rats travel enormous in-game distances, sometimes taking entire hours or days in the real world, to rescue players who've become stranded in remote parts of the galaxy without fuel. When I played *Elite: Dangerous* myself a few years ago, albeit infrequently, I once directly experienced this. Having foolishly marooned myself between two spiral arms of the milky way galaxy, light years from any civilised system (a rookie error, but I'm not particularly good at the game) a volunteer from the aforementioned Fuel Rats group travelled some two and a half real-world hours from his current location to refuel me, and having done so, simply asked if I needed any further assistance before promptly turning around and began the long, tedious journey home. The player didn't ask for in-game currency or goods, and could've easily taken them from me, with or without permission - in a dogfight his ship would've outgunned mine to a frankly hilarious degree. He or she was apparently content merely to have acted as saviour to a less experienced player, plus perhaps the satisfaction of making what I considered a difficult journey look effortless. It's worth pointing out that, if he had indeed decided to kill and rob me, there would've been zero consequence for doing so - unlike most online games with combat, kill and death counters in *Elite* are visible only to those players who were directly involved (or sometimes, during larger-scale battles, also to a player's squadmates), an intentional design choice to better facilitate backstabbing and betrayal, and introduce risk for players travelling in groups (both for thematic consistency, and gameplay balancing). In an online universe with an average 200,000 monthly players, my avatar's death would've been entirely unknown to all but my killer, making his act of generosity all that much more remarkable. If anything at all is to be taken from the experience of playing *Elite*, it's that any political simulation devoid of meaningful personal or moral consequences is inevitably going to produce entirely disparate results - players simply don't behave as they would in the real world, or even in any theoretical world, because personal responsibility and accountability, as well as personal risk, are almost non-existent. I do however take great comfort from the fact that even in *Elite*'s virtual universe, one which was intentionally designed to enable immoral and amoral play, and where murder is an unsettlingly consequence-free act, many online players still find the capacity to be genuinely altruistic.

A potential problem area for our understanding of ludic political simulacra, is the use of games as satire, with perhaps the most obvious example being Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games, 1997-2016) series. The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise has attempted, over its some fifteen installments and spin-offs, to humorously skewer North American culture in a variety of settings and time periods, invariably focusing on a player character's ascent through the ranks of organised crime, within a fictionalised US city. Since the original release in 1997, the *Grand Theft Auto* games have courted controversy on a near-constant basis, and quite intentionally so. During a *Sunday Times* interview with Rockstar (formerly DMA Design) leads David Jones and Mark Dailly, it was revealed that the game's then publicist (now convicted eight-time sex offender) Max Clifford was responsible for the game's reputation. "Max Clifford made it all happen..." said Dailly and Jones in the interview, "He designed all the outcry, which pretty much guaranteed MPs would get involved... He'd do anything to keep the profile high." (Rebecca Levene, Magnus Anderson, 2012). While the exact contents of the plan were never publicly revealed, it seemed to go very much as planned - Britain, Germany, and France condemned the game well before its retail release, with Brazil banning it outright - and it wasn't long before everything from hit & run incidents to school shootings were being linked to the influence of the game on children and adolescents, the cultural hangover of which can still be felt today, much to the benefit of its rather cynical creators. Unhelpfully, despite much of *GTA*'s content being legitimately deplorable - perhaps most notably the games' mechanical incentivisation of the hire and murder of virtual sex-workers - the case made against Rockstar and *Grand Theft Auto* was, without exception, handled extremely poorly, and with an emphasis on traditionalist conservative cultural panic, rather than simply on grounds of poor-taste or artistic immaturity. At this point in videogames growth, they were in dire need of a nuanced

debate - one that noted the expressive potential of the developing medium whilst acknowledging the responsibility of creators for that which they create. Instead, the charge against tasteless video game nasties was led by disbarred attorney Jack Thomson, previously best known for attempting to ban hip-hop and rap albums under Florida obscenity laws. Almost immediately the debate became one of censorship VS artistic freedom, and many young liberals, rather than fall in line with the moral panic of their parents and teachers, defended the games' right to exist (and their right to play them), irrespective of their content. Often the defence closely echoed the highly suspect claims of the developers that the titles were somehow comedic in nature - despite, for much of their duration, neither the games' content nor themes really being overtly humorous. Games had a troubled adolescence, and for almost a decade, a wave of titles were created seemingly to be as offensive as possible - not really to be fun or interesting, or to be expressive even, but essentially to greatly irritate those who would most like to see video games censored. It was this same movement that spawned the likes of *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992), *Carmageddon* (Stainless Games, 1997), and countless other, mechanically sound, but intentionally outrageously tasteless games. This was a wave that Rockstar themselves gladly rode all the way to the bank, culminating in the release of *Manhunt 1* and *2* (Rockstar Games, 2003-2007), veritable murder simulators that were mechanically stiff, aesthetically lifeless, and created almost with the express purpose of being banned upon release. Lacking the mechanical sophistication, the engaging level design, or even the heavy-handed political satire of *Grand Theft Auto*, the *Manhunt* titles were essentially (and exclusively) games about brutally murdering strangers in grey-brown rooms - the ludic equivalent of snuff films - and yet enjoyed financial success amongst Rockstar's increasingly rabid fan-following. Speaking from his personal blog, former Rockstar producer Jeff Williams makes it clear that even Rockstar's own employees found the bleak, gratuitous titles hard to defend, writing "[*Manhunt*] just made us all feel icky. It was all about the violence, and it was realistic violence. We all knew there was no way we could explain away that game. There was no way to rationalize it. We were crossing a line." (Williams, 2007).

Thanks in large part to the polarising debate on videogames, and a still-young internet, an entire subculture emerged almost overnight, largely centred around the belief that offensiveness was somehow uniquely worthwhile in its own right - a lazy apologia for a cultural immaturity that regards everything and everyone as a joke, other than of course itself. This bitter and cynical worldview can still be felt strongly in the recent *GTA* titles - perhaps the last remaining bastion of gaming's troubled youth - as was observed nicely by Chris Franklin on his YouTube channel *Errant Signal*: "[*GTA V*] argues for a sort of *South Park* centrism, in which everyone with strong opinions is wrong, because people with strong opinions are easy to turn into lazy parody - the game skewers everyone in a lazy effort to be above the fray, but in the process ends up punching *down* at vulnerable groups of people far more often than it ends up punching *up* at existing power structures" (Franklin, 2013). To *Grand Theft Auto*, and to many of its fans, the greatest sin one can commit is that of caring too much, about politics, about misogyny, about racism, about anything really, other than video games and the self-evident hilarity of being offensive. It's a pseudo-counterculture that Rockstar, *South Park*, and countless others have gladly encouraged and cheered-on for over two decades now. It's a culture that says games journalist Carolyn Petit docking *GTA V* some one out of ten points for being "Politically muddled and profoundly misogynistic" (Gamespot, 2013) is caring *far* too much, but thousands of gamers sending that writer rape and death threats for doing so is fair game; just readers exercising their right to free speech. It's a culture that desperately, pleadingly wishes for games to gain serious artistic legitimacy, but are quite unable to control themselves when serious critic Roger Ebert says that "no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form" (Ebert, 2010), having originally harassed him into voicing an opinion on the subject at all. It's a culture that forgets, much like Rockstar Games, that their much loved right to free

speech must also necessarily entail a responsibility and accountability for that which you choose to say.

SECTION 3:

V I D E O G A M E S A N D T H E M I L I T A R Y

SECTION 3

“What line separates the lawful wartime targeting of an enemy combatant from the extrajudicial murder of a man suspected, but not convicted, of wrongdoing?”

– Rosa Brooks, **How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon**

International theatres of conflict are becoming ever more virtual, and unsurprisingly so. According to Brigadier General Samuel Lyman Atwood Marshall, in World War II, in a squad of ten men, fewer than three would ever fire their weapons, irrespective of their field experience, seniority, or even the immediately impending danger of being overrun by enemy combatants (Marshall, 1947). World War II was felt by its combatants to be a straightforward war, and subsequent historiography has agreed on this - allied soldiers believed steadfastly that they were fighting to prevent an evil power from overwhelming Europe and the west. World War II was uncommon in this respect as conflicts, especially global conflicts, are rarely straightforward at all. Writing from the second Boer War in South Africa, William Watson, a gunner of the Second New South Wales Contingent told his family “You no doubt expected that I would at all events have been at least been under orders for home by now but no such luck. The country and our friends the enemy are so adapted to the present guerilla warfare that God only knows when the affair will really end. Tis not war now but Murder.” (Karageorgos, 2016). More recently in 2007, US Army specialist Ethan McCord, having attempted to rescue two Iraqi children from the aftermath of unprovoked apache helicopter fire (now a matter of public record thanks to Wikileaks), described to Wired.com how he was told by a senior officer to “get the sand out of [his] vagina”, and warned that he’d face repercussions were he to seek mental health support (Zetter, 2017). It can be said, without fear of being reductive, that the majority of wars are fought for the benefit of governments, as opposed to the citizenry. Often these citizens do not fully comprehend the conflict, or even necessarily provide consent to the outbreak of said conflict. Proportionally speaking, humans are far more often the tools by which war is waged than its beneficiaries; able bodies who will do as they’re instructed, with or without knowledge of that which it might entail, ideally with efficiency and skill, ideally without asking questions. In historical conflicts, dissenting soldiers might be shot - today they’re simply court-martialed, but compliance is still key. Perhaps in the not-so-distant future, entirely synthetic automata will replace the armed and obedient citizen within the context of war, but for the time being, military drones represent an increasingly-convenient and cost-effective compromise.

For all the good that can be said about it, Barack Obama’s administration was the first government in history to meaningfully integrate drone warfare into its military arm - building upon the groundwork established by the Bush administration - and saw fit to employ its usage liberally during the middle-eastern conflict. The growing prevalence of drone warfare as the go-to solution for military strikes creates an uncomfortable distance between action and consequence, and effectively divorces combatants from that which they undertake. According to political scientist and international relations scholar P.W. Singer, one anonymous Predator drone pilot working for the US Army in the Iraq war described the experience thusly: “You’re going to war for 12 hours, shooting weapons at targets, directing kills on enemy combatants. Then you get in the car and you drive home, and within 20 minutes you’re sitting at the dinner table talking to your kids about their

homework.” (TED, 2009). War is remarkably cheap and safe when the trigger is being pulled some 990,000 miles away from its target, at least for those pulling the trigger. It’s here that war-simulation video games and genuine military conflict, start to become unsettlingly similar in their human-interface, much to the benefit of both the military and videogame developers.

Just over a decade ago, eagle-eyed bloggers like Paul Strauss and Paul Maunders began noticing commercial gamepads, such as Microsoft’s Xbox 360 Controller, conspicuously popping up again and again in photographs of Small Unmanned Ground Vehicles (SUGVs) and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and as Bloomberg reported in 2008, multi-billion dollar defense contractors like Raytheon have been seeking to tap into video game GUI design for some time now. In the words of Raytheon’s own business development director “Gaming companies have spent millions to develop user-friendly graphic interfaces, so why not put them to work on UAVs? The video-game industry always will outspend the military on improving human-computer interaction.” (Scott, 2008). Granted, the relationship and interaction between the two industries is nothing new - one of the earliest documented video games “SpaceWar!” (Russell, 1962) was developed under a Pentagon grant, and as far back as the early 1980s the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was offering funding to developers who believed they could produce games effective in teaching players “an appreciation for the art and science of war.” (Eisiminger, 1997). What *is* new however, is the closeness of this relationship, and the sheer fidelity and complexity of the simulations and interfaces being produced. P.W Singer refers to this fast-growing market as “Militainment”, describing in an interview with Democracy Now! that “the military has invested in creating video games that they are using as recruiting tools” (Democracy Now!, 2015). Indeed, several technology research labs established by, or in close collaboration with, the US Army, have gone on to produce successful commercial videogames, including 2004’s “Full Spectrum Warrior” (ICT, Pandemic Studios, 2004), developed by the Institute for Creative Technologies, and more recently the ARMA series (Bohemia Interactive, 2006-2013), developed by Bohemia Interactive, which are essentially repackaged general-market versions of their VBS army training software. In the case of Bohemia Interactive’s VBS (or Virtual Battlespace) training software, countless videos uploaded to the company’s official Youtube channel proudly demo the technology using widely available gaming hardware, and dozens more showcase dramatic-sounding features like “Whole Earth Rendering” and “Physically-Based Dynamic Lighting” with the same mouth-watering wide-shots and near-pornographic extreme close-ups of high-fidelity virtual environments that game developers might employ to show off a new title or engine, because that’s almost precisely what they’re doing (Youtube, 2009).

According to interviews in Tonje Hessen Schei’s documentary “Drone” (Schei, 2014), and independent statements from a number of former US Army officials, the North American armed forces have, for some time now, been hiring military drone pilots straight out of gaming conventions, with many pilots still in their teens (Broersma, 2015). Speaking in the documentary, former reaper drone pilot Michael Haas recounts how he “had no idea what I was in for....I wasn’t even 20 years old at that point. I thought it was the coolest damn thing in the world... play video games all day... You never know who you are killing, because you never actually see a face.” (Schei, 2014). Another former pilot turned whistleblower, Brandon Bryant, who joined the program at just 19 years of age in order to help pay university tuition fees, describes working at a remote military base in Nevada for over five years, and claims to be responsible for over 1,600 confirmed kills (BBC, 2015), further elaborating in Schei’s documentary that he believes “We’re more interconnected now than at any time in human history - and that’s being exploited to help people kill one another.” (Schei, 2014). The power of technology to obfuscate and to virtualise war in these ways, greatly reduces the effective cost to those who possess the authority to wage it. In her book, “How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon”, Rosa Brooks describes in damning detail the personal cost of war to those in positions of authority; “I don’t believe that humans can be

reduced to homo economicus, but as a group, government officials are remarkably sensitive to financial, political, and reputational costs. Thus, when new technologies appear to reduce the costs of using lethal force, their threshold for deciding to use lethal force correspondingly drops. If killing a suspected terrorist in Yemen or Somalia or Libya will endanger expensive manned aircraft, the lives of U.S. troops, and/or the lives of many innocent civilians, officials will reserve such killings for situations of extreme urgency and gravity (stopping another 9/11, getting Osama bin Laden). But if all that appears to be at risk is an easily replaceable drone, officials will be tempted to use lethal force more and more casually." (Brooks, 2016). When US military drone strikes are being actioned quite so dispassionately for the extrajudicial execution of individuals *suspected* of terror activity - including truly horrific cases of mistaken identity (Guardian, 2014) - it's very hard to defend their usage as fully-justified, or even as being confined solely to needs-must cases. With an average of 44 collateral deaths per intended kill, these drone attacks are not, as is often supposed, any manner of precision strike - rather it is assumed that the deaths of nearly four dozen unknown civilians are a reasonable price to pay for the *probable* assassination of a target believed (but not necessarily proved) to be associated with terrorist activity. To refer back to my earlier case study of "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" and its troubling portrayal of Arab fighters as mere cannon-fodder; it seems clear that the view of brown bodies as functionally expendable is in no way confined to video games or interactive media - this is demonstrably the opinion held by the US Government, or at the very least, those figures within it who possess the authority to carry out drone strikes. When this view is observable at every level of the geopolitical discourse, from pop-culture to public office, it seems inadequate to present its normalisation as mere theory - it has *already* been normalised.

Early last year I played an independent video game called "SUPERHOT" (SUPERHOT Team, 2016) - the product of a highly-successful kickstarter campaign. SUPERHOT began as a much-loved submission to 2013's "7 Day FPS" game jam by designer Piotr Iwanicki. The game centres on a novel concept, described simply as "time moves only when you move", granting the player a significant advantage over AI combatants, and allowing them to outmaneuver and outgun large groups of enemies with relative ease, very deliberately evoking cult action films such as "The Matrix" (The Wachowskis, 1999). It's a pretty dramatic power-fantasy, and instantly engaging - even when the air is whistling with small-arms fire, frozen in an angry swarm of lead hornets - the player always, always has the potential to succeed. Mechanically however, the title is more puzzle than action; the main focus placed upon strategy and planning, rather than reaction times or sheer manual dexterity. The game subverted my expectations not far into its run-time, by peeling back its simple presentation to reveal a thoughtful meta-narrative: SUPERHOT (according to the game's story) is a mysterious virtual-reality simulation, found tucked away on a corporate server, and quickly shared through message-boards and chatrooms - no one really understands what it is, but everyone thinks it's incredible, and can't stop playing. As the game progresses, more information begins to emerge about the simulation's shady origins and its actual purpose. It's revealed that the simulation is in fact not a simulation at all, but a tool for actioning remote assassinations, and the targets are real people, selected for reasons unknown to the participants. This analogy for drone warfare and obfuscated brutality is cleverly integrated into the game's minimalist visuals, which are abstract, yet still evoke hyper-violence; everything appears to be constructed out of brightly-coloured, diamond-cut glass, and the targets' bodies - limbs, torsos, heads - shatter dramatically into thousands of blood-red shards when destroyed. At the end of its second act, the game presents a choice, cleverly inverting the red/blue pill conundrum of the film that inspired it: Stop playing now and be freed from the program, or continue and give yourself over. Whether out of morbid curiosity or lack of self-control, I don't know a single person who chose the former. Upon re-entering, the player is forced to self-actualise in a deeply unsettling way - destroying their avatar's physical body, thus trapping their mind in the program as a weapon for an unknown political power. It's at this point that the game begins to invoke themes of mind-control and psychological manipulation: "Mind is

software. Bodies are disposable. The system will set me free". The game intentionally stops short of a meaningful conclusion, eschewing answers to instead issue a command to the player, "We need more soldiers." it declares, "Tell all your friends 'It's the most innovative shooter I've played in years'". SUPERHOT's commentary on drone warfare, on violence as entertainment and entertainment as a recruitment tool, were clearly expressed and chilling to me, and yet seemed to bypass the gaming industry as a whole - I've yet to find a single review or article on the game that even notes the presence of these themes. In my eyes, this was the most disturbing thing of all about SUPERHOT - a highly-successful, award-winning shooter made explicit commentary on the gaming industry's exploitation by the military, and the potential future of virtualised state-sponsored violence that we're sleepwalking into, and no one seemed to noticed.

CONCLUSION:

“Computers had their origin in military cryptography—in a sense, every computer game represents the commandeering of a military code-breaking apparatus for purposes of human expression.”

- Austin Grossman, *You*

I set out to explore and evidence the theory that not only were video games political, but that their politics were being misunderstood, misread, and that this fact was being exploited by the military, both as a recruitment tool, and in order to normalise our current geopolitical conflicts. Upon reflection and investigation, the relationship between video games and the military is far closer and far more pernicious than I had originally suspected. Not only are video games most assuredly being used as a tool for military recruitment and as pro-war propaganda, but have been for quite some time now. Military training simulations are being sold to the public re-packaged as entertainment, and genuine instruments of war are being half-disguised as mere simulation in order to distance soldiers from the reality of their killings. Given that my investigation relied heavily upon a few key whistleblowers and infoleaks, my fear now is that I've only just scratched the surface of what's occurred in the last three decades, and indeed, what's yet to come. When contractors and ex-military personnel will publicly admit to the US Army having coerced video game content to bolster enlistment, to having poached talent and expertise from the field of interactive entertainment, and to the clear collusion between wargame developers and the western armed services, I dread to imagine that which they *won't* admit.

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