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War Games and Hegemony

A New Frontier of Military Propaganda

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So our motto is: 'Back to the hegemonic struggle'

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Table of Contents

Abstract (italiano) 1

Abstract 1

Introduction 3

1. Ideology at play 5

1.1 A tutorial on hegemony 5

1.2 Procedural rhetoric 10

2. Embedded issues in militainment 14

2.1 Militarism 14

2.1.1 A brief history of the DoD-Hollywood complex 16

2.1.2 Current cooperations in cinema 20

2.1.3 The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) 25

2.1.4 The DoD-digital games complex 27

2.1.5 Current cooperations in games 30

2.1.6 Other actors: the CIA, the FBI and cultural intermediaries 39

2.3 Conclusion 40

3. Hegemonical issues from cinema to video games 42

3.1 Signification 43

3.2 War as spectacle 46

3.2.1 The Gulf War Did not Take Place 51

3.3 War as hell 54

3.3.1 Criticism inside the general discourse 58

3.4 Changing the terms 62

3.4.1 Self-representation and traumatic realism 62

3.4.2 Counter-images 65

3.4.3 Harun Farocki 67

3.5 Considerations on production 70

3.6 Video games 73

4. Case studies 80
4.1 Playing the war on terror: soldier POV 80
4.1.1 *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019 80
4.1.2 *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) 90
4.1.3 Serious games and the war on terror 102
4.2 Issues of Representation by the Global North in war games 113
4.3 Playing the war on terror: civilian POV 117
4.3.1. *This War of Mine* (2014) 117
4.3.2 *Liyla and the Shadows of War* (2016) 121
4.4 Resistance through *countergaming* 126
4.4.1 *dead-in-iraq* 127
4.4.2 Play by the Rules 129
4.4.3 Spontaneous pacifism in violent games 131
Conclusion 134
Bibliography 137
Filmography 148
Ludography 150
Acknowledgments 151

Abstract (italiano)

Il concetto di “egemonia” è spesso citato nelle ricerche che riguardano l'impatto culturale dei videogiochi, soprattutto per quelli che ritraggono il Sud globale. Il medium, come il cinema, è radicato nelle caratteristiche capitalistiche-coloniali dell'industria dell'intrattenimento occidentale, con una tendenza ancora più forte ad abbracciare il militarismo a causa della sua storia. Mentre il concetto gramsciano di egemonia applicato ai videogiochi è esplicitamente discusso in alcune pubblicazioni come *Gramsci and Games* di Robert Cassar, la sua trattazione in letteratura è tutt'altro che completa, in quanto inizia solo a suggerire come il medium agisca in questo quadro e come opere o modalità di gioco contro-egemoniche possano emergere dalla sua struttura algoritmica. L'obiettivo di questa tesi è definire come il videogioco di guerra egemonico agisca e come sia possibile contrastare la retorica dominante incorporata in esso. In primo luogo, discuteremo l'argomento dal punto di vista teorico, utilizzando il la teoria dell'egemonia di Gramsci per definirne correttamente le modalità retoriche di funzionamento. Questa analisi sarà rafforzata da un'esplorazione del contesto storico della loro produzione e dei loro legami con Hollywood e l'esercito. In secondo luogo, presenteremo una serie di casi di studio su giochi di guerra definibili egemonici e contro-egemonici (nonché su pratiche di *countergaming*) per dimostrare come le “meccaniche” egemoniche teorizzate agiscano nella pratica e come vengano contrastate da vari artisti, soprattutto nelle opere che trattano il conflitto in Medio Oriente come soggetto dell'imperialismo americano.

Abstract

The concept of “hegemony” is often cited in research involving the cultural impact of video games, especially for those that portray the Global South. The medium, much like cinema, is entrenched in the capitalist-colonial characteristics of the Western entertainment industry, with an even stronger tendency towards embracing militarism due to its history. Whilst the Gramscian concept of hegemony as applied to video games is explicitly discussed in some essays like Robert Cassar’s *Gramsci and Games*, its treatment in the literature is far from complete, only starting to suggest how the medium acts in this framework and how counter-hegemonic works or modes of play can emerge from its algorithmic structure. The aim of this dissertation is to define how the hegemonic war video game acts and how it is possible to counter the dominant rhetoric embedded in this medium. Firstly, we will discuss the subject theoretically, using the framework of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony to properly define their rhetorical modes of operation. This analysis will be reinforced by an exploration of the historical context of their production and their ties to Hollywood and the military. Secondly,

we will present a number of case studies on both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic war games (as well as on *countergaming* practices) to demonstrate how the theorized hegemonical "mechanics" act in practice and how they are countered by various artists, especially in works dealing with conflict in the Middle East as the subject of American imperialism.

Introduction

The study of "militainment" – that is, entertainment media focused on the depiction of war – is fairly well established, especially in regard to war cinema. Since Suid (2002) published the first known list of films supported by the DoD (US Department of Defense), many authors have tried to outline how the so-called military-entertainment-industrial-complex works, to understand how the entertainment industry and the military support each other, and to what end.[1] This relationship is now well understood: Hollywood productions receive cheap, practical support from the DoD, while the Department benefits from positive media representations which improve its public image. Moreover, militainment tends to sell well even when it's not directly aided by the government, further encouraging its production.

The video game industry is also part of this relationship, benefiting both from the lucrative popularity of militainment and by DoD support: the Department has been involved in video game development basically since their conception, as it benefits from the development of simulation software, mainly for training purposes. While the study of video games in this context is more recent, the publications of Der Derian, Stahl, Mirrlees, and Lenoir and Caldwell still outline well how the institutions support each other – although the known extent of the DoD's influence in game and film production is still an approximation.[2]

While in this dissertation we will extensively discuss these issues of production, that analysis will mainly be in service to a larger objective: to see how war games support the military hegemony of the US and its allies, understanding their influence through the framework of Gramsci's theory. While the concept is often cited in research dealing with the cultural impact of video games, it is explicitly discussed in an extremely limited number of publications.[3] More specifically, this research will try to answer three questions: how do war games support the military hegemonical status quo? Can they be used to counter it instead? If so, how?

To this aim, we will first lay down a simple theoretical background on Gramsci's theory of hegemony and on *procedural rhetoric* as the unique persuasive tool of the video game medium.

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[1] Suid, L. H. (2007). *Guts & glory: The making of the American military image in film* (Rev. and expanded ed., [Nachdr.]). Univ. Press of Kentucky; Mirrlees, T. (2016). *Hearts and Mines: The US Empire's Culture Industry*. University of British Columbia Press; Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous War: Mapping The Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (2nd ed). Routledge.

[2] Der Derian (2009); Stahl, R. (2010). *Militainment, Inc: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. Routledge; Mirrlees (2016); Lenoir, T., & Caldwell, L. (2018). *The Military-Entertainment Complex*. Harvard university press.

[3] Cassar, R. (2013). Gramsci and Games. *Games and Culture*, *8*(5), 330–353.

Then, in chapter 2, we will explore two main ideological issues which characterize the genre. First, the influence which the DoD has had in its development, as well as in the development of war cinema. This relative control on different media must be considered as a unitary driving force behind the development of both, not only because they uphold the same interventionist ideology, but also because their industries do not act independently of each other, sharing talent and collaborating on DoD-based projects. Second, the post-colonialist rhetoric which is still so common among mainstream titles, and which indirectly inhibits the development of local game industries in the Global South.

In the third chapter, we will analyze a specially formed corpus of post-9/11 war movies to identify the common threads in the signification of war both in mainstream movies and in titles which aim to challenge the status quo. This effort will serve to establish how contemporary war is represented in contemporary war cinema, and how its discussion might be transferred to video games.

Finally, in chapter 4, we will look at a number of case studies to see how these hegemonical representations work in an interactive medium, especially in regard to the portrayal of non-combatants and the Arab world, and how those strategies are countered in different genres. We will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the practice of *countergaming*, in order to establish if it can be utilized as a counter-hegemonical tactic.

Before we start, three clarifications on terminology need to be made. First, we will use the term "game" only as a synonym to "video game", never referring to physical board games or other categories. Second, we will use the term "war game" as shorthand to refer to any video game centered around the depiction of war, not only to strategy games which aim to realistically simulate war (as it is more commonly used for). Third, the term "militainment" will collectively refer to all entertainment media depicting war, whatever forms it takes.

1. Ideology at play

1.1 A tutorial on hegemony

In 1969, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino published *Towards a Third Cinema*.[4] In this manifesto, they define a new way of creating politically engaged / militant cinema, partially basing their reflections on their own experience filming and screening *La hora de los hornos* (1968).

They recognized that, in the neocolonial world, producing any kind of film, even an anti-System film (some movie nominally against the status quo), according to the dominant U.S.-led models leads to "the adoption of the ideological form that gave rise precisely to that language".[5] After all, the film industry has been constructed to generate certain ideologies, from its mode of production to its mode of exhibition (in a large theatre with a standard duration). Even though during its formation it wasn't influenced only by state apparatuses, being largely influenced by commercial interests as well, both of these forces lead to the "absorption of forms of the bourgeois world-view": the spectator is "viewed as a consumer of ideology, and not as the creator of ideology", always in a passive state of consumption.[6] An aspect which is even more evident today, with Hollywood and the Silicon Valley merrily collaborating with the US Army to an unprecedented extent.[7]

Regarding "author's cinema" (the *nouvelle vague*, *cinema novo*…) as a good effort, but one still "trapped inside the fortress", they go on to develop the theory and practice of Third Cinema. That would be a kind of cinema (meant to aid the revolutionary effort) which does not only set out to fight the System, but that without the use of dominant models: using the forms of the bourgeois worldview would result in assimilation by the System itself.

Of course, they weren't the first to write on this topic, and certainly not the last (as it will be showed in chapter 2.1). However, their relatively short essay, especially when read in its historical context (the middle of a post-colonial battle), summarizes exceptionally well how mainstream cinema operates in maintaining the status quo and how much an alternative is needed.

As cinema becomes more varied in terms of format and the so-called postcinematic turn opens up a galaxy of moving-image-based configurations that go beyond the film alone, the same can be said about other media, too.[8] The video game medium inherits all of the issues identified by Solanas and

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[4] Solanas, F., & Getino, O. (1970). TOWARD A THIRD CINEMA. *Cinéaste*, *4*(3), 1–10.
[5] Ibid., p. 4
[6] Ibid.
[7] Mirrlees, T. (2016). *Hearts and Mines: The US Empire's Culture Industry.* Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
[8] De Rosa, M., & Hediger, V. (2017). Post-what? Post-when? A conversation on the 'Posts' of post-media and post-cinema. *Cinéma & Cie: International Film Studies Journal*, *26/27*(XVI), 9-20.

Getino, whilst being even more involved in ideological construction and state apparatuses: fruit of the same Western capitalist system, it was also born to represent conflict. One of the argued-to-be-the-first videogames ever, *Spacewar!* (1962), even had ties with the United States Army, who partially funded the MIT lab where it was developed.[9] Foundational games like *Doom* (1993), although the fruit of a small independent team, were still apt enough to be quickly adapted by the US Army to serve as a training tool. Videogames, like cinema, contribute to the maintenance of the current hegemonical worldview. This is particularly true of war games in regard to their mainstream view on the morals of violence and armed conflict. This dissertation tries to answer a twofold question: how does the medium of war games uphold the Global North's cultural hegemony on war? And how could it be used to counter this hegemony?

To properly understand how these games operate in the reproduction of hegemony, the short manifesto of Solanas and Getino isn't enough. Robert Cassar in *Gramsci and Games* discusses the relevance of ideological debate in the study of video games in light of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, arguing that the medium is an especially useful platform to observe ideological and hegemonic conflicts in action.[10]

First, Cassar writes about how video games at large establish an ideological framework by process of legitimization, identifying them as a form of Barthes modern myths.[11] According to him, myths are "the ideology or rather the ideas and practices of bourgeois", conveyors of a society's ideology.[12] They manifest themselves as natural, influencing what Gramsci would call *common sense*, "the uncritical and partly unconscious way in which people perceive the world", a consciousness which everyone has passively absorbed from culture and the past, often times in contradiction with their actual political activity.[13] It is "the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed", but also "the site of resistance and challenge to this ideology": the task of Marxist theory is to develop the positive aspect of common sense (*good sense*) into an explicit and coherent outlook[14]. Videogames are largely the product of contemporary industrialist-capitalist society, much like the cinema *Toward a Third Cinema* talks about, and consequently reinforce the hegemony of the society which produced them. This is evident by considering the sheer quantity of game genres dedicated to conquest, expansion and command: turn-based strategy games, real-time strategy games, first-person shooters, third-person shooters, construction and management simulators like *Factorio* (2020) or *SimCity* (1989). As

[9] Ibid.
[10] Cassar, R. (2013). Gramsci and Games. *Games and Culture*, 8(5), pp. 330-353.
[11] Ibid., pp. 333-334.
[12] Ibid., p. 350.
[13] Simon, R. (2001). Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction. London: The Electric Book Company, p. 9.
[14] Ibid., p. 72.

pointed out by documentarist Dan Olsen, even apparently peaceful games like *Minecraft* (2011) are built on the common imperialist fantasy of seizing control of a wild virgin land, and they can end up reproducing colonial processes like the displacement of indigenous people for settlement building even without implementing that specific game mechanic.[15]

It is extremely important to note how ideology is specifically expressed in videogames, as this characteristic make them an especially useful vehicle for persuasion: it is manifested visually and textually, for sure, but also *procedurally*, "throughout the rules and gameplay mechanics".[16] Bogost refers to this expression as *procedural rhetoric*, identifying the video game as the only widely consumed medium "that relies on conceptual frameworks – rule-based interactions – as its core mode of signification".[17] Games like *Civilization* are a prime example of this concept, as they make claims about the processes driving human history by reproducing them in a certain way (usually making imperialism the most efficient tactic) – along with visually and textually perpetrating Western stereotypes on various foreign cultures, especially in early instalments of the series[18]. Looking at war games, one can look at how the *Call of Duty* series operates by putting players in situations where warfare is the only available option for victory, reproducing the morals of the war on terror as a necessary evil.

The dissemination of ideology is necessary for maintaining *hegemony*. Although connected to its common definition as the predominance of one state or social group over others, the Gramscian concept is different, being both a political strategy and a tool for understanding society. According to him, the concept comes from Lenin, for whom it was a strategy for achieving the leadership of the working class via a "broad alliance of social forces".[19] Gramsci extends the concept to include the practices of the capitalist class and its representatives: "A hegemonic class, or part of a class, is one which gains the consent of other classes and social forces through creating and maintaining a system of alliances by means of political and ideological struggle".[20]

One of Gramsci's most important additions to Marxist thought was the identification of power as residing not only in the institutions of the state (termed *political society*) and its monopoly on violence but also in what he termed *civil society*. That is, "all the organizations and institutions which are not a part of the state", but are still the "fortresses and earthworks standing behind the state", defending

[15] Olson, D. (2019, August 23). "Minecraft, Sandboxes, and Colonialism | Folding Ideas." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6i5Ylu0mgM&ab_channel=FoldingIdeas (last accessed December 18, 2024).
[16] Cassar (2013), p. 331.
[17] Quoted in Cassar (2013), p. 331.
[18] Simon (2001).
[19] Simon (2001), p. 16
[20] Quoted in Simon (2001), p. 26

it by way of persuasion.[21] That is where a dominant society organizes consent and establishes hegemony, which strengthens this domination without the use of force. Gramsci uses the term *integral state* to explain this conception of power: the state should be understood as the union of *political society* and *civil society*, of "government apparatus as well as the private apparatuses of hegemony"; in other words, "hegemony protected by the armour of coercion".[22] Whilst this formula may not work for all of the complex political state-system of the contemporary world, it is nonetheless especially apt to describe, for example, the relations between the US Army, Hollywood and Silicon Valley that shape the medium of war games.

Another important Gramscian idea reported by Cassar is his treatment of popular culture, closely tied to the ideological battleground of *common sense*. The resurgence of Gramsci in the 70s "cleared the way for a new conception of popular culture […] as a direct product of capitalist industrial society", mimicking its structures while consequently "suffering from the same condition", as it has already been posited by the comparison with *Third Cinema*.[23] Popular culture itself is seen as a site of "struggle and negotiation of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate ones"[24]. It is neither as a capitalist imposition nor as authentic folk culture, but a mix of both set in a *compromise equilibrium*, a "contradictory mix of forces from both below and above both commercial and authentic marked by both resistance and incorporation, structure and agency".[25] Gramsci analyzed popular taste to explore the terrain where cultural transformation would take place, writing about superman novels (*superuomo*, not to be confused with the modern superhero comics) as representing escape and hope for the readers, a sign of an active desire for change. In reading the *Prison Notebooks*, however, one has to consider that he tended to explicitly privilege the written word over radio and film (although they were already becoming important in his time): according to Forgacs, this can be attributed to both a widespread Italian tendency and to his conception of hegemonical reformation as "a process of process of acquisition of a critical outlook, […] of 'coherent and systematic thought'" which he tended to identify only with writing.[26] Another reason to look closely at the specificities of cinema and games beyond his writings.

It is important to note that this view does not imply an explicit will to persuade the people and maintain the hegemony of the ruling class by all the artists which produce popular culture. Although

[21] Ibid., p. 31.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Cassar (2013), p. 342.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Quoted in Cassar (2013), p. 342.
[26] Gramsci, A. (2000). *The Gramsci reader: Selected writings 1916 - 1935* (D. A. Forgacs, Ed.; 1. ed). New York Univ. Press., p. 364.

some of the games which will be analyzed in this research were made as clear propaganda, like *America's Army* (2002), claiming that all of them were would be far-fetched. In any case, as Cassar already notes, "claiming that something is a work of fiction does not change its content nor does it absolve the responsibility of whoever produced it": this is especially evident in the games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), with their developers constantly claiming that they do not make "political games"[27]. Now, the aim of this dissertation is not to prove authorial intent, as one could take their word as face value; it does not matter if *Call of Duty*'s developer intended to uphold the military status quo or not. Their product still upholds the talking points of *common sense* regarding the war on terror, namely that it was a, unavoidable, tragic necessity, and that everything done in its name was justified: a narrative which works clearly in favor of American imperialism. Moreover, *Call of Duty* games are often the result of collaborations with the US Army or institutions directly tied to them.

As it has already been stated, culture in Gramsci is a terrain for struggle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, both of which find examples in the medium. Cassar thus ends his argument by writing on how the counter-hegemonic process can happen in videogames, both through creation of new games and modification of already established titles.[28] His examples are not considered as offering a perfect counter position, but rather "a mild yet active struggle", a testimony of the complexity of escaping hegemonical discourse.[29] *Under Siege* (2011), for example, is a military shooter developed by Afkar Media which sees the protagonist as heroes of the anti-Zionist resistance during the Second Intifada.[30] Whilst it is a direct reply to the prominent Western narrative, it is no more than an inversion of the classical Western shooter, ultimately mimicking the same rhetoric used by the "enemy", perpetrating hegemonical models much like the anti-system cinema criticized by Solanas and Getino. *Darfur is Dying* (2006) adopts a slightly more complex rhetoric, simulating the life of a child in Sudan suffering through the civil war: when the player dies during the game, an on-screen message points that unlike a kid in Sudan, they can have another chance if they wish.[31] While the death screen ejects the player from the illusion created by the game, it uses this disconnection to effectively drive home its message, mimicking the abyss dividing who plays to an actual refugee. However, the game's narrative is, overall, quite superficial: Bogost mounts a fierce critique of it based on its use by MTV (who sponsored its creation through a contest) for advertising purposes, the

[27] Game Informer (2019). *Is Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare A Political Game? Here's Infinity Ward's Answer* [Video]. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Jb5Qj5JPM (last accessed December 18, 2024).
[28] Cassar (2013).
[29] Ibid., p. 346.
[30] Afkar media (2005). *Under Siege* [Video game]. Dar al-Fikr.
[31] Ruiz, S. et al. (2006). *Darfur Is Dying* [Video game].

complete lack of historical context and its explicit aim (reinforced by MTV's host website) to invite doing nothing but the simple, trite "raising awareness".[32]

A way of engaging with the specificity of the medium to counter hegemonical narratives is by *modding*: modifying existing games. According to Cassar, contemporary modding practices show an interesting interplay between the developers and the gamers which modify the game: some developers encourage it, somewhat abandoning their authorship, but keeping players playing their game – but they also know that they would engage in modding even without their support. Whilst this ambiguous interplay is certainly to be taken into consideration when researching user-based game modification, his view is supported only by citing the very well-known example of modding in the *Elder Scrolls* series, without actual examples of counter-hegemonic activity or even of a particular mod. Two essays contained in *Video Games and the Global South* give us some examples on how this practice can be used to combat Western views and shortcomings, as can be observed by the widespread habit of modding *Pro Evolution Soccer* in Brazil or by the "Indigenous People of Oceania" mod for *Europa Universalis IV* (2013) developed by scholar Rhett Loban for his Ph.D. project.[33]

As we have seen, resistance can take multiple forms, some of them deriving from the inherent characteristics of the medium. we will now delve deeper in Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* which underlines these features; we will then list what is needed in addition to the above-mentioned ideas for a proper analysis of how, specifically, war games (or games about war) operate in supporting or countering hegemony.

1.2 Procedural rhetoric

Bogost's core argument is that "videogames open a new domain for persuasion, thanks to their core representational mode, procedurality".[34] Although this characteristic is present in other media, like tabletop games, they still rely on faulty human inscription: games like *Monopoly* and *Uno* are popular examples of games whose intended processes are often, inevitably modified by human behavior. On the other hand, procedurality is intrinsic and inextricable from computers.

If procedurality is "a way of creating, explaining or understanding processes", and rhetoric is intended as "effective and persuasive expression", then *procedural rhetoric* is defined as the "practice of using processes persuasively", as well as the "technique to use for unpacking computational arguments others have made". This subset of rhetoric acts through *procedural representation*, the act

[32] Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. MIT Press.
[33] Penix-Tadsen, P. (2019). Video games and the global south. Carnegie Mellon University ETC Press, pp. 75-99.
[34] Bogost (2007), p. ix.

of representing process with process, without the use of language like verbal or written rhetoric. In chapter 3.4.4, we will see how this concept ties to Farocki's work on operational images.

In his view, all culture can be explained through processes: different systems like military interrogations or customer relations may seems "flexible and porous", but Bogost sees them as "crafted from a multitude of protracted, intersecting cultural processes".[35] Even ideology is described as "hidden procedural systems that drive social, political, or cultural behavior".[36] Proof of this view is to be found in other works which try to explain large social phenomena with processes, namely Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel* and Dubner's *Freakonomics*.[37]

It's with these examples that we find an important issue with analyzing large phenomena only through the lens of processes: both of the cited books have been widely criticized exactly for their mechanistic approach, especially in regard to *Freakonomics*, which tries to argue, for instance, that the legalization of abortion in the United States led to lower crime rates.[38] Whilst Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* is essential in the study of videogames, as it gives us a framework to properly study this unique characteristic of games, it can't be the only lens used to look at the phenomenon. The reversed portrayal of the "Highway of Death" in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), blaming the horror on Russia, is a narrative choice which betrays the game's loyalties regardless of its procedural representation.[39] Coming back to the discussion of videogames, Bogost then defines the concepts of *procedural forms* and *procedural genres*, which will be used in the analysis proposed throughout this dissertation (see chapter 4). A *procedural form* refers to a standardized unit of *operational logic* which takes common roles in various procedural representations. Common procedural forms are the logics of player movement, gravity, or collision detection: these forms, along others like lighting which create a game's visual environment, are further classified as *graphical logics*. Another common type of *procedural forms* are *textual logics*: the mechanics which, for example, build up text parsers which dictate what line of text should show up in a visual novel based on previous player interactions.[40] In detective game *Disco Elysium* (2019) *textual logics* determine

[35] Bogost (2007), p. 7.
[36] Bogost (2007), p. 72.
[37] Bogost (2007), pp. 8-9.
[38] *Steven Levitt and John Donohue defend a finding made famous by "Freakonomics."* (n.d.). The Economist. https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2024/04/08/steven-levitt-and-john-donohue-defend-a-finding-made-famous-by-freakonomics (last accessed February 10, 2025).
[39] Hall, C. (2019, October 30). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's Highway of Death controversy, explained. Polygon. From https://www.polygon.com/2019/10/30/20938550/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-highway-of-death-controversy (last accessed February 14, 2025).
[40] Bogost (2007), pp. 12-15

what information your partner (and your subconscious) brings up during an interrogation based on the facts the player has already discovered about the case.[41]

The assemblage of *procedural forms* constitutes a *procedural genre*. Akin to film noir, fantasy novel or lyric poem, a *procedural genre* is defined not by narrative but by shared procedures.[42] Although the term is a coin by Bogost, who gave it a precise definition, the concept itself isn't. Game genres have always been defined in culture by their mechanics: "first-person shooter", "third-person shooter", "management simulator" are the first descriptors which are used to describe a given game. Well-known genres like *metroidvania* and *roguelike* even take their names from the specific mechanics of a specific game or series (*Metroid* (1986-), *Castlevania* (1986-), *Rogue* (1980)), but still carry no thematic expectation. However, this rule is not set in stone: *souls-like* games are procedurally defined by brutally hard combat and an expectation of frequent character death but are also widely identified with a dark fantasy atmosphere and grim ambiance. But again, as the genre is getting older (it was only popularized after 2011), more games which follow the formula but change the standard setting are being published: that is the case of the colorful, cartoony *Another's Crab's Treasure* (2024).[43]

Whilst *procedural genres* are not the only genre descriptors ever used (a horror game is a horror game regardless of the player's point of view), their forward existence is a testament to the fundamentality of processes in the analysis of video games: these genres carry embedded implications with them, to the point where a game's *procedural genre* can even clash with its intended narrative, resulting in what is known as called *ludonarrative dissonance*, a term first coined by Clint Hocking in a 2007 blogpost.[44] In *Tomb Raider* (2013), the protagonist is pictured as overcome by guilt at her first killing of a deer, only for the gameplay loop to revolve around mercilessly killing dozens of animals and people with no mention of remorse or narrative. This *dissonance* is a direct consequence of the choice of using the third-person shooter formula (a *procedural genre* where most, if not all, other entities in the game are understood to enemies to shoot at) to tell what is presented as a complex story about survival. On the other hand, games can use *procedural genre* expectations, and even *ludonarrative dissonance*, at their advantage: expecting the player to blindly following the conventions of the third-person shooter, only to twist the narrative against them, is what makes *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) a worthwhile critique of the genre.

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[41] ZA/UM (2019). *Disco Elysium* [Video game]. ZA/UM.
[42] Bogost (2007), pp. 12-15
[43] Aggro Crab (2024). *Another's Crab Treasure* [Video game]. Aggro Crab.
[44] Hocking, C. (n.d.). *Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock*. Click Nothing. https://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html (last accessed Februaty 10, 2025).

This concept also shows that, while *procedural rhetoric* is the defining feature of the medium, not all games employ it effectively. What Bogost calls "Persuasive Games" are those who "mount procedural rhetoric effectively", that "make arguments about the way systems work in the material world".[45] If works like *Tomb Raider* (2013) employ *procedural rhetoric* in an unintended way which nonetheless adds layers of meaning to the work, some just remain procedurally uninteresting. Like *Crazy World*, an anti-smoking game where the player must jump to avoid green clouds of toxic smoke, which has of course nothing to do with real world processes of addiction.[46] He calls for videogames to employ "sophisticated interactivity", borrowing Janet Murray's belief on interactive fiction that the "mere ability to move a joystick or click on a mouse is not sufficient cause for agency".[47] I bring up these concerns not to criticize the quoted examples, but to reiterate the limits of an analysis based on pure procedurality. As we have mentioned with the case of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019)'s treatment of history, there are multiple layers of hegemonical representation – while procedurality is unique to video games, it's not the only meaning-building layer in video games. Narrative and spectacle-building are an essential part of all militainment, as it will be shown in chapter 3 and 4.

[45] Bogost (2007), p. 47
[46] Ibid.
[47] Murray in Bogost (2007), p. 42.

2. Embedded issues in militainment

Now that we have defined a theoretical framework for the broad analysis of video games, how they mount arguments using procedural rhetoric, and how they function in maintaining hegemony, we must look at the specificity in this regard of war games.

First, we will talk about the historical ties between the United States Army, Hollywood and the game industry to show how these relationships demonstrate the synergy between *civil* and *political society* in maintaining the status quo and the interests of the dominant industrialist class. This will show how state apparatuses consciously and systematically employ the cultural industry to further their own goals, from the early days of cinema to contemporary war games. When not specified, we will refer to all entertainment media related to the military as "militainment", a term coined by Burston (2003) and defined by Stahl (2006) as "state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption".[48]

Secondly, we will review how issues of colonialism plague the medium, how this affects the most common narratives in military shooters (especially those set in the Middle East), and how the dominance of the Global North in the industry inhibits the development of games countering the hegemonic narrative.

2.1 Militarism

In this section, we will focus solely on the symbiotic relationship between the cultural industry of the United States and the US defense sector. This is not to say that the maintenance of cultural hegemony benefits only the US state or US-based industry, in fact it is quite the contrary. The interests of global capital are well and active on a global scale, with studios all over the world benefiting from the production of militainment. Moreover, many countries geopolitically benefit from the oppression of the Global South. At the time of writing, Israel is waging war against Palestine (if what is happening in Gaza and the occupied West Bank can even be defined as "war"), Lebanon, Yemen, Iran and Syria, touting the same rhetoric of the War on Terror: terrorism must be destroyed by any means necessary. Its military ties to the US are well known, and their relationship extends to media as well. For example, the US TV show *Homeland*, a dramatization of CIA's covert counterterrorism, is a remake of the Israeli drama *Prisoners of War*.[49] Like many others, the series justifies the CIA's routine abuse of human rights by framing it as necessary to prevent terrorist attacks.[50] As far as the

[48] Burston, J. (2003). War and the Entertainment Industries: New Research Priorities in an Era of Cyber-Patriotism. In D. Thussu & D. Freedman, *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (pp. 163–175). SAGE Publications Ltd..; Stahl, R. (2006). Have You Played the War on Terror? *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *23*(2), 112–130.

[49] Mirrlees (2016), p. 165.

[50] Ibid.

industrial side is concerned, war profiteering knows no borders: the US defense giant Lockheed Martin collaborates with many international manufacturers, including Italy's Leonardo S.p.A.[51]

However, it's undeniable that the US empire is at the forefront of the production of media supporting this kind of militaristic propaganda. Its cultural industry doesn't operate in a unipolar global market – Bollywood produces double the number of movies than Hollywood – but it still achieves market dominance "by capitalist invitation and incorporation", as reported by Mirrlees.[52] Its cultural hegemony is maintained both through national state support and international meddling. Whilst the States do not have a centralized cultural ministry, "there is scarcely any aspect of the culture industry, which is not supported directly or indirectly, by the US state and policy".[53] The dominance of media conglomerates is sustained through worldwide IP protection and promotion, tax breaks, and overall industry deregulation (like the dismantling of antitrust laws) which allows growing ownership concentration, reinforcing the oligopoly. Abroad, these conglomerates "transform other countries into service providers" through mergers, acquisitions, licensing agreements and cross-border production (practices which give financial incentives to local firms to not invest in local products).[54] Of course, these processes don't suppress all independent voices. As we'll see in chapter 3, plenty of voices have spoken against the US dominance, especially in the Global South. But the lion's share of the market is held by this oligopoly, whose products peddle US propaganda all over the world. Now, if the benefits for the industry are evident, what are the advantages for the empire? How and why does it need to be supported?

The US worldwide military presence is overwhelming. It's been called an "empire" not because it tries to gain direct control of large swaths of land: in fact, it has even let go many territories gained throughout its history, chief of all the Philippines (obtained as a result of the 1898 Spanish-American war).[55] Not that it has abandoned them all, of course: the Hawaii and Puerto Rico, conquered in that same war, remain part of the US, although only one of them has been fully integrated as a state – Puerto Rico still has no voting federal representation.[56] It also controls many other, smaller, overseas territories like Guam, American Samoa, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These, along with roughly eight hundred overseas military units (scattered in eighty countries), make

[51] *Lockheed Martin and Alenia Aeronautica to Display C-27J Spartan Airlifter In The U.S. | Lockheed Martin Corp*. (n.d.). From https://investors.lockheedmartin.com/news-releases/news-release-details/lockheed-martin-and-alenia-aeronautica-display-c-27j-spartan/ (last accessed November 7, 2024).

[52] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 109-112.

[53] Mirrlees (2016), p. 112.

[54] Ibid., p. 111.

[55] Immerwahr, D. (2020). *How to hide an empire: A history of the greater United States* (First Picador paperback edition). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[56] Ibid.

up what Immerwahr calls a "pointillist empire".[57] These numbers are exceptional when compared to any other state in the world. There are overall "thirty overseas bases owned by non-US countries", while Japan, Germany, South Korea or Italy each host more US bases than that (120, 119, 73 and 44 respectively)[58]. According to Immerwahr, the US just "reshuffled its imperial portfolio" after World War Two, "divesting itself of large colonies and investing in military bases, tiny specks of semisovereignty strewn around the globe".[59] Technological advancements in the fields of synthetics (like rubber), communication and transportation "alleviated the pressure on rich countries to colonize, since colonial products became both less necessary and easier to get through international (rather than imperial) trade".[60]

All of these bases require manpower, acceptance of their presence, and acceptance of their use. Herbert I. Schiller, as reported again in Mirrlees, like Immerwahr, also conceptualized the US empire as a unique example, but one focused more on its reliance on cultural imperialism to maintain its hegemony, "running a permanent PR campaign" to gain support for its economic dominance and permanent war.[61] He saw cultural products as "conveyor belts for the US empire's dominant ideas".[62] We will see now how such an empire has used cinema and, more recently, video games, to support its military policy.

2.1.1 A brief history of the DoD-Hollywood complex

The United States have used PR agencies to sell its way of living and fighting from the early 1900s, with Edward Bernays' firm helping the CIA and the United Fruit Company (now called Chiquita) to topple Jacobo Arbenz, the social democratic president of Guatemala. Bernays also worked in the US's first wartime PR agency, the Committee on Public Information (CPI), to promote US involvement in the Great War and liberal democratic capitalist ideals. It sent speakers all over the country, circulated (and censored) news, created "photographs, posters, pamphlets, and magazines", and even had a Division of Film, which produced and distributed short movies like *Pershing's Crusaders* (1918), depicting US troops abroad. It screened in major city theatres, small communities (via travelling exhibitors) and abroad, thanks to an agreement with the studios: the CPI expedited the process of

[57] Ibid., p. 187.
[58] *Infographic: US military presence around the world | Infographic News | Al Jazeera*. (n.d.). From https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive (last accessed November 7, 2024).
[59] Immerwahr (2020), p. 369.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Mirrlees (2016), p. 21.
[62] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

international distribution while the studios ensured that the shipments contained at least 20% CPI material.[63]

Similar public diplomacy offices were founded in the interwar period, the Second World War, the Cold War (supporting American involvement in Vietnam), and the War on Terror.[64] At the time of writing, this task is taken care of by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, under the Department of State.[65] While these offices have always played an important part in public diplomacy, they were never focused solely on war propaganda: for example, the lighthearted *The Three Caballeros* (1944) and *Saludos Amigos* (1942) were created commissioned to the Walt Disney Company to represent good relations between the US and its Southern neighbors. The bulk of audiovisual militainment was instead produced under the influence of the Department of Defense (DoD).

The first feature-length film reportedly supported by the DoD was Griffith's infamous *The Birth of a Nation* (1915).[66] The Army helped him with technical advice and even provided artillery pieces for close-ups. They would come to the director's help once again during the production of *America* (1942), loaning him one thousand men and a military band to aid in recreating the War of Independence. It justified its assistance by saying that "the combat sequences gave Army observers the opportunity to study the Revolutionary War battles with a precision never before possible".[67] The leading studios were more than happy to embrace this opportunity. After the White House screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, the head of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (Hollywood's lobby group) sent a memo that read: "The motion picture can be the most wonderful system for spreading national propaganda at little or no cost".[68] These early collaborations show how the DoD works with Hollywood to this day: the Department offers software (technical knowledge) and hardware (personnel, equipment), in exchange for positive PR. However, at the time, they were the exception rather than the rule. A notable increase in collaborations was had only in the early 40s, with some dramas and comedies which supported the war and conscription (like Irving Berlin's *This is the Army* (1943), starring Ronald Reagan) encouraged by the Office of War Information.[69]

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[63] Ibid.., pp. 68-73.
[64] Ibid., pp. 64-102.
[65] Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. (n.d.). *United States Department of State*. From https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/ (last accessed November 7, 2024).
[66] Suid, L. H. (2007). *Guts & glory: The making of the American military image in film* (Rev. and expanded ed., [Nachdr.]). Univ. Press of Kentucky., pp. 15-16.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Mirrlees (2016), p. 165.
[69] Ibid., pp. 164-169.

Systemic DoD-Hollywood collaborations only began in 1946, when the US War Department and Navy Department "set up Hollywood film review offices to grant production companies assistance […] if they agreed to a positive representation".[70] Two years later, the DoD opened the Motion Picture Production Office (MPPO) to further formalize the agreements, and, most importantly, appointed its first Hollywood liaison (a position which exists to this day), Donald Baruch.[71] The MPPO also collaborated with the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (1944) and the House Committee on Un-American Activities (1947) to persecute "socialist cultural workers who might make films critical of US empire and thereby established a major deterrent to anti-war films".[72]

Another step towards contemporary policy was made in 1962, after the disastrous release of Darryl Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962). The director had accepted help from the MPPO, but released the movie without making any of the requested changes, like removing "casual profanity" (an aspect dear to Zanuck, as he wanted the dialogue to sound more authentic) and reducing the "dramatizations of personal killings" to "avoid the 'bloodbath' effect".[73] James Jones, one of the screenwriters, didn't appreciate the requests:

> "I was morally shocked at… their 'concern' over the 'excessive slaughter' in the story. What the fuck do they think war is? What did they think Omaha was, if not a 'bloodbath'? I find it incredible that these ostriches can go on like they do, building fallout bomb shelters, with one hand, and not allowing honesty in combat films with the other.".[74]

If his response lacked subtlety, it nonetheless correctly identified a tendency by the DoD to sanitize the horrors of war. A new official policy would be released in 1964 with a stricter sect of guidelines, which had the Department guiding all future co-productions, allowing it to withhold support in case a production wouldn't apply the requested script changes.[75]

The policy change, along with the unpopular increase in American involvement in Vietnam, resulted in a gradual decrease of war co-productions. In fact, while the 60s saw around eighty DoD-Hollywood co-productions, that number dropped to less than thirty in the 70s.[76] Certainly the most notable entry in that time frame was John Wayne's hyper-patriotic *The Green Berets* (1968), filmed at the height of the Vietnam War.

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[70] Ibid., p. 169.
[71] Ibid., pp. 164-174.
[72] Ibid., p. 170.
[73] Quoted in Suid (2002), p. 177.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Suid (2002), p. 193.
[76] Alford, M., & Seckler, T. (2017). *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood*. Drum Roll Books., pp. 155-171.

The Army would eventually get over the Vietnam popularity problem, in large part thanks to *Top Gun* (1986). The movie's impact is hard to overstate. According to Phil Strub, the liaison officer at the time, it granted a post-Vietnam "rehabilitation of the military".[77] Thanks to its incredible success, and to Navy recruiters posted outside of movie theaters, recruitment reportedly increased by 500%.[78] This led the way for a great increase in co-productions, with the process later becoming more standardized and routinized.

We can use the data provided by Alford and Secker in *National Security Cinema* to confirm the trends identified by Mirrlees. After the immediate post-WW2 boom, we can see a stark decline in DoD-supported films, picking up with the 80s and then again after 2001. It is to be noted that the 2010s collaborations are not all reported, as the dataset extends only to 2017 [Fig. 1]. Their list is by far the most complete one available at the time of writing (and the only available one after 2002), as it was compiled with "Suid's books, documents obtained through FOIA requests, and searches on IMDB for movies filmed at military locations or that credited the DOD".[79] While it is an exceptional research tool, it is to be noted that the extent of the DoD's involvement in every productions is not known; over half of them comes from a DoD list containing only movie titles in alphabetical order.[80]

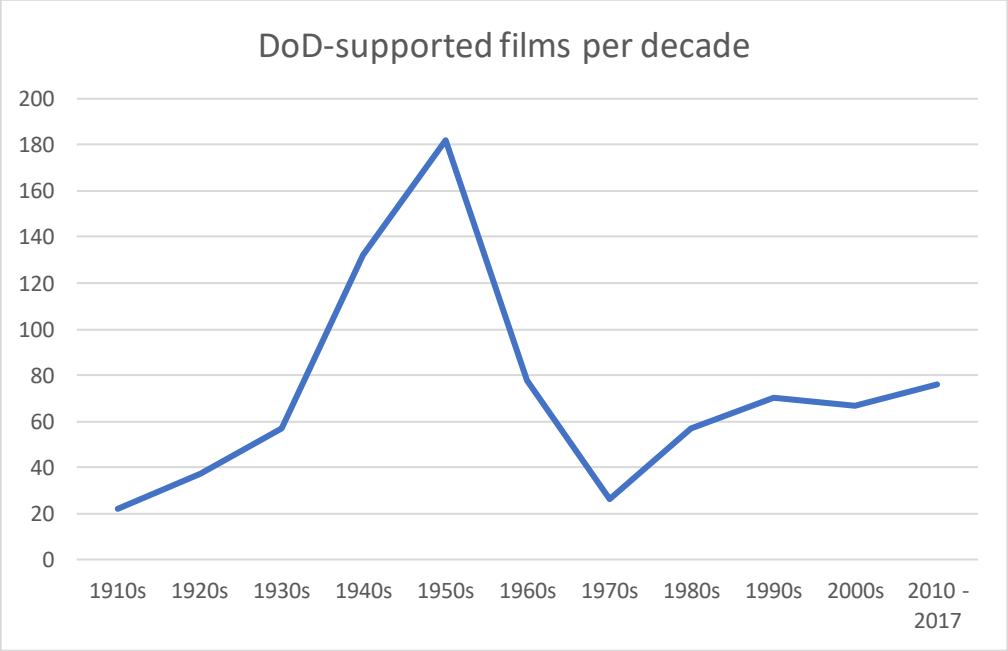


Fig. 1 DoD-supported films per decade. Data extracted from Alford and Secker (2017)

[77] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 175.
[78] Mirrlees (2016), p. 175.
[79] Ibid., p. 155.
[80] Alford and Secker (2017).

Moreover, the graph doesn't include the figure related to DoD-supported TV series, and the CIA, FBI and OSS-supported films and TV series. They have been excluded to maintain a more easily manageable dataset: it's not clear if the series were supported for just one episode, one season, or over their entire run, and many projects supported by the other agencies do not fall under the category of militainment (as they focus more on crime). However, the TV series list, coupled with the available weekly reports of the Army Entertainment Liaison Office (ELO), shows a notable trend: how much the Army is involved in the production of TV shows, especially reality shows. The 1365 pages of the document are too many to be parsed through for this research, but the Army omnipresence is evident even at first glance. As reported by Secker, the list includes "*American Idol*, *The X-Factor*, *Masterchef*, *Cupcake Wars*, numerous Oprah Winfrey shows, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Battlefield Priests*, *America's Got Talent*, *Hawaii Five-O*, lots of BBC, History Channel and National Geographic documentaries, *War Dogs*, *Big Kitchens*".[81] It is to be noted that the document only covers the 2010-2015 reports, and only those of the Army. The Marine Corps publicly available reports suggest an involvement of a similar scale (with a baffling number of participations in cooking shows).[82] Every other branch of the military has its own ELO, and further research will be needed on other released documents.[83]

2.1.2 Current cooperations in cinema

The 1988 DoD directive 5410.16, "Department of Defense Assistance to Non-Government, Entertainment-Oriented Motion Picture, Television and Video Productions", delineates the policies and procedures governing DoD assistance to this day.[84] They are now handled by the Department of Defense Special Assistant for Entertainment Media (DODSAEM), a centralized entity in the Pentagon which oversees the various Hollywood liaison offices located in Los Angeles. The collaborations work as such: first, the production company sends a letter to the office describing their proposal, its plot, and its benefits for the DoD. The DODSAEM reviews the request, considering that the project has to directly benefit the Department of be in the "best national interest"; a project is in the *national interest* if it authentically represents "actual persons, places, military operations, and historical events", does not "condone or endorse activities […] contrary to US government policies"

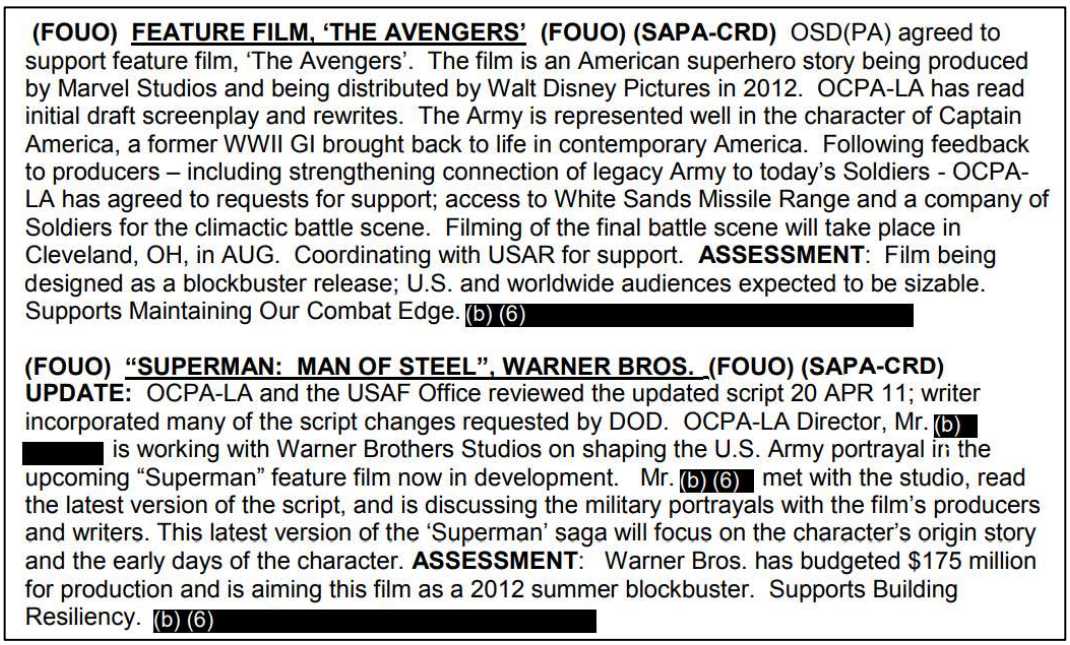
[81] Secker, T. (2015, July 12). *Biggest ever FOIA release from Pentagon Entertainment Liaison Offices | Spy Culture*. From https://www.spyculture.com/biggest-ever-foia-release-from-pentagon-entertainment-liaison-office/ (last accessed November 4, 2024).

[82] Secker, T. (2015, November 18). *7 Years of Reports from the Marine Corps Entertainment Liaison Office | Spy Culture*. From https://www.spyculture.com/7-years-of-reports-from-the-marine-corps-entertainment-liaison-office/ (last accessed November 4, 2024).

[83] Ibid.

[84] Mirrlees (2016), p. 181

or enhances recruiting and retention programs.[85] The Army ELO weekly reports includes the specific reasons why any given collaboration would be advantageous under the "ASSESSMENT" section [Fig. 2]. While the presence of popularity projections is easily understandable, the second section of the assessments utilizes obscure military lingo. It's not clear how *The Avengers* (2012) "Supports Maintaining Our Combat Edge" or *Man of Steel* (2013) "Supports Building Resilience".[86]



(FOUO) FEATURE FILM, 'THE AVENGERS' (FOUO) (SAPA-CRD) OSD(PA) agreed to support feature film, 'The Avengers'. The film is an American superhero story being produced by Marvel Studios and being distributed by Walt Disney Pictures in 2012. OCPA-LA has read initial draft screenplay and rewrites. The Army is represented well in the character of Captain America, a former WWII GI brought back to life in contemporary America. Following feedback to producers – including strengthening connection of legacy Army to today's Soldiers - OCPA-LA has agreed to requests for support; access to White Sands Missile Range and a company of Soldiers for the climactic battle scene. Filming of the final battle scene will take place in Cleveland, OH, in AUG. Coordinating with USAR for support. **ASSESSMENT**: Film being designed as a blockbuster release; U.S. and worldwide audiences expected to be sizable. Supports Maintaining Our Combat Edge. (b) (6)

(FOUO) "SUPERMAN: MAN OF STEEL", WARNER BROS. (FOUO) (SAPA-CRD) **UPDATE:** OCPA-LA and the USAF Office reviewed the updated script 20 APR 11; writer incorporated many of the script changes requested by DOD. OCPA-LA Director, Mr. (b) is working with Warner Brothers Studios on shaping the U.S. Army portrayal in the upcoming "Superman" feature film now in development. Mr. (b) (6) met with the studio, read the latest version of the script, and is discussing the military portrayals with the film's producers and writers. This latest version of the 'Superman' saga will focus on the character's origin story and the early days of the character. **ASSESSMENT**: Warner Bros. has budgeted $175 million for production and is aiming this film as a 2012 summer blockbuster. Supports Building Resiliency. (b) (6)

Fig. 2 Two entries from the OCPA-West Weekly Report, 2 May 2011.

The presence of these two titles in the reports also shows how the definition of required "authenticity" has changed over the years. The DoD also collaborated in the production of Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), the *Transformers* franchise (2007-), and various other Marvel Studios projects (2008-). It appears that the military is willing to get involved in more fantastical projects to ensure that its portrayal can still be accurate to what would happen in case they faced otherworldly threats. As Lt.-Col. Paul Sinor, the army Hollywood liaison officer, said before the release of *Transformers* (2007): "The Army has never fought giant robots, but if we did, this is probably how we'd do it".[87] The DoD is not shy about these collaborations, as can be seen from the banner of the Department of the Air Force Public Affairs' website [Fig. 3]

[85] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 182.
[86] OCPA-West. (2015). *OCPA-West Weekly Reports, 2010-2015*.
[87] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 186.



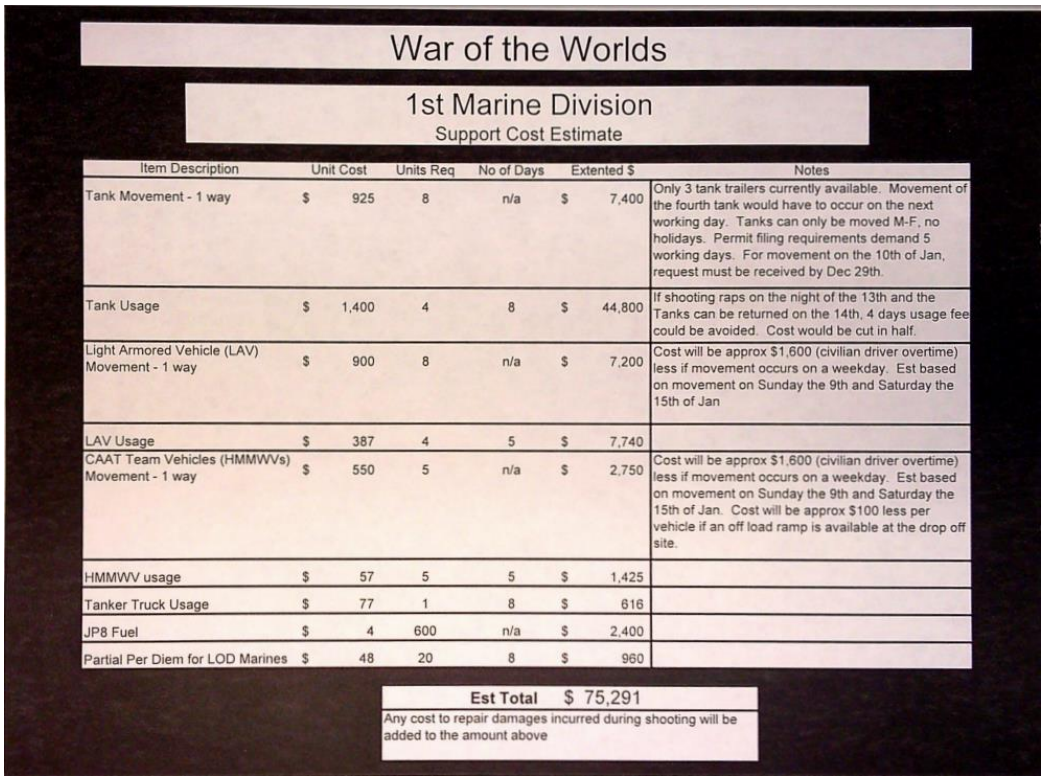
Fig. 3. Screenshot from Department of the Air Force Public Affairs' website portraying characters from the *Transformers* franchise (https://www.publicaffairs.af.mil/Entertainment/)

We can use *War of the Worlds* (2005) as a practical example of a contemporary collaboration thanks to a co-production file obtained by Secker from the United States Marine Corps Motion Picture & TV Liaison Office, which seems to contain every document regarding the co-production (from personal emails to budget tables). It gives us an exceptional inside look into the workings of DoD-Hollywood co-operations, with script notes, material details of the assistance, and signed production obligations (consistent with the 1988 directive).[88]

In this case, the requested script changes focus on representing the Marines more accurately. This, coincidentally, also makes them look better. They ask to alter the portrayal of the assaults to make it more "tactically sound", to not show the Marines retreating (as "Marines don't retreat. We conduct a fighting tactical withdrawal"), to reduce the amount of planes lost to the enemy, and to not portray any form of panic among the infantry standing in front of giant three-legged monsters from outer space.[89] While the requested changes focus often on the Marines' help to civilians, that is not always the case: "Since we will not have many dismounted forces besides the recon Marines calling in fire support, I would recommend that we don't have Marines trying to deter civilians racing towards the battle. If they're that stupid, so be it." [90]

[88] US Marine Corps. (n.d.). *USMC production notes on War of the Worlds (2005)*.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., p. 73.

As is routine, the assistance consisted in both software and hardware: “four M1A1 main battle tanks, four Light Armored Vehicles, four hard-back HMMWVs and one refueling vehicle, plus crews for all of these”, plus technical knowledge.[91] We can see how this is an enormous economic advantage. While equipment is not given out completely for free, the studios only have to reimburse “out—of-pocket expenses, such as fuel, depot maintenance, and expendable”, without needing to pay the any soldier’s salary when they are “officially assigned to assist in the production”.[92] The only obligation to military personnel is providing them with travel, housing and food (when not shooting on a base) and a $48 per diem. As we can see from the document, the support costs consist of fuel reimbursement, the per diem, and fees related to “usage” and “movement”. The fees include possible cost cuts in case the equipment use happens during the week, possibly because the drivers would work on duty [Fig. 4].



War of the Worlds

1st Marine Division

Support Cost Estimate

Item Description	Unit Cost	Units Req	No of Days	Extented $	Notes
Tank Movement - 1 way	$ 925	8	n/a	$ 7,400	Only 3 tank trailers currently available. Movement of the fourth tank would have to occur on the next working day. Tanks can only be moved M-F, no holidays. Permit filing requirements demand 5 working days. For movement on the 10th of Jan, request must be received by Dec 29th.
Tank Usage	$ 1,400	4	8	$ 44,800	If shooting raps on the night of the 13th and the Tanks can be returned on the 14th, 4 days usage fee could be avoided. Cost would be cut in half.
Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) Movement - 1 way	$ 900	8	n/a	$ 7,200	Cost will be approx $1,600 (civilian driver overtime) less if movement occurs on a weekday. Est based on movement on Sunday the 9th and Saturday the 15th of Jan
LAV Usage	$ 387	4	5	$ 7,740	
CAAT Team Vehicles (HMMWVs) Movement - 1 way	$ 550	5	n/a	$ 2,750	Cost will be approx $1,600 (civilian driver overtime) less if movement occurs on a weekday. Est based on movement on Sunday the 9th and Saturday the 15th of Jan. Cost will be approx $100 less per vehicle if an off load ramp is available at the drop off site.
HMMWV usage	$ 57	5	5	$ 1,425	
Tanker Truck Usage	$ 77	1	8	$ 616	
JP8 Fuel	$ 4	600	n/a	$ 2,400	
Partial Per Diem for LOD Marines	$ 48	20	8	$ 960	

Est Total $ 75,291

Any cost to repair damages incurred during shooting will be added to the amount above

Fig. 4 The support cost estimate for a Marine division working for the movie.

[91] USMC production notes, p. 4.
[92] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 183.

The DoD even encourages studios to hire personnel in a non-official capacity for extended acting roles, allowing studios to pay below-the-line labor less than the union rates.[93] Knowing that this might constitute a legal issue, an agreement clause moves the responsibility for union disputes to the production company.[94]

Aside from guaranteeing the safety of the personnel and proper handling of the equipment, the production has various obligations: first, it needs to have a DoD Project Officer present whenever "military is being videotaped or otherwise involved in any aspect of the Picture" to ensure that the terms of agreement are met, including in the post-production phase.[95] It also needs to comply with requests for script changes, and set up official DoD pre-screenings in Washington, DC, under penalty of immediate cessation of all present and future cooperations with the production company.[96]

To summarize, production companies obtain a great deal of very cheap assistance, while the DoD can control its public image to maintain consent and recruitment rates high, stifling unflattering representations and anti-war sentiment. Thanks to the leak of an early *Iron Man* (2008) script, we also know that this process may entail massive changes intervening in the original script, possibly to mellow down its original anti-war message purported by the film, in favor of a less critical approach[97]. The studios have an additional political advantage as they are "owned by vertically and horizontally integrated mega-conglomerates that support and benefit from the broad US foreign policy goal of globalizing liberal democratic capitalism"[98].

The *War of the Worlds* example shows only the basic benefits that the DoD can reap from its hold in Hollywood, as it doesn't represent an actual, human war. However, the US military not only needs to justify its enormous budget or to recruit a steady number of young soldiers. As we have stated at the beginning of the chapter, it also needs to justify its unprecedented spread on the surface of the planet and its constant military interference (with its allies) in all matters – especially in the Middle East. It needs to justify *why* and especially *how* it wages war, as this has vastly changed in the last decade. Before we move on to talk about the influence of the DoD on video game production, we need to define this change, because, as we will see, the technological advancements that made it possible were, at the same time, the result and the cause of war games.

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[93] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 180-188.
[94] USMC production notes, p. 9.
[95] Ibid., p. 5.
[96] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 180-188.
[97] Lenoir, T., & Caldwell, L. (2018). *The Military-Entertainment Complex*. Harvard university press, pp. 192-201; Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 81-84.
[98] Mirrlees (2016), p. 195.

2.1.3 The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)

During the invasion of Iraq, a new way of waging war saw its debut: the Gulf War was the first major conflict to see the use of the GPS, "smart" bombs, and entire divisions trained on networked simulators.[99] These new technologies and strategies have resulted in what Max Boot, a military historian, has called "a new American way of war" based on "speed, maneuver, flexibility […] precision firepower, special forces, and psychological operations".[100] It is known as the Revolution in Military Affairs.

This new strategy led to enormous successes, especially at the start of Operation Desert Storm. Those "smart" bombs helped in disabling "much of Iraq's network, including the Baghdad power grid" in the first ten minutes of the coalition's air bombing campaign, which continued for another forty-three days (at a great cost for civilians).[101] The ground invasion started with another landslide victory, the Battle of 73 Easting (named after a UTM coordinate line). In fact, the American forces had already virtually won the battle before their boots touched the ground. The DoD had been using virtual training simulators for years but in 1990 it had launched SIMnet ("simulator network"), a revolutionary tool which allowed troops to enter battle simulations all together and at a distance. [Fig. 5].



Fig. 5 An M1 tank simulator at SIMnet, Warfighter Simulation Facility, Camp Oliver, Fort Stewart, Georgia. Courtesy of Picryl. From https://picryl.com/media/students-from-the-land-force-doctrine-and-training-system-canada-in-an-m1-tank-b098fc (last accessed February 15, 2025).

[99] Immerwahr (2020), p. 406; Mirrlees (2016), p. 207.
[100] Quoted in Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 34.
[101] Immerwahr (2020), p. 406.

They had already planned and pre-played the encounter on the network, with officers guiding them both in simulation and battle thanks to Project Odin, a 3D terrain visualization software. Both technologies were developed with the help of private contractors.[102]

The Revolution was exacerbated during the War on Terror, which saw an increase in the use long-distance weaponry, Special Forces, and "superior intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities (ISR)".[103] The combination of ISR analysts, drone operators, and specialized combat teams resulted in many early successes, like the taking of Baghdad in 2003, which "required half the troops, produced fewer than half the casualties, took a little over half as long, and cost only a fourth as much".[104] They were attributed to the RMA and Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense. The successes soon stopped: "While SOF [Special Operations Forces] and flexible armor divisions were effective in toppling governments, they proved less adept at finishing the task".[105] However, the change continued, with increase negative effects on the civilian population.

The inhabitants of Afghanistan and Iraq were subjected to constant drone warfare, "both too precise, allowing operators to kill from half a world away, and not precise enough, unable to distinguish between civilians and combatants".[106] Later, in Pakistan and Yemen, the CIA assassinated people with the use of "predictive forensics", "determined by an algorithm to pose an 'imminent risk,', without their identities or names being known".[107] Not to mention their routine use of "advanced interrogation techniques" (i.e. torture) and unlawful imprisonment in black sites – all in the name of fighting terrorists.[108]

Under the Obama administration "cross-border Special Forces [SOF] raids, drone assassinations, and cyber warfare became the status quo", with the number of SOF deployed overseas quadrupling and the budget of the US Special Operations Command (US-SOCOM) increasing its budget from $2.3 billion in 2001 to $10.4 billion in 2013.[109] Often engaged in black ops (covert operations) all over the planet, they are the main forces behind RAM and the protagonists of some of the most successful war games and movies, like the *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and *Splinter Cell* series.

[102] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), pp. 52-56.
[103] Ibid. p. 36.
[104] Ibid., p. 38.
[105] Ibid., p. 8.
[106] Weizman, E. (2019). *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (First paperback printing). Zone Books., p. 23.
[107] Ibid., p. 32.
[108] Mirrlees (2016).
[109] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 40.

RMA heavily relies on the culture industry and communication technology. It's not a coincidence that, in 2003, Donald Rumsfeld himself approved the Information Operations Roadmap (IOR), a "plan to advance the goal of information operations as a core military competency".[110] The document outlines the DoD doctrine on "Electronic Warfare, Computer Network Operations, Psychological Operations, Military Deception and Operations Security […] to influence, disrupt, corrupt or usurp adversarial human and automated decision-making while protecting our own".[111] Since its release in 2006 after a FOIA request by the National Security Archive, it has raised a lot of criticism, being called a "Roadmap to Propaganda". According to the Archive, it is an open admission to an effort to influence foreign public with PSYOPS, which the military defines as "planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence the emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals."[112]. By presenting this document, I do not mean to state that all militainment, not even all militainment produced with the DoD, is a "PSYOP" – this term is already mentioned too much in conspiracy theories. But it is further proof of the attitude of the US towards foreign audiences; after all, it already tried to use news media to influence public opinion in the Arab world, threatened by the rise in popularity of Al Jazeera.[113] Moreover, during the Cold War some films have been secretly produced by the CIA as anti-communist propaganda, like the animated adaption *Animal Farm* (1954).[114]

As the Battle of 73 Easting showed, the video game industry has been an essential ally in the production of the simulators the army so heavily relies in the context of the RMA.

2.1.4 The DoD-digital games complex

The US Army has been involved with video games since the very start. *Spacewar!* (1962), one of the argued-to-be-first video games, was created at the nexus of the DOD, US technology corporations, and MIT: the Institute's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory.[115] In fact, the DoD, often collaborating with US universities, had been stimulating the development of the US computer industry since the end of the Second World War.[116] Many other "first" games were developed in US Universities via

[110] Mirrlees (2016), p. 58.
[111] Quoted in Mirrlees, p. 58.
[112] The National Security Archive. (2006, January 26). *Rumsfeld's Roadmap to Propaganda*. The National Security Archive. From https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB177/index.htm (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[113] Bloch-Elkon, Y., & Nacos, B. L. (2014). News and Entertainment Media: Government's Big Helpers in the Selling of Counterterrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, *8*(5), 18–32. JSTOR.; Mirrlees (2016), p. 93.
[114] Shaw, T. (2007). *Hollywood's Cold War*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
[115] Mirrlees (2016), p. 204; Lenoir and Caldwell (2018).
[116] Mirrlees (2016), p. 204.

Army-funded projects, shaping the burgeoning medium to a great extent. That is the case of *Maze War* (1973), the first FPS (First Person Shooter) and *Empire* (1973), the prototype for the first online multiplayer game, as they were developed respectively for ARPANET and PLATO (both military-funded networks).

This is not to say that the Army was single-handedly responsible for the development of all early video games. *Spacewar!* (1962) might be the medium's most famous ancestor, but game development soon moved out of universities, with arcade games spreading all over the globe in the 70s, and Japan quickly becoming a second center of production. Moreover, *Spacewar!* (1962)'s record is debatable. Depending on one's definition, the first video game could instead be Turing's theoretical chess program (1947), Ferranti's Nimrod machine (1951), Strachey's *Draughts* (1952)…[117]. It is, however, undeniable that the Army was extremely influential in the early production of *war* games, forever embedding its influence into the structure of the medium. After all, the first programmable computer was created in 1946 "to calculate artillery-firing tables for the army", and since then the production of war games has been more and more intertwined with the production of training simulators, as well as serious games employed for PTS purposes.

At the beginning, the DoD didn't have any plans to use war games as a propaganda tool. The mutually beneficial relationship between the Department and the fledgling game industry was instead based on a two-way exchange of technology and personnel fueled by the military's capital, without any policy guiding it. So, the DoD's support to video games was more indirect. First, it funded the aforementioned university computer networks, giving students and professors the material basis for early game development: it's even unclear whether *Maze War* (1973) or *Empire* (1973) were ever officially a part of Army projects, although they were very popular among soldiers. Second, it contracted individuals and corporations to develop virtual training simulators, founding future game developers and the creation of what would essentially become game software. In fact, the term "virtual world" itself was coined by Ivan Sutherland and Bob Sproull in the 60s while they were developing a head-mounted display to immerse soldiers in interactive virtual environments.[118]

The result of the constant exchange between the DoD and the games and computer industries manifested itself in the 80s. The Department kept contracting private corporations to make simulators in-house, but also started to adapt commercially available war games as training simulators. That is the case for *Army Battlezone*: the result of the Army contracting Atari to make a "Bradley infantry

[117] Donovan, T. (2010). *Replay: The History of Video Games*. Yellow Ant, pp. 10-15; Smith, A. R. (2016). The Dawn of Digital Light. *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, *38*(4), 74–91.

fighting vehicle simulator" based on their commercial *Battlezone* (1980s), which was in turn inspired by *Panzer* (1977), a tank simulator developed for PLATO.[119] And at this point, as military simulators and commercially available games resembled each other so much, the DoD started using them for recruitment purposes by bringing *Army Battlezone* to shopping malls.[120]

The peak effectiveness of early exchanges was reached with the aforementioned Battle of 73 Easting. SIMNET was born off the effort of Air Force Captain Jack A. Thorpe, a research scientist brought to DARPA to bring down the cost of training technologies. He did just so by pursuing technologies developed outside of the military and hired industrial and computer graphics designers to develop the precious network. In fact, SIMNET's defining characteristic was borrowed from the game industry: *selective functional fidelity*. Instead of building whole vehicle cabins for the simulators, the designers focused only on the essential important parts "to make the crews and units, not the device, the center of the simulation, which allowed for the construction of devices that were both low-cost and streamlined to impart essential knowledge".[121]

These collaborations, which seem to have happened on a case-by-case basis, were structurally formalized in 1994 with the Federal Acquisitions Streamlining act: it mandated a "hierarchy of procurement acquisition", making the military first consider adopting commercially available alternatives to what was needed. The already permeable boundaries between the military and commercial computing sector were thus further loosened. In 1997, a policy titled *Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense* officially recognized the symbiotic relationship between the military and, specifically, the entertainment industry, because of common goals in R&D. One of the reasons behind this change in policy was that simulation technology developed in-house (whether through contractors or not) had now been surpassed by the civilian game industry. In the same year, the extremely popular *Doom* (1993) was turned into *Marine Doom* (1997), a training game. A year after that, *Falcon 4.0* (1998), an extremely detailed F-16 flight simulator (with a 600-page manual) was adapted for military training. The MÄK Company, founded in 1990 to provide R&D to the DoD in the field of virtual reality, was the first to fully exploit this new industrial relationship, developing and releasing at the same time a military simulator and its commercially available counterpart: *Spearhead* (1998).[122]

[119] Mirrlees (2016) p. 206.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 50.
[122] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), pp. 56-66; Mirrlees (2016); Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous War: Mapping The Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (2nd ed). Routledge, pp. 151-176.

2.1.5 Current cooperations in games

Contemporary collaboration practices were finally defined in 1999 with the founding of the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), which brought together the DoD, Hollywood, the game industry and academia in the same place. Now, all the sectors of the cultural industry were officially brought together, collaborating in tandem for the Department. Why? The military still had a creative problem, and needed help in imagining possible future war scenarios as well as in capturing the "physical and emotional tension of battle".[123] So, soldiers, cultural workers, computer scientists, military technocrats, digital capitalists, professors and PR experts were put together to work on military simulation games at the University of Southern California. Der Derian, who was present at the inauguration, reported the presence of "about every major L.A. player in high-tech, higher education, and high- as well as low-brow entertainment".[124] There Louis Caldera, the US Secretary of the Army at the time, described the ICT as such:

> "This 45 million dollar contract will fund joint modeling and simulation research and has high-value applications for the army as well as for the entertainment, media, video game, film, destination theme park, and information technology industries that are such a key part of the California economy… This partnership will leverage the U.S. national defense and the enormous talent and creativity of the entertainment industry and their tremendous investment in cutting-edge applications of new technology."[125]

Like MÄK (who actually collaborated with the ICT), the Institute simultaneously developed training and commercial software, with *Combat System XII* and *C-Force* being adapted into *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004).[126] According to its website, its Modeling and Simulation section is still focused on advancing "the art of the possible in military modeling and simulation", having developed "a number of strategic training games for the Naval Postgraduate School", mostly focused on counterterrorism and digital warfare.[127]

Administrated by the Modeling and Simulation Coordination Office, the DoD-game industry complex is composed of many other agencies, each one reinforcing the relationship. The US Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation (PEO STRI), established in 1974 in Floria, spends millions of dollars on the acquisition on commercialized war simulation

[123] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 63.
[124] Der Derian (2009), p. 162.
[125] Quoted in Der Derian (2009), p. 162.
[126] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 17.
[127] *Modelling & Simulation—Institute for Creative Technologies*. (2021, September 14). From https://ict.usc.edu/research/labs-groups/modeling-simulation/ (last accessed November 6, 2024); Game Center — Global ECCO - Naval Postgraduate School. (n.d.). From https://nps.edu/web/ecco/game-center1 (last accessed November 6, 2024).

hardware and software, being responsible for 5,500 training systems with a combined project value of $2.7 billion. The *Simulation and Training Technology Center* (STTC) is the military driving force behind the ICT. The *Modeling, Virtual Environments and Simulation Institute* (MOVES), established in 2000 at the Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, operates parallel to ICT in the field of modeling and simulation, also linking universities with the Army and game firms.[128]

The collaborations between the DoD and the game industry are not limited to these official agencies, as they extend ideologically well beyond their walls. Both the military and the entertainment industry are well aware that war sells. Already, in the early 90s, publishers released games that made replaying the Persian Gulf War possible, like *Super Battletank: War in the Gulf* (1992), *Desert Tank* (1994), realized by Sega with the help of Lockheed Martin, and later *Gulf War: Operation Desert Hammer* (1999).[129] None of these games received help from the DoD, however they clearly exploited the spectacle of modern war for pure profit. Moreover, they still justified US interventionism, as they all play from the coalition's heroic point of view.

After 9/11, the public's interest in the Gulf War grew exponentially: *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004) is set in the "fictitious Middle-Eastern nation of Zekistan", where the player can overthrow Mohammad Jabbour Al-Afad, "a supposed former Mujahideen leader and current dictator and his band of 'Taliban and Iraqi loyalists.'"[130] It was released after an investigation into public sensitivity by THQ, its publisher, who found out than only 8% of the people public found the idea "tacky and exploitative".[131] Stahl reports that Sony (along with thirty other companies) even tried to trademark the phrase "Shock and Awe" on the same day of the storming of Baghdad, although it dropped the rights a month later, "presumably to avoid public criticism that the company was 'turning the war into a video game.'"[132] Still, many other publishers followed into THQ's footsteps, with or without the collaboration of the DoD. That is the case of *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002) and *Conflict: Desert Storm II – Back to Baghdad* (2003), released by Gotham Games. As Mirrlees points out, the games inflate the threat posed by Saddam Hussein much like the Bush administration did, making the player fight "against a hyper-real version of the Republican guard – a powerful military force more difficult to defeat virtually than it actually was."[133] The *Call of Duty* franchise took advantage of the trend by breaking its WW2-centered formula with its fourth installment, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007). Although it is set during fictional conflicts in the Middle East, Russia and Ukraine, it still

[128] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 210-212.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Stahl, R. (2010). *Militainment, Inc: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. Routledge., p. 96.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Stahl (2010), p. 101.
[133] Mirrlees (2016), p. 223.

recreated a version of the real War on Terror by reproducing its already widespread imagery. For example, the "Death from Above" level accurately reproduces the AC-130 Spectre gunship targeting sight, allowing the player to "play the videos [of the war] that had become so popular on network television news and YouTube", while they're accompanied by a transceiver voice constantly celebrating the slaughter [Fig. 6].[134]



Fig. 6 Screenshot from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007). Courtesy of Peel, J. (2019, October 11). *Modern Warfare's Death From Above mission is still the model for quiet unease in Call of Duty*. Gamesradar. https://www.gamesradar.com/modern-warfares-death-from-above-mission-is-still-the-model-for-quiet-unease-in-call-of-duty/ (last accessed February 12, 2025).

Building on the genre's DoD-funded roots, these games commodify war for economic return, ultimately supporting US militarism with both story and gameplay. Lenoir and Caldwell argue that the frantic, "epic" gameplay of a *Call of Duty* game produces "sanitized war experiences to be consumed in an interactive fashion" which turn "audiences as depoliticized subjects – 'citizen soldiers' […] by making the conduct of war seem cool and fun".[135]

To this point, it is now worth briefly introducing Eugeni's concept of "epos" as he presented it in *La condizione postmediale*, as it will be of use in the following chapters. It is commonly understood that the "epic", as a literary genre, belongs to the past, as it was, in modern times, replaced by the novel: while the epic is based on a shared sense of community, and it aims to offer wisdom, the novel

[134] Stahl (2010), p. 103.
[135] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 21.

is a medium of solitude; the writer writes alone, the reader writes alone, and it offers no answers but only individual experiences, different perspectives on life. However, Eugeni argues that the epic is not actually over, as contemporary narrations (which include but are not limited to novels) actually do take the form of the epic. First, because of the presence of heroic or super-heroic characters, ans second because they branch out as *transmedia storytelling*, thus reaching the scale and aim of the epics of old. Not that they act identically: the contemporary epic is still extremely fragmented, polyphonic, almost eternally unfinished. Still, it is epic, a collection of "great transversal tales" traversing the postmedial condition and "giving a common sense to the proliferation of practices and dispositifs".[136] Eugeni's essay then focuses on three great "epos" which traverse our contemporaneity, and we will later focus on his "epos of subjectivity" in chapters 3 and 4. I mention it here to argue that war is built into a shared militainment epic exactly in this way: its tale is fragmented through different media, authors and franchises, but it does still share the same overall ideology. Namely, that it is an epic tale of heroes - tragic at times, but still epic. The hegemony of militainment partially transfers the elements of classic myth to contemporary conflicts, operating a symbolic shift which, coincidentally, guarantees to the military-entertainment-industrial-complex a great source of revenue.

These games are not always completely celebratory, at least not at first glance. The characters of *Call of Duty*'s campaigns might occasionally lament the hardship of war, or the sadness of sacrifice, but the *procedural rhetoric* of the gameplay presents its battles as nothing but a rollercoaster ride which turns soldiers into gun-toting superheroes. In *Modern Warfare*, for instance, the first mission sees the player assaulting an enemy base after bombarding it with white phosphorus (which makes for a spectacular explosion). The player-character does stop for a second to remark how difficult it is to see people burning alive, but the regret lasts just for a second – the fun part starts immediately after, and everything is forgotten [Fig. 7].

[136] Eugeni, R. (2015). *La condizione postmediale: Media, linguaggi e narrazioni*. Editrice La scuola., pp. 36-41.



Fig. 7 Own screenshots from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019).

Lenoir and Caldwell also argue that the popularity of big franchise games like *Modern Warfare* (the world's bestselling video game of that year) makes them even more influential for the public's perception of war-as-spectacle than military simulators-turned-games like *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), which saw a comparatively limited success.[137]

This effectively propaganda extends from the gameplay to the plot: all the reported games widely justify American interventionism by portraying the *act* of war as a cool and effective way to eliminate one's enemies. However, the players don't fight only in Iraq or Afghanistan. A great number post-9/11 games center around black operations, turning extrajudicial killing and war crimes into an epic deed performed by heroes. That is the case for *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* (2002), which follows a

[137] Stahl (2010), p. 101; Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), pp. 16-47.

Navy SEALs officer covert anti-terrorism missions around the globe, *Just Cause* (2006), where the players try to overthrow the socialist dictator of a fictional Cuba stand-in, and, most egregiously, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010).[138] Set during the Cold War, it follows a CIA operative attempting to stop fictional Soviet Union terrorist plans – although it starts with a straight-forward attempt to storm Cuba and assassinate Fidel Castro essentially unrelated to the main plot. The player is even given the satisfaction to assassinate the leader while he's cowardly using a lover as a human shield (although it is later revealed to have been just a Castro-lookalike, placed in his rooms by the scheming communist).[139] Both *Splinter Cell* (2002) and *Just Cause* (2006) were big hits, funding long-lived series, but they still didn't reach the success of *Black Ops.* In fact, the game was so popular that it brought the Cuban government to issue a sardonic statement about the Castro mission: "what the United States government did not achieve in more than fifty years, it now tries to do virtually".[140] These games justify the practices and military politics of the RMA and the War on Terror, including the black operations which previously began during the Cold War.

They generally center around covert ops around the whole globe, justified by the necessity to stop some terrorist plot, like in *Splinter Cell* (2002). But some exhibit a peculiar fascination towards war crimes. That is the case of the whole *Call of Duty* franchise. As Jacob Geller has reported, there are at least 46 torture scenes spread throughout the series' 22 titles. The only two that don't feature torture in their campaigns are the first one, *Call of Duty* (2003), and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4* (2018), which does not have a campaign. Geller has found that, although "good guys" and "bad guys" commit torture equally, only the good guys are effective at it. Moreover, the character being tortured is always in possession of a desired piece of information (with only one exception). The series thus builds its own common sense understanding of torture, *always* justified and effective. Exactly what it isn't, especially what it wasn't during its widespread use by the CIA.[141] The overall moral stance of the games is well summarized by Captain Price, a recurring character of the series, in a trailer for *Modern Warfare* (2019): "we get dirty, and the world stays clean".[142] As Jeremy Peel has put it in an article for Rock, Paper Shotgun: "No sooner has [Captain Price] arrived than he's presented with the COD campaign take on the trolley problem: is it right to hurl an innocent man strapped with explosives

[138] Mirrlees (2016), p. 224.
[139] Treyarch (2010). *Call of Duty: Black Ops* [Video game]. Activision.
[140] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 235.
[141] Jacob Geller (2024). *Analyzing Every Torture Scene in Call of Duty—All 46 of Them* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPiL3-CYzWk (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[142] Call of Duty (2019). *Official Reveal Trailer | Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bH1lHCirCGI (last accessed November 4, 2024).

from a balcony, if doing so will save the lives of several others? Too late, thinking time over - Price has already done it".[143]

Meanwhile, the Department of Defense kept working on official collaborations. In 2000, Rival Interactive was commissioned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to create *Joint Force Employment* (2000), "a turn based strategy game to simulate how officers might react to a terrorist crisis".[144] A year later, it was divided in two parts and released to the public as *Real War* (2001) and *Real War: Rogue State* (2002). Its distributor even tried to increase sales after 9/11, doing free giveaways of the game with "cell phone ringtones that bleeped 'America the Beautiful'".[145] The plot fit that narrative perfectly, as the player had to battle a fictional terrorist group armed with weapons of mass destruction, but it ultimately flopped, bombarded by horrible reviews.[146] However, another great project was in the making.

In the late 90s, the US Army had a recruitment problem. With no perceived threats to national security and a low unemployment rate, its ranks diminished. The DoD's standing with youth culture was especially fraught due to increased skepticism towards American interventionism. So, it increased signing bonuses, college funds, and, most importantly, invested in marketing. Its newly founded Marketing Strategy Office (MSO) contracted the prestigious advertising agency Leo Burnett to re-brand the Army towards young people. The "Army of One" multimedia advertising campaign was the result.[147] With a new Army logo, the campaign "took notes from the countercultural industry, which had long ago commodified images of dissent, by depicting the army as the site of cool and hip individualism and war as a source of exciting and self-actualizing experiences". [148] It brought the new Army brand to "shopping malls, high schools, and NASCAR racetrack" via recruiters, and to TV and movie theaters via advertisements. But the crown jewel of the campaign was *America's Army* (2002). The concept originated with Colon Casey Wardynski, a West Point economics professor, who thought that "A well-executed game would put the Army within the immediate decision-making environment of young American".[149] The DoD invested $32.8 million for its production, contracting "video game corporations like Epic Games, THX Division, Dolby Laboratories, Lucasfilm Skywalker Sound, HomeLAN, and GameSpy" to develop the game at MOVES. It was released for free in 2002 and re-

[143] Contributor, J. P., & Peel, J. (2019, November 27). Who does Modern Warfare's Captain Price really "get dirty" for? *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*. From https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/who-does-modern-warfares-captain-price-really-get-dirty-for (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[144] Halter, E. (2006). *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games*. Thunder's Mouth Press., p. 87.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 212-215.
[148] Ibid, p. 213.
[149] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 213; Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 74.

launched a year later with a bombastic presentation at the E3 conference, which included Special Forces rappelling down to the Los Angeles Convention Center from Black Hawk helicopters.[150] The web platform used to play the game was designed to double as a recruitment gateway, showing ads and gathering personal information which could be used to directly send recruitment emails to promising players. The DoD even organized tournaments and LAN parties at local community centers. The gameplay was also fine-tuned to turn players into good virtual soldiers, emphasizing realism with a tightly regulated experience: "the goal was a game a platoon sergeant could play without wincing".[151] It had a lengthy tutorial teaching basic fighting tactics, correct weapons used and Rules of Engagement (ROE). After the tutorial, the players could enjoy fighting as a squad in multiplayer (the only available mode), advancing through the ranks not by stacking kills but by earning points through an "honor system". These points were awarded by following the ROE, like by helping your teammates when downed and avoiding friendly fire (which was always active).[152] This system de-emphasized killing in favor of team collaboration, something helped by having every squad being represented as "good guys": the two teams which faced each other online were not divided into soldiers and terrorist (like in the *Counter Strike* series), but instead both played the same role thanks to a double flipped perspective. Each player appeared from their own point of view as a US soldier, while the adversary saw them as generic "Opposing Forces".[153] The project was extremely successful: in 2012, it had been downloaded more than 42.6 million times. However, the military doesn't seem to release video game recruitment data.[154]

A similar strategy marketing strategy was employed with *SOCOM: US Navy SEALs* (2002), developed by Zipper Interactive. Its production was much simpler than *America's Army* (2002): It received consultations from two US Navy SEALs and access to a SEAL base in exchange for embedded recruitment ads in the game menu and manual. While this kind of collaboration isn't unique, as it resembles many movie productions, the way it was obtained shows how much the DoD and the game industry are intertwined: Zipper Interactive's CEO already had contacts in the SEALs, and its vice-president had worked for US defense contractors and as a programmer for SIMNET.[155]

These collaborations went smoothly. However, eight years later, the backlash to the release *Medal of Honor* (2010), showed what can happen if a developer doesn't follow the recommendations of the

[150] Halter (2006), p. 7.
[151] Lenoir and Caldwell (2018), p. 76.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Halter (2006), p. 9.
[154] Schwartzburg, R. (2024, February 14). The US military is embedded in the gaming world. Its target: Teen recruits. *The Guardian*. From https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/us-military-recruiting-video-games-targeting-teenagers (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[155] Mirrlees (2016), p. 215.

DoD. The single player campaign was the result of a collaboration between Electronic Arts and Tier 1 operatives. This was probably helped by EA's location (close to the ICT) and a previous collaboration with the Air Force for *Medal of Honor: Airborne* (2007).[156] The game, set in Afghanistan, is mostly focused on reproducing Operation Anaconda, a two-week, US-led international effort to kill Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters. A very popular moment in the war, it had already been exploited by media companies, spawning two books and a documentary.[157] However, the multiplayer mode was developed by EA alone, who decided to let players play as the Taliban. This fact alone made the DoD reconsider its support, claiming that the feature was "tasteless and unpatriotic".[158] It banned the game on military bases and launched an extensive flak campaign (supported by the UK's defense secretary and Canada's defense minister) which resulted in EA eventually replacing the Taliban with generic "opposition forces" and issuing a public apology.[159]

In this section we have presented some notable examples of DoD collaborations with the game industry. Retracing their history and practices was made possible thanks to the works of Der Derian, Stahl, Mirrlees, and Lenoir and Caldwell, who published the latest work on the matter.[160] However, gauging the *extent* of the Department's influence on this industry is another matter entirely. As it was shown, the institutional relationships between the military and the game industry are much more complex compared to those between the military and cinema. Moreover, there simply exists no collaboration list like what was published for films in *National Security Cinema*. A comparable amount of data is out there, but it is hidden in those thousands of pages-long weekly reports from the various ELOs. While a comprehensive evaluation of those sources once again exceeds the scope of this research, it is evident that collaborations continue between the DoD and major game studios of the US and beyond. The Army reports mention assistance or coordination with Electronic Arts, Namco Bandai, Redstorm, and Activision/Blizzard; the Air Force reports mention Electronic Arts and Bungie Studios (who apparently organize video game competitions in military camps); the Marine Corps mention id Software, Activision and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 4* (2007), and a "Operation FlashPoint 2", which probably refers to *Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising* (2009), developed by Codemasters.[161] This uncomplete list does not even mention the projects which do not pass through the ELOs, like those developed by the ICT and MOVES. A number of recent titles comprised in this list will be thoroughly analyzed in chapter 3. To look at the whole picture, however,

[156] Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office. (n.d.). *Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office Weekly Activities Reports, Oct-2005 – July-2006*. 2008.
[157] Mirrlees, T. (2014). *Medal of Honor: Operation Anaconda: Playing the War in Afghanistan*.
[158] Mirrlees (2016), p. 226.
[159] Mirrlees (2014), p. 85; Mirrlees (2016), pp. 226-228.
[160] Der Derian (2009); Stahl (2010); Lenoir and Caldwell (2018).
[161] OCPA-West (2015); US Marine Corps (n.d.); USMC Television and Motion Picture Liaison Office (2015).

we must first take into consideration the role of other agencies and firms external to Hollywood and the DoD.

2.1.6 Other actors: the CIA, the FBI and cultural intermediaries

A review of the influence of the US government in entertainment media wouldn't be complete without mentioning the CIA and FBI. The influence of these agencies is mentioned in this separate section as they only partially operate in the production of militainment, However, some background on their operations is needed, as they collaborated in films which will be analyzed in chapter 3. According to Alford and Seckler's list, the FBI's support is given almost only to projects dealing with national investigations, like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). It doesn't appear to be a major player in Hollywood anymore, but it was very active only in the past, especially under Hoover's lead. It censored unwanted references to the agency, recruited celebrities as informants (most famously Ronald Reagan, Cary Grant and Walt Disney), spied upon stars like Orson Welles and Charlie Chaplin (on whom they had a 2,000-page file), ruined careers, and closely controlled the production of the TV series like *The FBI* (1965-1974).[162]

On the other hand, the CIA's public influence is rising. It had already secretly encouraged some productions during the Cold War through the *Congress for Cultural Freedom*: most famously, Tom Shaw discovered that the cinematographic adaptation of George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* (1954) was a straight-up CIA creation meant to foster anti-communist sentiments.[163] However, in 1996 it appointed an official Hollywood liaison officer, and now runs an *Entertainment Industry Liaison Office* (EILO) modeled on the DoD's. It has been involved in a relatively low number of productions (only 29 known films since 1996, compared to the Department's 174), but some of those have been very successful, like *Argo* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Like the military, it recently expanded in the realms of the fantastical, as it was involved with Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* (2018).[164] Moreover, according to an internal document released under a FOIA request, it also participates in the production of video games. According to the short EILO list, it has helped Ubisoft with research

[162] Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 47-50.
[163] Shaw, T. (2007).
[164] Parramore, L. S. (2018, March 11). *Why does a white CIA agent play the hero to Killmonger's villain in 'Black Panther'?* From NBC News: https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/why-does-white-cia-agent-play-hero-killmonger-s-villain-ncna855401 (last accessed November 4, 2024).

for what most likely became *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands* (2017): the game's full name is not mentioned, but the series name, production timeline, and plot summary match.[165]

The newest entities working in the production of militainment are the so-called "military cultural intermediaries".[166] Together, they form a for-profit sub-sector of cultural intermediaries specialized in advising production companies on how to pitch to the DoD. Although they don't produce or distribute media themselves, they must be taken into consideration firstly because their existence is further proof of economic importance of DoD-Hollywood collaborations, and just how much this section of *civil society* profits from helping the state. Secondly, because they explicitly claim to be in business to use Hollywood to influence public perception. That is the case of Warriors, Inc., founded by former US Marine and Vietnam War veteran Capt. Dale Dye: its website claims that Capt. Dale "had a single mission in mind… to change how American civilians view the common grunt […] so he looked for the best medium available to reach the hearts and minds of the public, and chose the film and television industry to spread his message".[167] Another major firm, Musa, was founded by a former US Army captain (Brian Chung) and a former US Army lieutenant-colonel (Greg Bishop). They claim to operate according to "the same values that the military holds true: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Honor, Integrity".[168] Musa promotes itself as bridging "the gap between military and entertainment", not only helping production companies navigate "through the Department of Defense's military support approval process", but also enhancing production themselves "by achieving accurate and authentic portrayals of military personnel and equipment".[169] In this perspective, it has collaborated not only in the production of blockbusters like *G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra* (2009) and *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009) but also war games like *Battlefield 3* (2011) and the oft-mentioned *Medal of Honor* (2010).[170]

2.3 Conclusion

By analyzing the material conditions of the production of militainment we have now seen how the US state and the US culture industry support each other in military matters. Although we have treated movies and war games separately, we have only done so for ease of understanding: Hollywood and

[165] *ENTERTAINMENT LIAISON & MEDIA OUTREACH LIST OF MAJOR MEETINGS, SUBSTANTIVE INTERACTIONS, & SHOOTS | CIA FOIA (foia.cia.gov)*. (n.d.). From https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/15577008 (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[166] Mirrlees (2016), p. 184.
[167] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), p. 184.
[168] Musa (n.d.). From https://musaconsulting.com/about (last accessed November 4, 2024).
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

game studios operate under the same economic incentives, while the same ELOs oversee the production of both industries. The end result is the same: industry and state, *civil* and *political society* collaborating to maintain an advantageous cultural hegemony. On one side, the US empire enjoys the effects of propaganda, necessary to bolster its numbers and convince national and international audiences of the necessity of its military policy. On the other side, the culture industry benefits from production support from the DoD, and an increase in sales resulting from turning war into entertainment (which in turn arguably helps the empire, as these conflicts are made less "real"). In the following chapter, we will delve into the theoretical workings of militainment propaganda, how it works to change the public's perception of war and how some titles have tried to counteract it.

Then, in section 2.2, we have seen how cultural hegemony is supported both by the passive interference of private actors (ignoring the markets of the global south) and the active interference of states imposing embargoes on information and communication technologies. While these are the common challenges faced by the vast majority of the countries of the global south, the specific effects on local game cultures vary wildly between each region, as do the adaptation strategies of local studios, independent developers, and gamers. There are no publications which talk about these strategies in *all* the regions, but again the essays collected in *Video Games in the Global South* come to our help; they show, for example, how an African video game industry is emerging thanks to the investment of Cameroonian and Nigerian studios into mobile gaming and local culture, or how Brazilian players fix their misrepresentations through modding.[171] In chapter 4, we will briefly discuss these effects in relation to the case studies which will be presented.

[171] Bayeck, R. Y. (2019). The Emerging African Video Game Industry An Analysis of the Narratives of Games Developed in Cameroon and Nigeria; Messias, José & Amaral, Diego & Oliveira, Thaiane. (2019). Playing Beyond Precariousness: The Political Dimension of Brazilian Modding in Pro Evolution Soccer.

3. Hegemonical issues from cinema to video games

In chapter 1, we have given a first theoretical overview on the objectives of this research, introducing the matters of ideology in cinema and games, as well as of procedural rhetoric. In chapter 2, we illustrated the process of militainment production to show how the cinema and game industries work systemically to support the US-centered military's cultural hegemony. Now that we have established how and, largely, why militainment is produced, we need to delve into its modern specificities to understand how it supports this hegemony, and through which forms.

To this aim, I have created a corpus of around 40 "war movies" (here intended as "movies about war"). The movies have been chosen according to the following criteria. First, they have been released post-9/11, as to look at a time period wholly influenced by the War on Terror. Second, they all deal with terrorism or post-9/11 wars, either directly or through allegory. The allegorical exception has been added due to the quantity of movies with a fantastical subject which deal with these issues, most often produced with the help of the DoD. To limit the case number, they have also been chosen on the basis of popularity and available documentation on them (but not exclusively). While we will only directly mention some of them, the full list is available in the filmography section of this research.

Before delving into the analysis of the corpus, we will introduce the concept of *signification* in media studies, which will inform a framework of analysis for ideological communication. As Hall shows, *signification* is essential to understand how ideology operates in media beyond the simple repetition of dominant ideas.[172] Then, in part 3.2 and 3.3 we will see how mainstream war movies use, counterintuitively, both abstraction and the simulation of realism as a way to reinforce the view of war as a tragic but unavoidable (and aesthetically engaging) necessity. This section will be supported by a theoretical sub-section which will deal with the issue of "virtualization" of historical armed conflicts. In part 3.4, we will then see how those hegemonical significations are countered by movies through both narrative and form, both from inside and outside the general discourse (to varying degrees of success). Finally, we will consider how these findings can help discuss war games and what is otherwise needed to analyze a different medium characterized by pre-programmed interactivity.

[172] Hall. S. (1982). The rediscovery of 'ideology': Return of the repressed in media studies. In Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennet, James Curran, & Janet Woollacott (Eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (pp. 52–86). Routledge.

3.1 Signification

To analyze this filmographic corpus and see how war movies engage with cultural hegemony, we need to adopt a culturological framework in order to look at how the interpretation and signification processes which end up forming and reinforcing hegemonic ideology and general consensus. Stuart Hall's chapter *in Culture and Media*, "The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the repressed in media studies", gives us precisely that framework for the study of ideology in audiovisual media.[173] In the chapter, he describes how mainstream media is not a passive reflection of an already existing, democratically determined societal *consensus* (what Gramsci termed *common sense*) but rather an active agent in creating and reinforcing it. Hall (summarizing the work of many scholars of media studies) posits that it is shaped via the practice of *signification*. Facts, he argues, do not have an inherent meaning, but are instead *signified* (given meaning) by media (like news outlets) with the *power to signify* the fact. They might, for example, signify an industrial dispute as a "threat to the economic life of the country" rather than a fight for workers' rights.[174] In the same manner, they might construct the subjects to which the discourse applies: the dispute, would be then signified as a conflict between strikers who are harming the economy versus "we, the people", rather than between "workers" and "employers". We can find a similar example by looking at the Italian media's portrayal of the popular response to Luigi Mangione's arrest. As the alleged killer of UnitedHealthcare's CEO Brian Thompson, he faces (at the time of writing) 11 state and federal charges, including first-degree murder and terrorism.[175] However, due to the enormous issues tied to the US healthcare insurance industry many cheered for Thompson's death, a sentiment exacerbated by the ideological motive apparently behind the murder itself: the killer had written "deny "defend" and "depose" on the bullet casings used for the shooting, a reference to common tactics used by insurance companies to avoid paying claims.[176] On the one hand *il manifesto*, ("the communist newspaper") described the favorable response to the murder as the result of the collective trauma to "commercialized healthcare", "that which inflicts the most constant suffering and imposes the cruelest injustice on defenseless citizens".[177] On the other, the *Corriere della Sera* (moderate liberal daily) described the people who

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid., p. 65.

[175] Waller, D., Rozner, L., Bauman, A., & Zanger, J. (2024, December 23). *Luigi Mangione pleads not guilty to state murder, terrorism charges in UnitedHealthcare CEO assassination—CBS New York*. From https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/luigi-mangione-arraignment-state-charges/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[176] Waller, D., Rozner, L., Bauman, A., & Zanger, J. (2024, December 23). *Luigi Mangione pleads not guilty to state murder, terrorism charges in UnitedHealthcare CEO assassination—CBS New York*. From https://www.cbsnews.com/newyork/news/luigi-mangione-arraignment-state-charges/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[177] Celada, L. (2024, December 12). *Luigi Mangione, l'avatar anti-capitalista a processo*. il manifesto. From https://ilmanifesto.it/luigi-mangione-lavatar-anti-capitalista-a-processo (last accessed January 10, 2025). (my translation).

cheered for Brian Thompson's death as a "dark cult", and *il Giornale* (conservative daily) as "users with the Palestine flag, Italy haters, feminists who live in the past, etc.".[178]

Given these mechanisms, an ideology can then be described as "a system of semantic rules to generate messages", as per Veron's point.[179] Hall adds to this abstract definition by identifying in Gramsci's *common sense* a historical basis for the formation of this system of rules. The strongest ideological elements in the basis are called by Gramsci "historical traces": discourse practices which are constantly reproduced and exert a "powerful traditional force over the ways in which subsequent discourses […] can be developed".[180] For example, the bourgeoisie signification of the term "freedom" as equating to the liberty of the individual and of the free market. Mainstream media institutions end up reinforcing consent because they end up needing to sustain these historical traces to appear legitimate: just a different signification of a term such as "freedom" would make them look radical, as they would position them outside the dominant discourse. In addition to that, they also have a material need to appear legitimate to keep being supported by the state and political systems; Hall uses the BBC as an example, but, given the extent of the US state support to media conglomerates (as shown in chapter 2) I'd extend this necessity to the film industry as well. Media outlets then "become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the 'production of consent' — shaping the consensus while reflecting it — which orientates them within the field of force of the dominant social interests represented within the state".[181] Changing the terms of the discourse (like the signification of "freedom") is an exceedingly difficult task, as is demonstrated by the continuous relevance of Hall's following example (the book was published in 1982): a debate on immigration policy is most often going to be shaped as a problem "about numbers". A counterargument to immigration restriction which posits that "the numbers are not too high" does make the case for a different policy, but it still reproduces the dominant terms of discussion and the accepted signification of immigration as a constant potential threat.[182]

He also ascribes to visual media an intrinsic power of signification somewhat superior to that of the sole written word, as "the systems of visual recognition on which they depend are so widely

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[178] Stasi, L. (2024, December 28). *«Killing fucking CEOs»: Il culto oscuro di Luigi Mangione continua a crescere in rete (ma anche fuori)*. Corriere della Sera. From https://www.corriere.it/tecnologia/24_dicembre_28/killing-a-fucking-ceo-il-culto-oscuro-di-luigi-mangione-continua-a-crescere-in-rete-ma-anche-fuori-802fd192-783e-474a-bb4f-ebf904ea0xlk.shtml (last accessed January 10, 2025). (my translation); Galici, F. (2024, December 10). *"Un esempio da seguire". Luigi Mangione diventa un simbolo a rischio emulazione*. il Giornale. From https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronaca-internazionale/esempio-seguire-luigi-mangione-diventa-simbolo-rischio-2409880.html (last accessed January 10, 2025). (my translation).

[179] Quoted in Hall (1982), p. 67.

[180] Hall (1982), p. 80.

[181] Ibid., p. 83.

[182] Ibid., p. 77.

available in any culture that they appear to involve no intervention of coding, selection or arrangement".[183] Television inscribes itself as a "window on the world", and uses its almost universal visual language to produce a *naturalized* (not naturalistic) discourse, shrouding its construction of meaning through the most "skillful and elaborate procedures of coding".[184] I would argue that the same can be said for cinema, or war cinema at least, for two main reasons.

First, war movies which act inside the dominant discourse most often than not present themselves as "inspired by real events". Some, like *Good Kill* (2012) and *Argo* (2012) open with text cards describing historical facts.[185] Others, like *Tears of the Sun* (2003) and *The Kingdom* (2007) integrate them with real or recreated news footage, thus offering a view of themselves through a historical lens.[186] The haunting beginning of *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013) is the pinnacle example of this tendency, as it makes the spectator listen to real 911 calls of people trapped in the Twin Towers. Coincidentally, the reminder of the tragedy also serves to justify the torture sequence it's immediately followed by.[187]

Second, even the most explicitly unrealistic war films like *Top Gun* (1986) and *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) represent war with a positive signification enough to act as an effective recruitment tool. If the recruitment boom of the former was somewhat unexpected, the marketing paratexts of the latter show how much the Army is aware of these effects. As pointed out by Jonathan McIntosh (Pop Culture Detective on YouTube), its ad campaign melded advertisement for the movie, video gaming and recruitment together in an effort to try and convince audiences to join the Army. Merging fact and fiction, recruitment marketing invited spectators to join to become heroes just like those seen on the big screen blowing up mindless aliens.[188]

Given this premise, we will now delve into the specificities of post-9/11 war movies to illustrate precisely how war is signified in the contemporary general discourse. We will argue that it's presented both as a spectacle and as a tragic necessity, in a manner which, counterintuitively, both abstracts war and pretends to represent it as hyper-realistic (sometimes in the same film). We will then move on to discuss pictures which meaningfully challenge this dominant signification while remaining bound to mainstream production practices and the general discourse (arguments which are still "about numbers"). Finally, We will take into consideration those movies which actively try to change the

[183] Ibid., p. 72.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Niccol, A. (2014). *Good Kill* [Film]; Affleck, B. (2012). *Argo* [Film].
[186] Fuqua, A. (2003). *Tears of the Sun* [Film]; Berg, P. (2007). *The Kingdom* [Film].
[187] Bigelow, K. (2012). *Zero Dark Thirty* [Film].
[188] McIntosh, J. (2016, September 28). *Military Recruitment and Hollywood*. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5xfBtD6rLY&ab_channel=PopCultureDetective (last accessed January 10, 2025).

terms of discussion. Throughout the discussion we will also consider how their messaging might be tied to their production processes.

We will use the term "war" in a broader sense than its common definition, including in it also violent military/police operations outside of a strictly military conflict. The reason is twofold. First, the RMA melds the traditional concept of war and police operations. Second, the DoD, FBI and CIA all support favorable cinematic representations of their foreign incursions.

3.2 War as spectacle

Soon after 9/11, the documentary filmmaker Chuck Worman (most famous for *Precious Images* (1986) and the televised Academy Award montages) was commissioned to put together *The Spirit of America* (2001), a tribute composed of dozens of clips from the greatest Hollywood movies. The short intended to stir patriotism and remind the country of its values, spelled out in writing under the clips: "diversity", "defiance", "work", "family", "home", "heroism", "patriotism", "style", "character", "pride", "courage"…[189] War movie clips only make up part of it, but it's a textbook introduction into contemporary signification in cinema: the meaning of every word which title its section is perfectly reproduced according to the dominant American ideal. For example, it closes on an edited version of the iconic quote from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940): "Wherever there's a fight so hungry people can I eat, I'll be there. I'll be everywhere, wherever you can look".[190] It is composed only of the two first sentences switched around, excluding the next line, "wherever there's a cop beating up a guy, I'll be there", which would have clashed with the hyper-jingoistic tone[191]. Not that there aren't clashing inserts: the warmongering General Turgidson from *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) flashes on-screen as a representation of "courage"; Charlie Chaplin guzzled by gears in *Modern Times* (1936) is presented as a representation of "work"; *West Side Story*'s (1961) rendition of *America*, a piece which laments the still-ongoing mistreatment of Puerto Rican citizens, accompanies the celebration of "diversity".[192] Other clips do show an acknowledgment of internal American struggles, like racism: sequences from both *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) are included, but they still place racism in the past, as a won war. Overall, even images from films which would counter the intended message of the short are twisted by its montage and made into signifiers of American exceptionalism.

This 3-minute-long piece of spontaneously produced propaganda further demonstrates Hollywood's awareness of the persuasive power of the filmic image and its willingness to support

[189] Worman, C. (2001). *The Spirit of America* [Film].
[190] Ibid.
[191] Ford, J. (1940). *The Grapes of Wrath* [Film].
[192] *The Spirit of America* (2001).

the state even without direct incentives: there is no evidence that *The Spirit of America* (2001) was subsidized by any part of the government. As Hall puts it, "ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent".[193] Filmmakers like Worman who wished to help the country by supporting its self-evident values reinforced the dominant discourse just by working within it. However, as we established in chapter 2, war ideology in the US is also directly reproduced by the state. In fact, there was a clear increase of contact between state apparatuses and the movie industry in the months which followed 9/11: soon after the attacks, the DoD commissioned two dozen Hollywood screenwriters to come up with "future threat and attack scenarios" at the ICT. Moreover, the Bush administration organized two different meetings with Hollywood executives to discuss possible future projects focused on the war on terror.[194] On November 8, 2001, during the second meeting, a White House senior advisor gave them specific advice:

> "1) make films that communicated that the country's war on terrorism was not a war against Islam but rather terrorism, 2) rally US citizens around the flag and potentially aid military recruitment efforts, 3) emphasize that US troops and their families need support, 4) frame the 9/11 attacks as an attack against civilization that required a global response, 5) emphasize that children need to be reassured of their safety and security in the wake of the attacks, and 6) suggest that the global War on Terror is a good war against evil and not a war between friendly and civilized nation states. […] Furthermore, Rove suggested that Hollywood should avoid making films with simplistic one-dimensional messages."[195]

A few months later, MEDEACOM Productions released *Operation Enduring Freedom* (2002), a documentary in support of the War on Terror which was shown by the largest US theater chain "before all featured films on its 4,000 screens".[196]

The Spirit of America (2001) also exemplifies a common reliance on pure spectacle as a vehicle for signification. In the analyzed corpus, this aspect was especially evident in films released after 2007. The year saw the release of both *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Transformers* (2007), which received support, respectively, from the FBI and the DoD. Peter Berg, the director of *The Kingdom* (2007), wished to make a movie which showed a more nuanced take than usual on the war on terror, the cycle of violence, and the representation of Muslim countries.[197] However, this intention is manifested only in its first and last minutes. The film opens with excerpts from real news reports, as it tries to explain

[193] Hall (1982), p. 84.
[194] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 177-178.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid. p. 178.
[197] Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 88-91.

the current geopolitical situation with a timeline of the history of Saudi Arabia, including its privileged commercial relationship with the US through oil and to the Bin Laden family. It then closes with the villain, a fictional major Al Qaeda terrorist, telling his nephew to "kill them all" with his dying breath: will the FBI incursion only bring more violence?[198] However, the remaining sequences follow the standard action-thriller formula, complete with all the clichés: after a terrorist attack on an American housing compound in Riyad (inspired by real events), a group of FBI heroes has to fight both governmental bureaucracy (who wants to stop the investigation) and AK-47-armed, headscarf-wearing terrorists to enact justice and revenge in the name of a fellow agent who was killed in the attack. They are helped in their efforts by the seemingly only honest Saudi policeman in existence, who chose this career because he was inspired by The Hulk's cartoons. The action sequences are frequent, fast-paced, almost entirely shot with a shaky camera: barely legal foreign police operations are turned into a thrill ride. It also plays into a fantasy of revenge, as the real-world attacks were never followed by similar operations.

This kind of misrepresentation of real events is common in these DoD-sponsored pictures, even those which a higher pretense of realism like *Sabing Jessica Lynch* (2003) and *Argo* (2012). The former depicts the rescue of Private Jessica Lynch: during an ambush in Iraq, she was knocked unconscious in a car clash and then brought to a civilian hospital where she was treated and retrieved by Marines (who encountered no resistance) less than a week later. The movie, however, presents the facts as "the story of a little girl Rambo from the hills who went down fighting" who was saved with a courageous incursion.[199] Lynch herself couldn't bear to watch the whole movie due to the number of inaccuracies.[200] The risky secret operation depicted in *Argo* (2012) did at least take place. Although it encountered many less obstacles than those depicted, their addition for dramatic purposes is understandable. Where the CIA-supported movie veers towards propaganda is in its exclusion of the role of the role of the Canadian intelligence agency, and the help offered by the British and New Zealand embassies. While the extraction was the result of a cooperation between two agencies, it is here turned into another example of American exceptionalism.[201]

The spectacle of war is most often coupled with a hero fantasy. Both *The Kingdom* (2003) and *Argo* (2012), along with *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Bad Company* (2002), *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Green Zone* (2010) *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013) have protagonists which are

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[198] *The Kingdom* (2007).

[199] Cornwell, R. (2024, December 18). *Twisted propaganda tales of US heroes in Iraq*. NZ Herald. From https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/twisted-propaganda-tales-of-us-heroes-in-iraq/7V5IDJYW7IE6Q7BRS4MEMFQYWY/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[200] Ibid.

[201] Mirrlees (2016), pp. 191-192.

exceptionally superior to their enemies, either in combat prowess, strategical capabilities, or both. This is of course typical of action movies, as it is an essential aspect of the genre.[202] However, what is peculiar (in the analyzed corpus) is the addition of a great focus on the technological superiority granted to US soldiers, which then appears as an essential piece of the revenge on terrorism fantasy. This is exemplified by the frequent use of the infrared POV: the enemy, who never has access to the same technology, always finds himself powerless in front of the superior gaze of the US military [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8 Stills from (top to bottom, left to right): *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Green Zone* (2010), *Memorial Day* (2012), *Act of Valor* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013).

As it was mentioned with *The* Kingdom (2007), another common plot thread is a conflict between protagonists and their own government. Now, if seen in isolation, this inclusion might seem like a critique of governmental practices, but, counterintuitively, it very often takes place in state-supported media: in *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Tears of the Sun* (2003), good-hearted soldiers can't (or

[202] Delving into the features of the genre per se goes beyond the scope of this research, however for a review of these characteristics, please refer to Stahl, R. (2009). Why We "Support the Troops": Rhetorical Evolutions. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *12*(4), 533–570.

shouldn't) help suffering civilians due to restrictive RoE. CIA heroes in *Argo* (2012) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013) are repeatedly stopped by red tape. It is self-evident that if these "critiques" went against state agenda, the films would not have received support from the DoD, FBI or CIA. As governmental obstacles so often result in justified rule-breaking, this "criticism" appears then as a reinforcement on the necessity of interventionism. Political worries, RoE and international treaties always stop "good soldiers" from helping, but they know better. They should be allowed to act more on their own. These internal conflicts also serve to avoid a simplistic one-dimensional message. The only meaningful institutional critique in a DoD-supported movie was found in *Good Kill* (2012), although, crucially, it critiques the CIA (which does not operate under the Department of Defense). This case will be discussed in section 3.3.

If *The Kingdom* (2007) and similar action movies show some restraint and consideration for the tragedy of war, that is not the case for fantasy or sci-fi. The presence of a literally alien enemy allows filmmakers to portray the military in action with all its might with no real consequences, while the DoD can still enjoy a positive representation and recruitment opportunities. It is not a surprise, then, that it moved to help the production the biggest fantastical franchises like *Transformers* (2007-) and a substantial part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These are in addition to big-budget standalone projects like *Battleship* (2012), *World War Z* (2013), *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022).[203]

The last example does not actually contain fantastical elements, although the enemy is abstracted to the point of becoming functionally alien, a peculiarity helped by the unique romanticism of aerial combat. In this sequel, a group of young elite pilots led by Pete "Maverick" Mitchell (Tom Cruise) is tasked with an almost impossible mission: to fly into a canyon just 30 meters off the ground, climb into a hidden valley, fire two impossible shot in a row to destroy a uranium enrichment facility, and finally impossibly escape. It is never even mentioned which state is enriching uranium. The enemy is thus completely anonymous, stateless and faceless: all the enemy pilots wear black helmets with black visors more reminiscent of *Star Wars* (1977)'s Tie Pilots than their American counterparts [Fig. 9]. In fact, the core of the mission, to destroy an enemy base by shooting down a tight vent/exhaust port, is also shared with *Star Wars* (1977), which in turn borrowed it from the WWII epic *633 Squadron* (1964).[204]

[203] Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 88-91.

[204] Cory Graff. (n.d.). *The Real Aerial Battles That Inspired Star Wars*. Smithsonian Magazine. From https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/air-battles-became-star-wars-1-180975832/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).



Fig. 9 Stills from (top to bottom) *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022), *Star Wars* (1977).

This kind of spectacular and romantic representation of war has already been criticized decades ago upon the release of *Star Wars* (1977) itself, when the memory of the Vietnam war (on which a good part of the film is based) was still fresh in the public eye. In 1978, Dan Rubey noted that "the film's combination of traditional models of individual combat with the technology of electronic warfare re-romanticizes war, creating a new set of heroic images appropriate to a technological age and the kind of electronic warfare the United States waged in Vietnam"[205]. A year earlier, Jim Hoagland of the Washington Post expressed the same sentiment: "Both in 'Star Wars' and in Vietnam, technology's equal potentials for violence and for fantasy were exploited to the maximum".[206] This is in reference to a double issue: the contemporaneous distancing of real war from its victims (something made possible through aerial bombing) and of its representations, both in cinema and news media, from reality.

3.2.1 The Gulf War Did not Take Place

In 1964, the documentarian Beryl Fox climbed onto a bomber to film the climax of *The Mills of the Gods: Viet Nam* (1965), produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation as part of their *Document* series.[207] The sequence shows the effects of bombers being so distant from their victim, as the pilot rejoices upon seeing the combined effects of bombs, guns and napalm: "We can see the

[205] Rubey, D. (1978). Star Wars: Not so long ago, not so far away. *Jump Cut*(18), pp. 9-14.

[206] Hoagland, J. (1977, December 11). The Politics Of "Star Wars." *Washington Post*. From https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/12/11/the-politics-of-star-wars/e5e845ea-e843-48cd-bf93-5cc38fe3b2b4/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

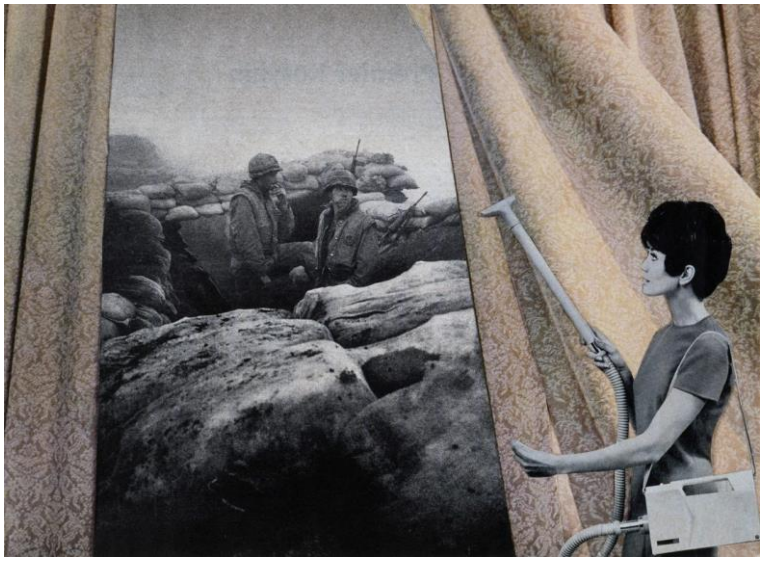
[207] *Canadian Film Encyclopedia—Beryl Fox*. (n.d.). From https://cfe.tiff.net/canadianfilmencyclopedia/content/bios/beryl-fox (last accessed January 10, 2025).

people running everywhere, it was fantastic!" "We really hosed them down, that's great fun! I really like to do that" [Fig. 10]. As per his own admission, he's never seen his effects up close, but he wishes he could.



Fig. 10 Still from *The Mills of the Gods: Viet Nam* (1965).

On the other side of the ocean, Martha Rosler's photomontages showed another kind of disconnect, that of affluent American households (who could, for the first time, experience a televised war), from the destruction abroad [Fig. 11].[208]



[208] MoMA. (n.d.). *Martha Rosler. Cleaning the Drapes from the series House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home. c. 1967-72 | MoMA*. The Museum of Modern Art. From https://www.moma.org/collection/works/150123 (last accessed January 10, 2025).

Fig. 11 Martha Rosler, *Cleaning the Drapes* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* c. 1967-72.

Then, in 1991, the first "live from the battlefront" war took place.[209] Baudrillard wrote it before, during and after it, and his essays were later published together as *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Of course, he does not claim that literally nothing happened in the Gulf, but rather that the media's Gulf War did not happen, that it was something completely different to what went on in the desert: "a new kind of event and a new kind of power which is at once both real and simulacral".[210]

First, because the absurd disparity of forces hardly made for an actual adversarial encounter, not only due to the technological disparity, but also due to the fact that it was waged, largely, at a distance: "We have seen what an ultra-modern process of electrocution is like, a process of paralysis or lobotomy of an experimental enemy away from the field of battle with no possibility of reaction. But this is not a war, any more than 10.000 tonnes of bombs per day is sufficient to make it a war."[211] In a manner even worse than Vietnam, the enemy was reduced to just "a computerised target", not only targeted from miles above but also virtualized.[212] Second, because the media presented a military-curated image of a "clean war", heavily controlling the images released to the press to the point of outright banning the portrayal of coffins of American soldiers.[213] Serge Daney criticized the French television in a similar manner for "merely reading out aloud the CNN soap opera or the briefings from SIRPA", and "intentionally fabricating a spectacle".[214]

So, for Baudrillard, "the power to create a crisis [merged] with the power to direct the movie about it", giving birth to a "a new kind of military apparatus which incorporates the power to control the production and circulation of images as well as the power to direct the actions of bodies and machines": what was later named the Revolution in Military Affairs, psyops included. The media event that was the Gulf War resulted in "hyperreality", a merging of the real and the virtual "subject to no principle of truth or reality", a perfect simulacrum.[215] War stripped of everything (passions, violence, images…) and then reclothed with the "artifices of electronics".

[209] Baudrillard, J., & Patton, P. (1995). *The Gulf war did not take place*. Indiana university press.
[210] Ibid., p. 6.
[211] Ibid., p. 61.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Cozens, C. (2004, April 23). Ban lifted on photos of dead soldiers' return. *The Guardian*. From https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/apr/23/Iraqandthemedia.pressandpublishing (last accessed January 10, 2025).
[214] Daney, S. (2006, February 3). Serge Daney in English: Montage Obligatory. *Serge Daney in English*. From https://sergedaney.blogspot.com/2006/02/montage-obligatory.html (last accessed January 10, 2025).
[215] Patton (1995), p. 11.

Both him and Daney wrote specifically about televised image, and of the impact that this had on the conflict to the extent of having all in all a different war. However, as we have seen in chapter 2.1.3, the technological and media-representations peculiarities of the Gulf War did not remain unique to it. Instead, they served as a precursor to the war on terror. In *Montage obligé - La guerre, le Golfe et le petit écran* (1991), Daney wrote about the differences between the *visual* vs the *image*. For him, the *visual* corresponds to what is televised, an "optic verification of a purely technical operation lacking nothing". The *image* refers instead to the cinematic image, which always lacks something but actually, because of this, can show "the other", while the *visual* is only able to show "one". The visual prevents us from seeing (as it needs to be decoded, decrypted…) while the *image* "always challenges us to edit with another with the other. Because in the image, as in democracy, there is something at stake, something incomplete, a first incision or gap".[216] Not that the *visual* showed everything about the war, as he also notes that the image of Baghdad beneath the bombs was always lacking.

Although we are considering only cinematic images, I'd argue that both Baudrillard and Daney's observations can be of use to this research. First and foremost because, as we have amply established, cinematic images of war are also controlled by the state to a great extent. In fact, it could be argued that, while the US (and its allies) have partially lost its control on the news media (with the rise of Al Jazeera after the second Iraq invasion and then after the start of the war on Gaza), its influence on the movie industry is still intact: as we will later see, the movies which challenge hegemonical signification exist almost exclusively outside of mainstream studios and audiences. Furthermore, regarding the *visual/image* split, I would posit that hegemony-supporting movies might not neatly fall in either category, given their aforementioned pretense of realism which often includes the use and mimic of the news *visual*. We will now see how this pretense is most successfully exploited, and then see the actual effectiveness of the *image* in those movies which try to meaningfully change the terms of the discourse in chapters 3.3 and 3.4.

3.3 War as hell

Hegemonical representations of war do not always signify it as a "clean" spectacle. More often than not it is characterized by death and suffering, although this doesn't exclude its spectacularization. Even *The Kingdom* (2007) stops for a moment to consider the tragedy of the death of adolescent radicalized into terrorists. This tendency is at full display in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Although it was produced before 9/11, it released in advance "to sate the assumed desire of the

[216] Daney (2006).

American viewer to see US troops do good abroad" and was later invoked by Dick Cheney himself to defend Bush's response.[217] Based on real events, it depicts the aftermath of a semi-failed US operation to apprehend a Somali general in Mogadishu during the Somali civil war. Two Black Hawk helicopters get shot down, and multiple squads end up trapped in a hostile part of the city, having to fight hordes of enemies all throughout the day and night while waiting for their rescuers. The initial operation is instead intended as a way to help the poor Somali civilians, whose suffering is the first thing seen on screen. However, it is to note that they're never portrayed as individuals: there are only two named Somali characters, who are also the only Somali speaking roles (but only because they speak English, as dialogue in Somali is never subtitled, at least not in the Netflix version). They're otherwise represented only as skeletal famine sufferers or violent swarms [Fig. 12].[218]



Fig. 12 Still from *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

If its representation of the enemy doesn't vary much from the examples analyzed in section 3.2, its signification of war is almost opposite, as it focuses on its tragedy. The movie even opens with a quote (misattributed to Plato) which works as a thesis statement: "only the dead have seen the end of war".[219] We see the proof of this sentiment as the excitement of young soldiers turns into suffering and grief when they find themselves outnumbered, trapped under fire, their comrades tragically dying (opposite to the Somali fighters whose is never given any weight). It is to note that the action isn't shot much differently from *The Kingdom* and similar action thrillers, with a lot of shaky cam footage, fast cuts, tense and spectacular moments. That is evident at the nighttime arrival of another Black

[217] Mirrlees (2016), p. 198; Gosztola, K. (2021, September 18). *Pentagon-Backed "Black Hawk Down" Championed Military Intervention After 9/11*. The Dissenter. From https://thedissenter.org/the-pentagon-backed-war-film-that-sold-americans-on-military-intervention-after-9-11/ (last accessed February 2, 2025).

[218] Scott, R. (2001). *Black Hawk Down* [Film].

[219] *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

Hawk, which mows down enemies by the dozens, and the elite Delta Force which hyper-efficiently infiltrates enemy lines: war might be hell, but it still looks great. As was previously established, RoE (they can't shoot without being shot at first) keep getting in the way, even prohibiting a helicopter crew to save a starving crowd which is being slaughtered without reason.[220] In *Tears of the Sun* (2003), the same obstacle prohibits Lieutenant A. K. Waters (Bruce Willis) and his squad to stop acts of genocide in Nigeria, although they ultimately decide to break RoE for the greater good. However, although Waters and Dr. Lena Kendricks (Monica Bellucci) are the absolute protagonists, the Nigerian characters they're escorting have much more agency than in *Black Hawk Down*, as their story ultimately ending on a note of solidarity rather than white saviorism.[221]

Spectacular action aside, *Black Hawk Down* reinforces its negative signification of war by pointing out that violence will only beget more violence, as the Somali warlord Firimbi plainly states: "In Somalia, killing is negotiation. Do you really think if you get General Aidid, we will simply put down our weapons and adopt American Democracy? That the killing will stop? We know this: without victory there can be no peace. There will always be killing, you see? This is how things are in our world.".[222] Given this premise, what is, then, the given justification for waging war? It's Hoot, the Delta Force leader, who tells the audience his reason to keep fighting: "it's about the man next to you", he says in one of the last sequences, while preparing to go out, again, into the field. That is enough to convince Eversmann (the young co-protagonist) to continue as well: talking to the coffin of a dead comrade, he confesses to having, unwillingly, become a hero. Even when suffering civilians are not considered, there's always a given reason to remain a soldier. However, while the importance of this bond between brother-in-arms is central throughout the genre, it's rarely the only stated reason for war.

In some cases, the US military fights to help the local population. That is the case of *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Battleship* (2012) and Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016), where the US military singlehandedly saves the world, and *Transformers* (2007), where it supports American heroes which singlehandedly save the world. However, outside of science fiction the given reason is more often the war on terror, always and specifically a threat to American lives. That's also the case in some sci-fi films like Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), which the director explicitly

[220] Ibid.
[221] *Tears of the Sun* (2003).
[222] *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

stated reflects the post-9/11 fear and confusion.[223] It's not by chance that multiple characters (running traumatized and covered in rubble) wonder if the attacks are caused (again) by "the terrorists".[224]

Occasionally, these terrorists are fictional, although they still operate internationally as to justify operations all over the globe: in *Bad Company* (2002), the "Black Hand" is trying to get their hands on a portable nuclear bomb which almost detonates in New York; in *Act of Valor* (2012), Russian and Chechen terrorists collaborate to sneak hyper-powered suicide vests in the US to outdo 9/11 (after they already killed the US Ambassador to the Philippines, his son, and dozens of children with an ice cream truck-bomb); in *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), a North Korea group attacks the White House. It is to note that *Olympus*, although ideologically aligned to the others, does not seem to have received production support from the DoD. This is possibly due to the same reasons that stopped Emmerich's *White House Down* (2013) (the second movie released in 2013 which features a terrorist attack on the White House) from receiving it: according to Hollywood liaison Phil Strub, showing such an important American symbol being blown up was just too much.[225]

Much more often the enemy of choice is Islamic terrorism, as is the case with *The Kingdom* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Argo* (2012), *Memorial Day* (2012), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013), the story of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden. In Kathryn Bigelow's epic, one CIA heroine, Maya (Jessica Chastain), works for years to chase a major Al Qaeda courier, constantly facing governmental obstacles (including a stop to "enhanced interrogation techniques") to her tireless investigation which finally leads to the operation that killed Bin Laden. The movie is peculiar in its extended portrayal of torture, the central subject of its gut-wrenching first third. It is shown slowly and crudely, focusing on the long uninterrupted suffering of the victims which even evokes Maya's empathy. The military operation is shot in a similar way, not shying away from its systematic killing of unarmed men and women. Both the torture and the assault, however, are shown as undeniably effective (and justified by the 911 calls which open the movie): it's torture that gives Maya the first essential clues. Thanks to a FOIA lawsuit "hundreds of pages of emails, memos and other records" related to its CIA-supported production were released to the public domain. They reveal that the Agency was "absolutely comfortable" with its portrayal".[226] As reported by Alford and Secker, the CIA requested numerous changes to the script, all of which went into effect. According to a memo, the changes were

[223] Breznican, A. (2008, May 18). *Spielberg's family values*. USA Today. From https://web.archive.org/web/20080518075722/http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2005-06-23-spielberg_x.htm (last accessed December 14, 2024).

[224] Spielberg, S. (2005). *War of the Worlds* [Film].

[225] Chris Bell. (2013, September 11). *White House Down: How Roland Emmerich was snubbed by the Pentagon*. The Telegraph. From https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10277220/White-House-Down-how-Roland-Emmerich-was-snubbed-by-the-Pentagon.html (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[226] Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 41-42.

"not concerned with accuracy so much as 'to help promote an appropriate portrayal of the Agency and the Bin Laden operation.'"[227] Curiously, after the release of the film the CIA acting director claimed that they didn't actually have any control the final product, and even that "enhanced interrogation techniques that were part of our former detention and interrogation program" were not key to finding Bin Laden.[228] The statement, together with the backed script, seems to act as a double PR message: the Agency rejects their past of torturing detainees; however, this past was effective, and it finally brought justice to the victims of 9/11. This interpretation is supported by another CIA-requested script change which made Maya "less involved in the torture of prisoners, even though her real-life counterpart Alfreda Frances Bikowsky was so involved in the CIA's program that she had been labelled the 'Queen of Torture.'".[229]

3.3.1 Criticism inside the general discourse

As we have seen, *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) represent the mainstream approach to the representations of war. They signify it as something tragic but ultimately necessary (in all its modern forms), as the US is constantly threatened by acts of terror. There are, however, widely distributed films, some even supported by the DoD, which do meaningfully critique military and police institutions or the act of war itself. Some, like Paul Greengrass' *Captain Phillips* (2013), offer a refreshing view of the enemy. The Somali pirates which kidnap the titular character (Tom Hanks) are largely portrayed as sympathetic, even equal to the crew of the boarded cargo ship: the first third of the movie alternates between the preparations of the two crews, equating them in their goals and motivation. Both sailors and pirates plainly state that they're on the sea just for money. The pirate group is much more violent, but that is because they have no choice: they were peaceful fishermen once, but big foreign ships took everything from their sea. Their captain, Abduwali Muse (Barkhad Abdi) clarifies their stance even further when asking for ransom: "No Al Qaeda here. Just business. We want money".[230] Their backstory even warms them to Captain Phillips, who starts having a peaceful rapport with them, although when the situation starts to degenerate, he quickly rebukes their stance, scolding Muse: "you're no fishermen".[231] Then the Navy, which supported the movie by loaning a whole destroyer and more, comes. They lure the pirate captain on their ship under the false premise of a negotiation and then eliminate all the others with three perfectly synchronized sniper shots.[232]

[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid., p. 42.
[229] Ibid.
[230] Greengrass, P. (2013). *Captain Phillips* [Film].
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.

Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) adds another layer to the signification of war as hell by representing it as a corruptive force with a dangerous allure. This is once again stated with an opening quote: "the rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug – Chris Hedges".[233] Its protagonist, Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), is so addicted to danger that he ends up putting his whole IED-disposal squad into danger. He is ultimately able to return home to his beautiful wife (Evangeline Lily) and new-born son, he quickly abandons them again to return to Iraq: by his own admission, he's only able to love war. According to the film's credits, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) did not receive support from the DoD, being supported instead by the Jordanian military (it credits a "Jordanian military liaison") and Northrop, a multinational aerospace and defense company.[234] While this representation of war as corrupting is utterly negative, it is to note that Sergeant James is the only character who suffers from this addition: the other two members of the squad only want to save American lives and come back home. Moreover, it is to note that having war-obsessed characters is by itself not a feature which can exclude a film from receiving support from the DoD. *War of the Worlds* (2005) has two characters who pointlessly wish to fight (although neither is a soldier), and both *Independence Day: Resurgence* (2016) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022) features pilots who long for action. Once again, what appears as a negative portrayal in a vacuum is clearly not considered negative enough to hurt the aims of the military-industrial complex. In any case, directing *The Hurt Locker* did not stop Bigelow from later receiving CIA support for her following project, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013).

Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) depicts violence in a similar fashion, although the subject is not strictly a military operation, but the Mossad's hunt for the organizers of the Munich massacre of 1972. The secret Israeli team, led by Avner Kaufman (Eric Bana), starts their operation for a sense of justice, but quickly fall into a cycle of revenge, paranoia and violence. The men they assassinate are immediately replaced by "worse" ones, and even deadlier attacks are carried on by Black September as a response.[235] Kaufman finally abandons the mission and Israel, choosing to live in Brooklyn with his wife and new-born daughter. He even questions the Mossad directly, asking his handler what the point of the whole operation (given its effects) was, and why, if the alleged objective was justice, were they assassinating people instead of arresting them, like they did with Eichmann. During a mission, he also had to chance to talk with a member of the PLO, realizing that no side will ever abandon their claims to the land, that violence will only ever bring more violence. He receives no meaningful response from the handler. While the movie does portray the Mossad's operation in the

[233] Bigelow, K. (2008). *The Hurt Locker* [Film].
[234] Ibid.
[235] Spielberg, S. (2005) *Munich* [Film].

traditional, spectacular manner of an action thriller, its script does condemn them.[236] As Kaufman is realizing the futility of his mission, it's also revealed that the inciting incident, the massacre of all the Munich hostages, was caused by the Israeli response: they faked a negotiation only lure the terrorists out of the Olympic village and attack them. It's this attack which resulted in all the deaths. A member of the Israeli cabinet even points out that Israel had already "killed more than 60 Arabs" in response to the massacre weeks before the start of the Mossad missions. If one were to look only at the movie's content, they could rightfully read it as a condemnation of Israel's response and overall politics. However, this interpretation is only made possible by ignoring the film's paratexts. In a 2006 interview with Roger Ebert, Spielberg described himself as "truly as pro-Israeli as you can possibly imagine", stating: "I agree with Golda Meir's response".[237] Later that year, the director also donated $1 million worth of aid to Israel during its invasion of Lebanon.[238] Describing the movie's effect on the general discourse regarding war/police is complicated, and also varies depending on if one considers it in a vacuum or with his paratexts or as part of Spielberg's oeuvre, which includes multiple collaborations with the DoD: *Empire Of The Sun* (1987), *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade* (1989), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *War of the Worlds* (2005), and *Bridge of Spies* (2015).[239]

To summarize, we could say that *Munich* (2005) does critique some actions of the Mossad, but that it does not challenge the foundational merit of their operations: like the previous examples, its criticism still uses the dominant terms of the argument. War is bad, but necessary. *Green Zone* (2010) and *Good Kill* (2014) operate on a similar vein, as they make some pointed criticism the CIA and the US government, while never challenging the rightfulness of the war on terror itself. Paul Greengrass' *Green Zone* (2010), an action thriller set during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, dramatizes the discovery that the invasion began under false pretenses. Roy Miller (Matt Damon) an idealistic Army Chief tasked with securing WMDs sites, slowly unravels a governmental conspiracy to hide the truth: an evil Special Intelligence official has fabricated evidence of the continued existence of WMDs in Iraq, and it's Miller's job to reveal it to the world. He's helped in his task by the CIA, who somehow seems to have no idea of the secret plot and support him at every turn. The movie not only criticizes the WMD scandal, but also the overall US role during the occupation of Iraq, implying instead that it's the Iraqi that should have been able to choose their country's future. According to Alford and Secker's list, *Green Zone* (2010) did not receive DoD support, although a "Military Liaison" credit (Colonel

[236] Bronstein, P. (2010) Man-made martyrs in the age of mechanical reproduction: disturbing manufactured martyrdom in *Paradise Now*. *Jump Cut* (52).

[237] Ebert, R. (2006, January 1). *"I knew I would lose friends over this film."* The Telegraph. From https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1506765/I-knew-I-would-lose-friends-over-this-film.html (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[238] Alford and Secker (2017), p. 143.

[239] Ibid., pp. 155-171.

Antonio Abello) does appear – perhaps the trace of a collaboration that fell through. Moreover, Greengrass is another frequent DoD collaborator, as he worked with the Department for *United 93* (2003) and *Captain Phillips* (2013). *Green Zone* (2010) might then be interpreted as part of the state's strategy towards supporting criticism over past mistakes. In fact, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) also mentions the CIA's failures in regards to Iraqi WMDs. Ultimately, this kind of criticism end up supporting the cultural hegemony, as these movies democratically discuss past mistakes while also ultimately portraying the US's institutions as a force for good. A bad government might have fabricated evidence, but the CIA is portrayed as rushing to unveil the truth. Moreover, the fight between Miller and the evil government representative once again reinforces the idea that soldiers just know better.

Compared to all the previous examples, *Good Kill* (2014) stands out as a serious critique of the US's use of UAVs (drones) for the war on terror. It follows Major Tommy Egan (Ethan Hawke) and Vera Suarez (Zoe Kravitz), two members of a drone piloting squad with a conscience, as they struggle with their increasingly controversial assignments. Major Egan is already having a bad time at the start of the movie, as a former F-16 pilot relegated to "flying at 1G".[240] His superior is also dealing with increasingly unexperienced recruits, who, by his admission, are mostly gamers recruited at malls to fly UAVs on a program "modeled on the Xbox".[241] He tries to communicate to them that, while their job might look like playing a video game, they are killing real people every day. Everything becomes worse when Egan's squad starts taking assignments directly from the CIA. The man giving them orders is never identified: he speaks to them through a phone and identifies himself only as "Langley". So, the squad switches from targeting only known terrorists to striking the homes of suspicious individuals, and then striking them again at the arrival of first responders, and then bombing the funeral of the victims. Suarez points out that what they're doing is both a war crime and something that will only create more terrorists, but she's ignored. What makes *Good Kill* (2014) unique is its fierce portrayal of the cruel futility of the CIA's "signature strikes" while still being a movie supported by the DoD.[242]

In relation to that, two things are of note. First, the CIA does not operate under the Department of Defense. Second, *Good Kill* (2014) does portray a use of UAVs which is presented as unequivocally good: Major Egan heroic, career-sacrificing final act consists in locking his squad mates out of the piloting building to be able to blow up a rapist in Iraq as he's approaching to his victim once again (they had spotted him numerous times during an ongoing surveillance operation, but could never act).

[240] *Good Kill* (2014).
[241] Ibid.
[242] Alford and Secker (2017), pp. 155-171.

Moreover, while his pre-CIA assignments had a negative effect on his mental health, they did still unequivocally target bad terrorists. Even though *Good Kill* (2014) rightfully critiques some UAV strategies, and the dehumanizing risk of striking at a distance, it doesn't go as far as condemning their overall use. Moreover, it paints fighter jets as wholly morally good by contrast, falling into the trend of aerial combat romanticism. It is also fully centered on the traumatizing effects of war on the soldiers which wage it: the pilots repeatedly kill children, but it's them who are framed as victims.

3.4 Changing the terms

3.4.1 Self-representation and traumatic realism

As we have just pointed out, there is a sore lack of meaningful representation in Western media of the actual victims of war, even in those films which are more critical of the US and Israeli policies. That is one of the driving forces behind Palestinian cinema. As Edward Said points out in the foreword of *Dreams of a Nation*,

> "on the one hand Palestinians stands against invisibility, which is the fate they have resisted since the beginning; and on the other hand, they stand against the stereotype in the media: the masked Arab, the *kufiyya*, the stone-throwing Palestinian – a visual identity associated with terrorism and violence".[243]

This struggle for self-representation in media also had to face Israel's theft and destruction of Palestinian archives all throughout the 20th century, as shown by *Looted and Hidden* (2017).[244] As much of the archives of the militant Palestine Film Unit were destroyed during Israel's siege of Beirut in 1982:,what remains of it has survived thanks to the effort of their members (who salvaged as much as they could during the siege) and the existence of copies safeguarded by a Japanese Palestine solidarity group.[245]

While this section will be focused on Palestine, Said's statement rings true for most of the Arab world. The work of the Syrian collective *abou naddara*, for example, also centers around what they call "the right of the image". That is the right for every individual to defend "their image in the name of property rights or the right to privacy", a right which does not extend to "the world's most vulnerable citizens whose indignity is exhibited on the screens of the world in the name of the freedom

[243] Dabashi, H. (2006). *Dreams of a nation*. Verso., p. 3.
[244] Sela, R. (2017). *Looted and Hidden – Palestinian Archives in Israel* [Film].
[245] Habashneh, K. (with Alkassim, S., & Fattaleh, N.). (2023). *Knights of Cinema: The Story of the Palestine Film Unit* (1st ed). Springer International Publishing AG.; Subversive Film. (n.d.). *Scenes of the Occupation from Gaza.* from Tokyo Reels: https://www.tokyoreels.com/catalogues/scenes-of-the-occupation-from-gaza (last accessed January 4, 2025).

of media".[246] Their shorts series *The Witness* (2017) exemplifies this ethic by portraying, via anonymous interviews, their own image of the Syrian civil war, those who fought it, and those who suffered because of it.[247] Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), a video installation which started as a series of non-academic lectures (a format which frees him from the constraints of the market), works on largely the same issues. In the video, Mroué examines low-resolution videos of the same war shot by Syrian protesters themselves, some of whom died in the protests because of their recordings. In this manner, he both continues the work of the protestors (highlighting the brutality of the now-fallen Assad regime) and remembers their often-anonymous sacrifice.[248]

Many films, both fiction and documentary, have been made on wars in Gaza: *Curfew* (1994), *Rainbow* (2004), *Ambulance* (2016), *Bank of Targets* (2021), just to name but a few. The diffusion of digital cameras and internet access has allowed, in the past decade, to document and spread the experience of Gazans with unprecedented ease. However, challenging the status quo is not as simple as pointing a camera to what is happening, as is shown by Mohamed Jabaly's *Ambulance* (2016). It has a very simple premise: the director made a deal with a Gazan hospital to allow him to document the work of an ambulance's crew during the 2014 Gaza War. On a surface level, the documentary is just that. Its approach to editing is quite traditional, but it does stand out among similar projects as it completely abandons the traditional prepared interviews, replacing it with unadulterated first-person footage: the whole movie is shot in first person, interviews are conducted only during the action. The spectator even shares the same confusion as the director when he's caught under a bombing: the camera, still running, captures the immediate darkness, screams, falling rubble. Later, these images are replayed again and again, as Jabaly replays the same memories, again bringing the spectator into his own first-person trauma. What makes *Ambulance* (2016) stand out is also its acknowledgement of the inherent invasiveness of the camera, how it is most often the driver of the violation of one's "right to the image". This issue is distilled into the evolving relationship between Jabaly and Abu Marzouq, the crew's leader and driver. At first, Marzouq sees the camera as a nuisance, completely ignoring the director's questions, and only speaking to him to tell him to stay out of their way. However, he is slowly persuaded of the usefulness of Jabaly's recording. First through the requests of other people who are actively seeking the camera's gaze to boost the reach of their call for justice and recognition, then through the recording of his own trauma. When the crew is caught in the bombed building, Marzouq is injured but manages to drive the ambulance himself back to the hospital

[246] abou naddara. (n.d.). *Abou naddara*. Vimeo. From https://vimeo.com/user6924378 (last accessed January 4, 2025).
[247] abou naddara (2017). *The Witness* [Series].
[248] Janevski, A., & Makki, ay. (2023, May 24). *Rabih Mroué's Pixelated Revolution*. The Museum of Modern Art. https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/905 (last accessed February 12, 2025).

and has to be kept from going back to work while his injuries get stitched. This shared brush with death brings the director and the driver (and the camera) much closer, and in the end it's he who calls Jabaly to come film then again, as "the camera had become his friend".[249] The importance of this memorial function is also made immediately apparent in the accidental recording the memory of martyrs: a journalist and an ambulance driver who Jabaly and the crew interviews only to find them dead just a couple of days later.

Ambulance (2016), along with the other cited documentaries on Gaza are all examples of what Dabashi calls "traumatic realism", the "mutation of that repressed anger into an aestheticized violence", a way to show a reality "too fictive to be fictionalized" which is typical of Palestinian cinema. Crucially, he points out that these works are not just passives receptacles of memory: by "keeping a sustained record of an endangered memory" they take active part in the struggle, as they act as a "J'accuse" by virtue of being an "alternative record to a silenced crime".[250]

Traumatic realism is also a characteristic of fiction, as shown by Hany Abu Assar, whose *Paradise Now* (2005) was the first film to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film (although not without difficulties).[251] A story of two aspiring suicide bombers, it reflects on what are the possibilities of resistance under occupation and what drives its most destructive forms. The movie ultimately favors non-violent resistance, but it also presents a uniquely empathetic views of those who choose to be suicide bombers. In the same year *Munich* (2005)'s dialogue between Kaufman and the PLO member had reduced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to an inevitability due to incompatible claims on the same land. *Paradise Now* (2005) also points out the futility of the cycle of violence, but, crucially, identifies in the constant Israeli humiliation of the people of Palestine the reason behind it all. Said, the character who decides to remain a bomber, does so to cleanse himself of the image of his father, who was reduced to being a collaborator and brought endless shame to his family. This war is not signified as sadly inevitable, but rather as a historical consequence of Israel's apartheid. Suicide attacks are also not reduced to just "terrorism" (a word which is never used in the script) or an act of fanaticism but is instead discussed as an understandable (while still condemnable) act of resistance and/or penance.

[249] Jabaly, M. (2016). *Ambulance* [Film].
[250] Dabashi (2006), pp. 11-12.
[251] Agassi, T. (2006, February 26). *Middle East tensions hang over Palestinian nominee for an Oscar / "Paradise Now" traces lives of two men who are suicide bombers*. SFGATE. From https://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/middle-east-tensions-hang-over-palestinian-2540418.php (last accessed January 10, 2025).

3.4.2 Counter-images

We have previously discussed movies like *Good Kill* (2014) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) which portray some negative aspects of war, although exclusively from the point of soldiers, recognizing some corruptive force/negative side/ tragedy of war but only focusing on them as victims of this "tragedy" (which is still always framed as necessary): the narration is US centric, the subjects are US men, the rest is a backdrop. There are, however, movies produced out of the mainstream which utilize the same point of view for opposite reasons and to opposite effects: by doing so, they manage to challenge the signification of war as something heroic, done by unwilling heroes, or always necessary for defense.

Such is the case of Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007). A fictionalization of the 2006 Mahmudiyah killings, it tells the story of a squad of U.S. Army soldier who rape an Iraqi girl and murder her with her family as misplaced revenge for the death of their Master Sergeant (the family had nothing to do with it). It is an indirect testimony which shows the untold stories of occupation never even referenced in traditional war movies. The blatant unchecked racism of soldiers who decorate their beds with Confederate flags combines with their given power over life and death to result in the most heinous crime. Systemic menaces and manipulation stop the soldiers who want to confess from doing so, further avoiding accountability. The movie stops when the investigations on the crime are still underway; in the real world, all the soldiers who committed the crime were prosecuted and jailed. This difference has been criticized, but *Redacted* (2007), aside from being fictionalized, is not just about a single unfortunate instance. As an anonymous woman points out in a faux-YouTube video after the news of the killings gets out: "this is the same monster immortalized in movies […] the Mai Lai massacre is too much even for liberal Hollywood".[252] *Redacted* (2007) mimics the form of a documentary to tell not of an isolated event in time but of the reality of war and occupation. Incidents like those portrayed are known to have been redacted for long, as the reality of war and occupation is redacted from the media landscape. To this point, it ends with a section titled "Collateral Damage", which shows real pictures of the victims of the Iraq war.

Its visual style is also of note, as, according to Eugeni, it is the best example of the use of "extra-medial material" to build an absolutely realistic style coherent with the postmedial era (being all filmed with handheld cameras, video surveillance and *helmet cam* footage). *Redacted* is, essentially, almost fully composed of *first-person shots*, a term which Eugeni borrows from video games. It is not to be confused with the "POV shot" ("soggettiva" in Italian): while that is usually characterized by a shot of a character looking oof-screen followed by their static POV, the *first-person shot* does

[252] De Palma, B. (2007). *Redacted* [Film].

not show the character, only following the moving gaze of the character/camera instead. It is a typical expression of the postmedial condition, born from the rapid diffusion of digital video and the spread of CCTV, helmet cams and similar devices (amongst other inputs): in this case, it is used as a means to achieve realism, as it shows the contemporary reality that all these devices *could* capture and share if the facts were not redacted by the army and the media.[253] In chapter 3.6, we will see how the same shot can instead be used to turn its apparently intrinsic realism to support hegemonical representations of war.

Jarhead (2005), the filmic adaptation of Anthony Swofford's memoir of the same name, also paints an unflattering picture of US soldiers, although it is again almost only centred on their experience and the actual futility of the US's display of forces during the Gulf War: almost a half million troops are amassed in Saudi Arabia, but Swofford's squad never sees any combat, as they spend endless days boring themselves to death in the desert. They have been recruited with the promise of cheap prostitutes (another recall to sexual violence), but they spend the vast majority of their deployment stranded in the middle of nowhere. The only Iraqis he encounters are ghosts: most are already dead (reduced to ashes along the Highway of Death), and the only live ones he sees through his sniper scope are blown to smithereens before he can fire his first shot. That is, however, not the only point of the film: while his squad does not enact violence, they still spend their whole deployment yearning for it (and, as the ending implies, they will continue looking for it their whole lives). Training has made them into killing machines, and so have movies: Swofford wrote that soldiers obsessively watch Vietnam war movies because they "are excited by them, because the magic brutality of the films celebrates the terrible and despicable beauty of their fighting skills. Fight, rape, pillage, burn. Filmic images of death and carnage are pornography for the military man.".[254] The movie goes one step further and implicates the audience itself in the fantasy, implying through its framing that the spectators are complicit in the desire for carnage, too [Fig. 13].

[253] Eugeni (2015)., pp. 59-60.
[254] Quoted in Mirrlees (2016), pp. 174-175.

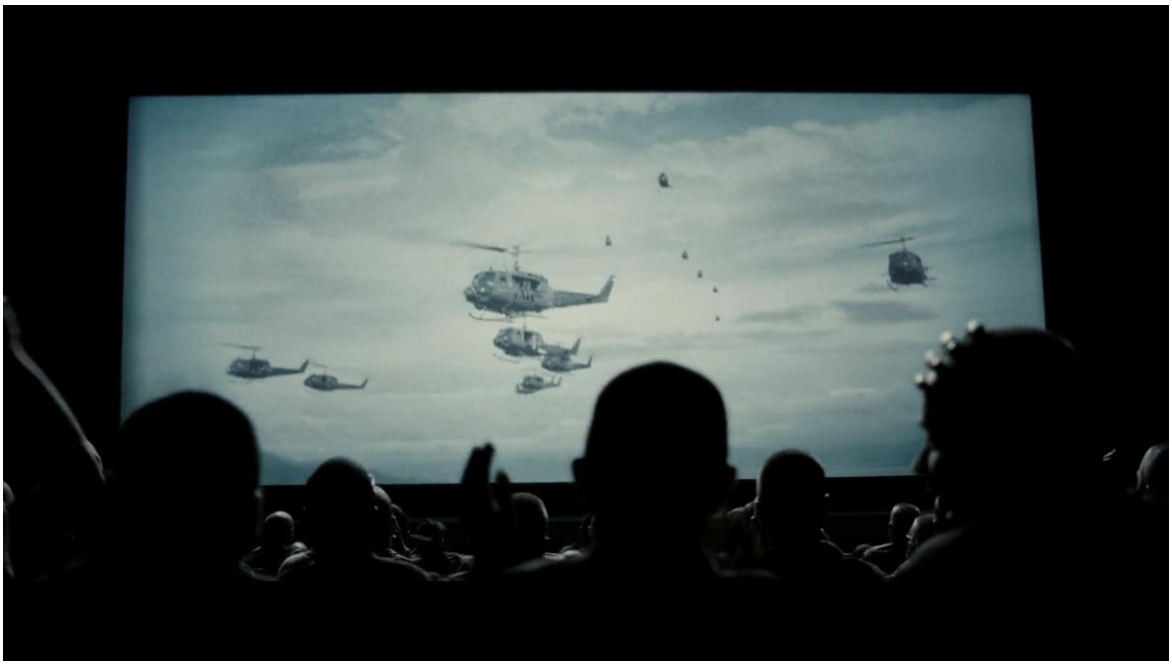


Fig. 13 Still from *Jarhead* (2005).

While *Jarhead* (2005) and *Redacted* (2007) zoom in on the issues tied to soldiers in service, Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) tells instead the broad story of the start of the war on terror. One of the most popular independent documentarians still in activity, Moore starts his film by explaining the controversies regarding Bush's first election (which could have possibly gone to Al Gore had the Supreme Court not stopped the Florida recount). He then moves on to illuminate his family's relationship with Saudi oil magnates, implying that the reasons behind the Iraq war were tied to his own economic interests (and to the interests of those who financed him); after all, Bush's family had received much more money from oil lobbyists that from the American people. Moore also blames the media from reinforcing the administration's fearmongering and complying to their requests, including their ban on filming the coffins of returning US soldiers. *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) ends with a consideration of the reasons for those soldiers to go to war, namely extreme poverty on one side (favoured by aggressive recruiters) and excitement for killing on the other. Some interviewed deployed soldiers are more than happy to talk about their song choices for tank combat, which include Drowning Pool's *Bodies* for the repetition of the lyric "let the bodies hit the floor".[255]

3.4.3 Harun Farocki

Another important strand in counter-narratives of war is the challenge to the mainstream use of images and technology which drive modern conflict (as Baudrillard and Daney did in writing): for

[255] Moore, M. (2004). *Farhenheit 9/11* [Film].

example, *Good Kill* (2014) gesticulated towards the risks of virtualizing war (although it stopped short of denouncing it), while *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2003) and *Jarhead* (2005) pointed out the propagandistic effects of news and cinema. The work of Harun Farocki also interrogates the dominant narratives of war, although it focuses less on narratives and more on the roles of images themselves, similarly to Daney. As Arantes and Nesteriuk write,

> "Farocki addresses a fundamental question: the fact that we live immersed in a world of images that have decisive influence over the way we see and approach reality. He discusses the nature of images in the twenty-first century, which unlike optical images, separate themselves from reality by creating their own "reality" with particular rules and characters".[256]

Farocki also brings to the surface the role that images themselves have in actively waging and shaping war, in addition to representing it. Didi-Huberman wrote that Farocki "spent his life obsessed with the same question: 'why, how, and in which way do the production of images participate in the destruction of human beings?'".[257]

How does this critique take form? Recalling Serge Daney's visual/image distinction, Christa Blüminger writes that Farocki "incorporates the *visual* in his works confronting it with the possibility of the *image*."[258] For example, in *Eye/Machine I-III* (2000-2003), he exposes the role that operational images ("images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation") have played in the Gulf War.[259] In the series, he shows the images that intelligent weapons' targeting systems use to strike their target: they are recreations of real landscapes which faithfully portray all military objectives, but never people. Bridges, in particular, "appear again and again as strategic targets, even if the civilian population was using them".[260] As he wrote in *Phantom Images*: "The operative war pictures from the Gulf War of 1991 that do not show any people are paradoxical. Despite the censorship, the pictures were more than propaganda attempting to silence the sum total of perhaps 200,000 dead. They were, perhaps above all, in the spirit of a utopia of war, a utopia that doesn't reckon with encountering people, accepting them only somewhat disdainfully as victim".[261] This is in reference to the media's use of military operational images, "produced by the military and controlled by the military" to support the myth of the clean war, made possible thanks to these so-called intelligent weapons. In the last sequence of the series, an advertisement by Texas Instruments

[256] Arantes, Priscila & Nesteriuk, Sergio (2016). Programing the Visible: Dialogues between Vilém Flusser and Harun Farocki. *Flusser Studies 21* (1)., p. 2.
[257] Quoted in Arantes and Nesteriuk (2016), p. 2.
[258] Blümlinger, C. (2004). Harun Farocki: Critical Strategies. In T. Elsaesser (Ed.), *Harun Farocki* (1st ed., pp. 315–322). Amsterdam University Press.
[259] Farocki, H. (2004). *Phantom Images. Public,* (29).
[260] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[261] Ibid., p. 21.

(which produces computer-guided bombs) inadvertently reveals the economic incentives behind the war. The company markets its missiles as cheaper than traditional bombing, which requires dozens of bombs to destroy one target, and even cheaper than precision-guided bombing, which still requires many missiles: "Paveway – one bomb – one target".[262] But, as Farocki writes, "a productive misreading of the message provides us with the interpretation that, with fewer bombs, there would be a drop in sales that would have to be compensated". Selling fewer bombs then requires selling more guidance systems which "can only be sold when there is a precise distinction between friend and foe. The economy, at least that of the weapons manufacturers, calls for war in the name of humanitarian goals.".[263] That is the great excuse behind the use of the weapons, and, as we established, a misdirection: drone strikes can strike a single house from thousands of miles away, but when they blow it up they cannot differentiate between soldier and civilian; nor do those who order them seem to care about collateral damage, as the death tolls show. Taken as a whole, *Eye/Machine* reveals how operative images dehumanize the act of war both for those who wage and those who report it, adding to this observation the economic push driving the conflict.

Farocki also interrogates video game images and their use by the military. In *Serious Games I-IV* (2010) he shows how the US uses video games both for training soldiers before the war and for treating their PTSD after they return at the ICT, and the biases behind the programs. The difference of the systems used for those purposes inadvertently show were the military's priorities lie. In the training software, the sun moves across the sky, and objects cast their shadow dynamically based on its position, while the PTSD software has no shadow programmed at all: "the system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one for training".[264] Farocki leaves to the viewer the task to think about the consequences of this virtualized training. Der Derian, on the other hand, has a more explicit opinion: "the ICT is leading the way into a brave new world that threatens to breach the last fire walls between reality and virtuality": the final consequence of the ever-increasing entanglement of entertainment media and the military. [265]

Harun Farocki is unique in his critique of operative images, of the "visual" which is, by necessity, absent from the films we have analyzed. However, his work is essential for our analysis in that the images he works with shape not only how war is waged but also how media represents, and thus signifies war: another reinforcement of the myth of the clean war. Furthermore, in chapter 4 we will

[262] Harun Farocki (2003). *Eye/Machine III* [Video installation].
[263] Farocki (2004), p. 22.
[264] Harun Farocki (2010). *Serious Games IV* [Video installation].
[265] Der Derian (2009), p. 167.

see how these images are used in video games with the same aim, as intelligent weapons so frequently uncritically appear in modern shooters as an essential tool of the war on terror.

3.5 Considerations on production

Given how much the cinema industry is still demonstrably dominated by US-favored representations of war, it is necessary to consider how the movies cited in this section were able to being produced and distributed, and the inherent limits tied to their production.

Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004) (the author's reflections on the portrayals war, violence and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and de Palma's *Redacted* (2007) were all works of already established auteurs. Now, an auteur movie already brings with it its own issues; while their position in the industry gives them more freedom than non-established filmmakers, the same established position risks liming their point of view. As Solanas and Getino already wrote in *Third Cinema* "The most daring attempts of those filmmakers who strove to conquer the fortress of official cinema ended, as Jean-Luc Godard eloquently put it, with the filmmakers themselves 'trapped inside the fortress'".[266] Moreover, productions inside the system, like that of *Redacted* (2007), are still limited, no matter how small the production company is or how famous the director: de Palma himself reported that Magnolia Production made him fictionalize the whole story (while he wanted to talk about the real event) and that the redaction of the Iraqi victim's faces during the last sequence was a post-production addition which happened without his consent. Mark Cuban, the owner of Magnolia Pictures, stated that it was because of respect, but de Palma replied that it was due to cowardice.[267] Cuban also stated in his blog: "Seperate [sic] the self promotion of Brian Depalma [sic] from the movie. The movie is fully pro Troops. The hero of the movie is a soldier who stands up for what is right in the face of adversity.".[268]

Moreover, *Jarhead* (2005)'s IP has apparently been used to spawn two unrelated sequels which appear to be standard action adventures: *Jarhead 2: Field of Fire* (2014) and *Jarhead 3: The Siege* (2016). *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) received widespread critical acclaim, but it could be argued that its success was helped by the somewhat easier to digest medium of animation (not that it diminishes its strength and evocative power). Palestinian cinema has found increasing success in the last decades, especially in film festivals, but its position is still extremely marginal in respect to American

[266] Solanas and Getino (1970), p. 34.

[267] Christine Kennedy. (2007, October 19). Director De Palma disturbed over Iraq film edit. *Reuters*. From https://www.reuters.com/article/world/middle-east/director-de-palma-disturbed-over-iraq-film-edit-idUSN18464892/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[268] Mark Cuban. (n.d.). *Me and Bill OReilly*. Blog Maverick. From https://blogmaverick.com/2007/09/04/me-and-bill-oreilly/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

blockbusters. Of course, it also still faces countless production obstacles both in Palestine and abroad. *Paradise Now* (2005) was partially filmed in Nablus and Tel Aviv, but its production, as its director, was based in the Netherlands. Even then, its Oscar nomination encountered obstacles due to the influence of Israeli diplomats. Works fully made in Palestine encounter of course many more obstacles, as by documented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese and Palestinian-British director Omar al-Qattan[269]. As Said says in *Paradise Now*: "there is no cinema in Nablus".[270] *Ambulance* (2016)'s format works brilliantly with its subject matter, but it was also dictated by the extreme difficulties of living and filming in Gaza.

These limitations, however, can also be a strength. As Hito Steyerl suggested,

> "the circulation of poor images creates a circuit, which fulfills the original ambitions of militant and (some) essayistic and experimental cinema—to create an alternative economy of images, an imperfect cinema existing inside as well as beyond and under commercial media streams. In the age of file-sharing, even marginalized content circulates again and reconnects dispersed worldwide audiences."[271]

The low resolution of Gaza documentaries, be it due to the filmmakers' limited equipment or their use of other amateur phone videos (as is the case with *Rainbow* and *Bank of Targets*) is also a strength. By losing the polish of mainstream media, the poor image "recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it", an aura which is only strengthened by frequent semi-illicit distribution of these documentaries.[272] The way I personally found *Redacted* (2007) is testimony to the strength of this type of distribution (as well as the film's own strength): an illegally uploaded copy to YouTube by an Iraqi citizen, edited with his own statement placed between the production logos and the title card [Fig. 14].

[269] Albanese, F., & Elia, C. (2023). *J'accuse.* Milano: Fuoriscena; al-Qattan, O. (2006). The Challenges of Palestinian Filmmaking (1990-2003). In H. Dabashi, *Dreams of a Nation* (pp. 110-130). London: Verso.

[270] Hany Abu-Assad (2005). *Paradise Now* [Film].

[271] Hito Steyerl. (2009, November). *In Defense of the Poor Image*. From https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).

[272] Ibid.



Fig. 14 *Redacted* (2007) YouTube upload addition referencing the real names of the soldiers involved in the killings.

The statement, partially repeated in the video description, reads:

> "An explanation for everyone who visits us from the House of Stories channel or other sites revealing the facts of the crimes that occurred and are still continuing against our people in Mesopotamia... 👇👇👇 I promise to make every effort to translate the content into Arabic as much as possible... The goal of my publishing this film was to reach the largest possible segment of the people of Western countries, to reveal the ugliness of the crimes of their military machines that claim to defend humanity, and to reveal the extent of the brutality of the brutal [sic] and despicable occupation led by the American-British killing machine of the brotherly land of Iraq... This channel is personal, non-profit, and currently contains nothing other than this film, which narrates a very simple part of the truth about the brutal crimes of the occupier. Therefore, subscribing to the channel is neither a requirement nor a goal, and all we hope for is to spread this content to reach as many people as possible."[273]

[273] *Redacted* (2007)'s YouTube upload.

3.6 Video games

With the analysis of this filmographic corpus, we have shown the contemporary characteristics of the significations of war both in the general discourse put forth by cinema and outside it. With this established audiovisual and narrative grammar, we can now move on to representations in video games, although some considerations have to be made.

Of course, games share with cinema much of its audiovisual language. In fact, the aesthetics of war action movies and war games have even started to meld. The *Call of Duty* series contains more and more cinematic cutscenes: pre-rendered game sequences where the player has little to no form of control, functionally (and sometimes formally) identical to film sequences. *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014) even features a performance by Kevin Spacey. Hideo Kojima's *Death Stranding* (2019), while not a war game, features multiple hours of cutscenes (with the longest one being 31 minutes) starring, among others, Norman Reedus, Mads Mikkelsen, Léa Seydoux, Margaret Qualey and Guillermo del Toro's likeness (his character is dubbed by another actor).[274] The film *Act of Valor* (2012) seems, in turn, based on a *Call of Duty* campaign. It portrays the mission of a squad of Navy SEALs (played by actual Navy SEALs), and was partially shot with cameras mounted on their helmets granting a game-looking first-person point of view [Fig. 15].



Fig. 15 Still from *Act of Valor* (2012).

This, of course, is also an example of a *first-person* shot. Recalling Eugeni, it is now worth mentioning that this form is not to be seen as a simple technical novelty. According to him, it instead embodies the "epos of subjectivation" of the postmedial era, allowing for a constitution of the subject through the experimentation of the experiences of others (be it through medial representation or not). In *La condizione postmediale*, he states that the "reproduction of the processes of self-constitution

[274] Kojima Productions (2019). *Death Stranding* [Video game]. Sony Interactive Entertainment, 505 Games.

through the cinema machine", typical of the medial era, has now been substituted by a "simulation-reactivation of this process, which can be indifferent medial or non-medial, direct or reproduced, biological or technological".[275] This "epos of subjectivation", for Eugeni, is a narrative in and of itself, one which presents lived personal experience as something which constitutes "me" as subject, while at the same time arguing that that same experience can be shared and experienced by someone else (through the *first-person shot*), constituting them as subject. In his interpretation, this narrative could be seen negatively as a way to hide the "logic of control" which permeates our contemporary society, characterized by constant surveillance both online and in public spaces. However, Eugeni ultimately sees it as something more neutral, which simply gives "a unified and wide-ranging meaning in narrative terms to a new experiential condition such as the postmedial condition".[276] While agreeing with his overall stance, I would still argue that, while media that reproduces the narrative of the epos of subjectivation dose not necessarily always hide the "logic of control", that epos *can* still be occasionally exploited for that reason. In other words, we could interpret *Act of Valor,* along with the vast majority of first-person shooters, as exploiting the *first person shot* to form constitute its spectators as soldier-subjects – not to literally turn them into fighters, but to make them internalize its ideology through subjectivation. Essentially utilizing the epos of subjectivation to sustain the epic of modern war shared by militainment.

The similarities with *Call of Duty* also come with its plot, as it essentially a loosely tied sequence of missions all in different countries: a stealth mission in Costa Rica, a reconnaissance mission in Somalia, a night mission and final grand assault in Mexico. Not that similar sequences of action set pieces are absent from the rest of the genre; however, its multiple similarities with *CoD* do stand out.

Still, as Bogost showed, the algorithmic peculiarities of the medium require additional levels of analysis, not limited to the first-person perspective (which is not utilized by all war games). In *Parallel I-IV* (2012-2014), for example, Farocki interrogates the unintended cosmogony of their worlds (due to its programmed borders), the quirks of NPCs (whose programming can turn into "twilight beings"), but also their expressive potential. Bound by no representational limits (as video game graphics quickly went from abstract symbolism to photorealism), Farocki wonders if "maybe the computer images will assume functions that were previously had by film – maybe it will liberate film" like photography liberated painting.[277] While this revolution still has to take place, *Parallel* still shows the depth of possible implications tied to a world both free and pre-programmed. It also serves as an example of how play a game critically: again Arantes and Nesteriuk have described Farocki's

[275] Eugeni (2015), p. 63.
[276] Eugeni (2015), pp.
[277] Voice-over of *Parallel I-IV* (2010).

work with games as characterized by breaking the "flow", that "state of extreme concentration" a player should find themselves in for full immersion.[278] This break lets the artist "appropriating, mediatizing, and subverting the logic of games, [placing] them in a kind of digital non-space, a palimpsest under which other texts are revealed; the invisible behind that which he called 'operative images'".[279]

Farocki's work is an outstanding example of the use of cinema to analyze video game images. Moreover, his way of playing by breaking the flow can also being applied to this research, although with some caveats. Breaking the programmed limits of a game's environment or physics is certainly an effective way to counter their hegemonical push, as it shows their artifices and breaks its programmed rhetoric, but it is more apt to his work as an artist-activist rather than a full research method: to ascertain the persuasive intent of a game it is also necessary to play as intended. However, *Parallel* and *Serious Games* still show us the potential of "breaking" in that it can reveal a game's assumptions. Recalling Garite, we could say that observing what can and can't be interacted with (and how) is a good way to show what kind of player the game wants to shape. The language of *Parallel* will also be an illustrative comparison by itself to those games which also purposefully suspend their own immersion. In addition to that, Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric*, introduced in chapter 1, will of course be essential to more clearly make explicit those gameplay-related assumptions: we will see, for instance, how, in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), the game's responses to the player shooting at non-combatants reveal its stance on acceptable civilian casualties. While harming a stationary civilian is punished by instant game-over, killing one while they're running during a frantic combat sequence bears no consequences. It follows that while cold-blooded murder is still seen as unacceptable, harming innocents in action is perfectly justifiable.

Neither Farocki nor Bogost, however, directly address the processes of ideology in the video game medium. While the mechanism of *signification* applies to the video game medium as well, more theoretical tools are necessary to reveal how it is carried on in games specifically. To this point, Cassar mentions Garite's argument (first introduced by Lev Manovich) that games "can be understood through an updated version of Althusser's (1971/19994) concept of interpellation, where players are asked to mistake somebody else's mind with their own"[280]. According to Cassar, "this perspective is very limited in scope".[281] As we'll see, Garite's arguments have some limits, but I will argue that his framework can still be of use, especially in the analysis of mainstream war games.

[278] Arantes and Nesteriuk (2016), p. 6.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Cassar (2013), p. 337.
[281] Ibid.

Garite is concerned with "the work of gaming—not merely the work of the player, but also the work that the video game performs in order to 'play' the player", as he argues that it deceives the player by giving them an illusion of choice while it actually shapes them through pre-determined outcomes and "integrated circuit of instructions and commands"[282]. He starts from Lev Manovich, who argued that, through games, "we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own" through pre-programmed interactivity, that is to say, through interpellation.[283] In 1970, Althusser developed his theory of interpellation, stating that "the main function of cultural texts […] is to construct people as "subjects" by "representing the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence".[284] The social structures of *civil society*, which he calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) shape individuals into social subjects by calling them (*interpellant*, in French), a process which "can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing : 'Hey, you there!'".[285] An individual hailed by this call will turn, understanding that the hailing is *really* addressed to him as a subject with the obligation to turn towards the figure of power. This interpellation thus reinforces the ideological identification of who is hailed. Ideology, according to Althusser, "has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects".[286] Ideological recognition happens every day with every ritual, even with those not directly related to ISAs: even by saying "Hello" and shaking a friend's hand when meeting him in the street we carry forward "a material practice of ideological recognition" as we recognize him as friend and subject.[287] As this example shows, individuals also constantly subject themselves willingly to ideology. Not that they could easily do otherwise: in his view, humans are inherently ideological animals. For Garite, "the individual who 'willingly' subjects herself to ideology in Althusser's model is not unlike the video game player who submits 'freely' to the commandments of the game".[288] The same commandments make players think they are "distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals", especially due to the "branching structure of game narratives", while all interactions are actually pre-programmed.[289]

This self-subjection of the player is also partially shared with the cinema spectator. First, as Benjamin and Manovich put it, cinema theaters already act like prisons, causing "institutionalized

[282] Garite, M. (2003). The ideology of interactivity (Or, Video Games and the Taylorisation of Leisure). Level Up Conference Proceedings, Utrecht: University of Utrecht. p. 2.
[283] Quoted in Garite (2003)., p. 5.
[284] Garite (2003), p. 5.
[285] Althusser, L., & Jameson, F. (2001). *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays* (B. R. Brewster, Trans.). Monthly Review Press. From https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm (last accessed January 10, 2025).
[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Garite (2003), p. 6.
[289] Ibid.

immobility", so "like cinema, the video game seemingly permits us to wander while it chains us to our seats".[290] Garite quotes Manovich in stating that interactive media simulates both "the codes of traditional cinematography" and "the perceptual properties of real life objects and environments" in what he terms "synthetic realism".[291] Games force players to shift between the roles of viewer and user, shift "between perceiving and acting, between following the story and participating in it": these transitions act as "suturing mechanism" which only engages players more.[292] Manovich is referring here to the concept of "suture" as described by Silverman, "the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic text confer subjectivity upon their viewers".[293] In particular, he argues that the shifts between playing and spectating serve to interpolate the player in the fiction like the shot/counter-shot structure does in cinema.[294]

This conception of cinema theaters as prisons brings to mind *Third Cinema* once again. In screening *La hora de los hornos* (1968), Solanas and Getino found that projections with "recorded music or poems, sculpture and paintings, posters, a program director who chaired the debate and presented the film, and the comrades who were speaking, a glass of wine, a few *mates*" made the film much more effective as a "detonator", a "pretext for dialogue, for the seeking and finding of wills", a militant act – an act which would be impossible in the context of a standard confined screening.[295] It remains to be seen which forms could this screenings take for video games, but the quoted passage does demonstrate once again the limitations of mainstream, unreflexive media consumption, and how film can push against it, even if by itself: *La hora de los hornos* (1968) sparked spontaneous debates even without them being organized. The final sequences of both *Redacted* (2007) and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) also purposefully break the immersion to similarly interrogate the spectator and spark discussions; although, based on the context of the screening, these discussions run the risk of being a soliloquy.

This being said, Garite's model is not without fault. First, Althusser's theory has, by itself, some limitations. As Hall put it, "Althusser, who transposed some of this kind of thinking into his general theory of ideology, tended to present the process as too uni-accentual, too functionally adapted to the reproduction of the dominant ideology", contrary to Gramsci which saw ideology (and language) as a site of struggle.[296] Moreover, Garite's overall concept of video games is limited. He argues from

[290] Ibid., p. 7.
[291] Ibid., p. 3.
[292] Ibid., p. 4.
[293] Silverman, K. (1984). *The Subject of Semiotics* (16. print.). Oxford Univ. Press., p. 195.
[294] Manovich, L. (2001). *The Language of New Media*. the MIT press., p. 208.
[295] Solanas & Getino (1970), pp. 54-55.
[296] Hall (1982), p, 74.

the position that all games (or at least all mainstream narrative games) pretend to have a free, branching narrative, while "the interactivity of video games often amounts to little more than choosing between 'A' and 'B': "choice is granted only at that moment when decisions have all been made".[297] Branching narratives are only utilized by a subset of games, most often RPGs (*Skyrim*, *Fallout 3, The Outer Worlds*…), although that is not always the case even inside the genre (*The Legend of Zelda* series always had one narrative). While freedom of choice has been used often as a selling point players are well aware of its illusion: Telltale Games' productions, which marketed themselves as having a choice-based gameplay, were famously the subject of endless discussions on whether in-game choices actually mattered or if it were just window dressing.[298] The narrative of *Bioshock* (2007), a definite best-seller which is also was responsible for the coinage of the term "ludonarrative dissonance", is all centered around the concept of the illusion of the player's free will. Moreover, games are often played in ways wholly unintended by their developers: speedruns, pacifist runs and modding are only some of the most popular alternative ways of interaction with games. In fact, Garite himself closes his argument by stating that the essay is also meant to "offer opportunities for perceiving and analyzing the plurality of means by which players challenge the imprisoning rationality of the code. Indeed, we might say that gaming technologies are only interactive to the extent that the player may resist".[299] In chapter 5, we will see how challenging the code is utilized by players and developers alike to counter assumptions and spectatorial passivity.

Mainstream war games, however, almost seem to utilize Garite's model as a rulebook. Referring to Crogan and Rokeby, he states that the mirror of interactivity is not only reflective but also *refracting*, for "what is returned is ourselves, transformed and processed".[300] The game plays the gamer by making him internalize its processes, which are then rendered invisible through repetition. As we have established, not all games render their processes invisible, but military simulators in particular are specifically used for training precisely to internalize their processes. And even shooters which are not simulators pride themselves on the same pretentions of realism. Moreover, as we have discussed in chapter 1, this internalization also happens in games with transparent processes: the *Civilization* series doesn't hide its workings and parameters, but it does still tacitly communicate an imperial view of history. I would argue that, while Garite might have applied his model too broadly, it is still relevant when considering the ideological workings of those games which do strive for tacit

[297] Garite (2003), p. 12.
[298] Andy Kelly. (2018, April 11). I'm over the fact that choices don't really matter in Telltale games. *PC Gamer*. From https://www.pcgamer.com/im-over-the-fact-that-choices-dont-really-matter-in-telltale-games/ (last accessed January 10, 2025).
[299] Garite (2003), p. 13.
[300] Garite (2003), p. 3.

internalization, which do utilize the language of cinematography to deepen engagement. In other words, those games which uncritically interpellate the player (like those films that do the same with their spectators). He shows the persuasive dangers of the medium inherent in its algorithmic structure (and history, given its ties to the military discussed in chapter 2), but also offers a blueprint for escape by challenging the code. I would also posit that this escape can be helped by the developer through breaking immersion and even through explicit interpellation of the player. The case studies presented in chapters 4 will serve as proof to this perspective.

4. Case studies

In this chapter, we will utilize the findings of our previous research to analyze a number of video games as case studies, demonstrating how war is signified in mainstream games not only through their narrative, but also through their gameplay. To this aim, I have played through a corpus of 10 games, selected to prioritize relative popularity and genre variety. While we will discuss only a restricted number of them, the full list will be available at the ludography section of this research.

With *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), we will see how hegemony is supported in a DoD-backed military shooter through interpellation and the internalization of its processes. This in-depth analysis will serve as a baseline for comparison with other games which attempt to challenge the militaristic ideology it represents. We will then look at *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and at three short, independent games (commonly identified as *serious games*) which criticize the war on terror and the usage of aerial bombing and drones.

After a section dedicated to follow the analysis of game representations of the Global South by the Global North proposed in chapter 2.2.1, we will move on to two games which instead depict war from the point of view of civilians: 11 bit studios' *This War of Mine* (2014) and the Palestinian *Liyla and the Shadows of War* (2014).

Finally, we will dedicate the last section to a preliminary look at *countergaming* in war games to see how the dominant ideology can be challenged not only through creation and modification, but also transgressive play. After the analysis of two examples of organized *countergaming*, we will look at the unexplored phenomenon of pacifist play in shooters.

4.1 Playing the war on terror: soldier POV

4.1.1 *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019

Infinity Ward's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), the 16th installment of the series and a soft reboot of the *Modern Warfare* sub-franchise, can first be analyzed just like a war movie. In many ways, it wishes to present itself as much. Its cutscenes are extremely well curated, played by actors recorded with motion capture, and presented with a cinematic 21:9 ratio.[301] The overall narrative perfectly falls in line with the most popular contemporary action war movies like *The Kingdom* (2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013), or *Act of Valor* (2012). It follows the adventures of British SAS

[301] NeoGamer - The Video Game Archive. (2019). *Behind the Scenes - Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019) [Making of]* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SJot0WUvmmc (last accessed February 7, 2025).

Captain John Price, SAS Sergeant Kyle "Gaz" Garrick, former Delta Force operator turned CIA SAC/SOG officer Alex Keller, and Urzikstan Liberation Force leader Farah Karim (basically led by Price) [Fig. 16] as they battle two enemies: the fictional terrorist organization Al Qatala (“the killers”) and the forces of Russian general Roman Barkov, both mainly operating in the fictional Middle-East country of Urzikstan.



Fig. 16 Own screenshot. Gaz, Farah, Price, Alex (from left to right).

Barkov essentially plays an exaggerated version of the role that the US has played in the real Middle East. He has been leading the brutal occupation of Urzikstan for decades under the excuse of fighting terrorism, often using chemical weapons on civilians. As the ultimate villain of the game, the final mission involves leading a combined grand assault against his chemical facility in Georgia (without Georgian forces). Moreover, it is his occupation that has led to the creation of Al-Qatala. The organization was founded to fight Barkov’s oppression, but it has expanded to international terrorism for unstated reasons. Although it is clearly modeled after Islamic extremist/fundamentalist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, its ideology is vague at best. Some of the post-death loading screen simply state,

> “AQ rejects religiosity and structure, favoring anarchy over institution”
>
> “Al-Qatala welcomes any and all warriors seeking to fight foreign power, oppression and resource theft”

"AQ rejects religiosity and structure, favoring anarchy over institution"[302]

Al Qatala serves two purposes in support to the game's interventionist ideology: first, it serves as an evil counterpart to the Urzikstan Liberation Forces led by Farah, who represents the good kind of resistance fighter (one who is friend with a SAS officer, welcomes American military operations in her homeland, and occasionally joins international black ops). Second, their attacks in the West justify an unlimited increase in militarism and controversial police operations. In fact, the game opens with a group of terrorists watching a AQ propaganda video before releasing a suicide bomber in Piccadilly Circus [Fig. 17].



Fig. 17. Own screenshot.

This plot thread is followed on in the game's second mission, "Piccadilly", where the player is introduced to Gaz, still a member of the counter-terrorism unit of the Metropolitan Police. His team if following the van a known terrorist cell (the one from the cut-scene), but due to restrictive RoE they cannot stop them before the attack. So, they find themselves fighting AQ with only "fucking sidearms" and without the sniper support they required, as it was refused in order to not upset the public. After the mission, Gaz extensively complains to Captain Price (who has heroically come to the rescue) about the fact that they had been stopped by higher ups from intervening beforehand even though they had "actionable intel". He wants more freedom during the action ("tell us when, tell us where, but don't tell us how"), as what he has witnessed perfectly demonstrates how better things

[302] Infinity War (2019). *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Activision.

would be if police and soldiers, were just free to act as they wished. This stance is further demonstrated in the follow-up mission "Clean House", perhaps the most controversial one of the whole game, and one of the centers of its marketing campaign (possibly in an effort to leverage its controversial aspects).[303] A short mission, it sees the player conducting a no-knock raid on a AQ-filled house in order to eliminate the terrorist cell and recover vital intel. The player has to move in dark, tight spaces using night-vision goggles [Fig. 18], while making split-second decisions to avoid killing non-combats or eliminate combatants before they eliminate you.



Fig. 18. Own screenshot.

Modern Warfare's developers state that the game is "not political". According to its campaign gameplay director Jacob Minkoff, for the game to be "political" it would have to reference real administrations and parties, and to "have a perspective". Their aim is instead to "present the different perspectives, we don't want to say that one of them is correct".[304] Whether their opinion is genuine or the result of a PR strategy, the end result is a game which presents itself both in gameplay and marketing material as just dealing with difficult decisions, complex gray areas, and taking no stance. It is essentially a textbook example of the theory of signification in action. The general consensus, in this case that terrorism must be fought no matter how, torture included, and that police agents and soldiers with boots on the ground just know better, is treated as a neutral, apolitical position, not even

[303] Stuart, K. (2019, May 31). Call of Duty: Modern Warfare returns to tread a moral minefield. *The Guardian*. From https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/may/31/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-reboot-controversy-activision (last accessed February 6, 2025).

[304] Game Informer. (2019). *Is Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare A Political Game? Here's Infinity Ward's Answer* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=87Jb5Qj5JPM (last accessed February 6, 2025).

a "perspective".[305] Of course, the events that follow the raid tacitly confirm its implicit thesis (that these raids are good, safe and effective): the squad learns the position of Al-Qatala's leader, Omar "The Wolf" Sulaman, in Urzikstan. Thanks to this intel, Alex is able to capture him during the following mission with the help of a squad of Marines. Torture is treated in the same way. The player is able interrogate Jamal "The Butcher" Rahal (captured during an unofficial operation in St. Petersburg which involves another shootout in the middle of civilians) using both physical and psychological torture: The Butcher breaks after Gaz brings his wife and son in the room and threatens to shoot them and reveals correct, precious timely intel.

To summarize, we can again state that *Modern Warfare*'s signification of war, on a narrative level, follows the same trend of mainstream war movies. War is bad, as the game reminds us with a post-death loading screen quote (""I have been apt to think that there has never been, nor ever will be, any such thing as a good war, or a bad peace – Benjamin Franklin").[306] But war is also necessary, as are war crimes committed under the excuse of fighting terrorism: without them, London would have been the victim of another terrorist attack, Urzikstan would still be suffering under Barkov, and World War 3 would have begun. And, of course, war is also a spectacle, and a fun one to play as well. As *Polygon*'s Patrick Gill put it when talking about its predecessor, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007): "the game's only framework to let the player interact with its themes was its exquisitely tuned pleasure machine".[307]

While this is the basic foundational ideology behind *Modern Warfare*, an analysis of its codified rules and procedures reveals the actual intricacies of its position. The interactions the player has with the world is almost all limited to shooting, excluding some dialogue choices (which do not chance the narrative) and short sequences. For example, in a flashback where we play as a young, imprisoned Farah, resisting waterboarding is turned into a minigame: the player has to avoid the water stream while Barkov compliments them for how "good" they are at being waterboarded [Fig. 19].[308]

[305] Ibid.
[306] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019).
[307] Patrick Gill. (2022, May 6). How Call of Duty turned war into a profitable circus. *Polygon.* https://www.polygon.com/videos/23059933/call-of-duty-military-entertainment. Last accessed 28/01/2025.
[308] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019).

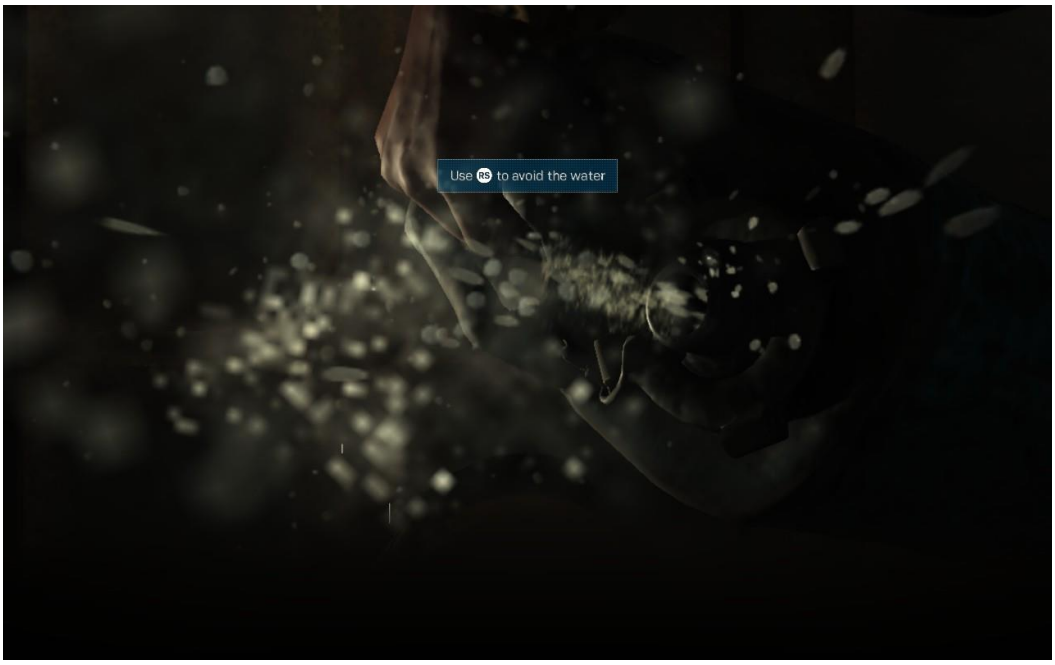


Fig. 19. Own screenshot.

In this case, the addition of interaction works against the intent of the narrative in a case of *ludonarrative dissonance*. The horror of torture is evoked by what is depicted (a known horrifying interrogation method) and its audiovisual representation: we can hear Farah choking, as the screen blurs and reddens while she faces the stream. However, the player can avoid most of this horror through interaction, turning torture into a skill issue and implying that someone can indeed be good at being waterboarded. Moreover, the mechanic (turn your face to avoid something) is introduced only with this section (and then never brought up again), and as such it only distracts the player who has had no chance of internalizing it. As we will later see, *ludonarrative dissonance* can be potentially used as a narrative tool, as breaking immersion can help a player actively reason on his actions. However, in this case the distraction simply results in a frantic "wait what do I have to press" moment, giving the player a sensation more closely associated to playing *Mario Party*.

In all the other cases, while "shooting" is as straightforward of a mechanic as it can be, the game responses to what you shoot and when you shoot are exceptionally revealing. They show, for instance, what behavior is accepted when dealing with non-combatants. Normally the killing of civilians (or enemies who have surrendered) results in an instant game over followed by the message: "Civilian casualties will not be tolerated. Watch you fire!". However, that is the case only if you shoot them when they're still and clearly non-threatening. If you injure a civilian in the chaos during the "Piccadilly" mission or even kill a baby's mother in "Clean House" by blindly shooting through a closed door, there are no in-game consequences: clearly, civilian casualties are tolerated [Fig. 20].



Fig. 20 Own screenshots.

While we're discussing interactivity, it is worth mentioning how the aforementioned post-death loading screen messages work to re-signify the original meaning of the quotes they depict. Quotes from Anna Frank, Martin Luther King, Bob Marley and Nelson Mandela are re-contextualized as support for American interventionism as they are made to refer to the player character's sacrifice in combat through montage (as they appear instantly after one's death):

> "How Wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world – Anna Frank"

> "No one really knows why they are alive until they know what they'd die for – Martin Luther King Jr."

> "You never know how strong you are until being strong is your only choice – Bob Marley"

"The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall – Nelson Mandela"[309]

Garite's updated theory of interpellation can be easily used to explain how *Modern Warfare* plays its players. Everything in the game works to tacitly turn the player into its preferred version of a badass soldier: the HUD (Head-Up Display) is minimalist, not even showing when the player is not aiming to increase immersion and the pretense of realism, as does simulated ballistics [Fig. 21].



Fig. 21. Own screenshot.

Alternating between cinematic introductions and gameplay work as suture to make the players identify as the heroes, which are presented by the narrative as infallible no matter which war crimes they commit. Moreover, in every moment, they are made to follow the game's own interpretation of RoE through the instant game-overs that follow disobedience, while Captain Price verbally tells them where to move, who and how to shoot. Following his orders, even when not mandatory to proceed, results in better, smoother outcomes, and the player finds themselves intuitively absorbing military lingo: during my play, for example, I found the indications of enemy positions ("twelve o'clock, two o'clock") initially confusing, but by the time credits rolled I found myself instinctively turning to those direction. The vast majority of this interpellation happens, of course, through a first-person shot, or rather a series of first-person shots which see the player/subject alternating between the view of a

[309] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019).

soldier, the view of a soldier enhanced by technology (like night-vision and long-range scopes), or the view of a machine targeting system [Fig. 22].



Fig. 22. Own screenshot.

This use of the *first person shot*, recalling Eugeni's reading of this element, serves to carry on the epos of subjectivation. It shapes the player-subject in a similar manner to *Act of Valor* (2012), but with even more intensity, as almost the whole game is experienced through *first person shot*: it is only momentarily interrupted by cinematic cutscenes which might still, according to Manovich, only reinforce the player's ideological interpellation. This process is also reinforced by recalling the real imagery of the war on terror (all conveniently tweaked to make Russia the water-boarding enemy which bombs a fleeing enemy on the highway of death and uses chemical weapons on civilians) and the imagery of its cinematic representations. The beginning of "The Wolf's Den" mission, for instance, eerily recreates *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)'s raid on Osama bin Laden's compound: a night assault on a gated compound, carried on by a select task force brought with two helicopters, culminating with a SSE (Sensitive Site Exploitation) [Fig. 23].



Fig. 23. After clearing the compound, the task force engages in SSE. Own screenshot from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019) (left). Screen capture from *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) (below).

As again Eugeni pointed out, some films mimic videogame's first person shot through the use of Steadicam (as, I'd argue, *Zero Dark Thirty* itself did).[310] "The Wolf's Den" would then be the result of a videogame mimicking films which mimic videogames, all pretending to be realistic, in another step of the postmedial merging of media. I do not mention this process wishing to add to Eugeni's archeology of the first person shot (doing so would require the analysis of many more games), but rather to point out two phenomena. First, the ever-increasing levels of abstraction which separate the player from real war, contributing to its virtualization described in chapter 3.2.1. Second, the evidently successful construction of a true postmedial war *epos*, fragmented throughout militainment but still presenting a shared narrative in support of US hegemony: while the depiction of armed conflict becomes increasingly unreal, players still find themselves similarly shaped in behavior and beliefs into supporters of US military and its policies. It is not surprising, then, that *Modern Warfare* received substantial help from the DoD. The game credits the Marine Corps Entertainment Media

[310] Ibid., p. 53.

Liaison Office and the USMC as "Consultants", and extends "Special Thanks" to Camp Pendleton and Marines at the Infantry Immersion Trainer.[311]

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019) has been chosen as a single case study to show all the ways in which a single contemporary war game can support the US's military hegemony through a refined system of historical revisionism and interpellation. Of course, it is not the only example, and every game will have its own rhetorical peculiarities. *Medal of Honor* (2010) also presented a sanitized version of real missions and has the player-as-soldier being interpellated with even more insistence, precision, and realism (thanks to the collaboration of its developers with real Tier 1 operators)[312]. *The Dark Pictures Anthology: House of Ashes* (2021), a supernatural horror interactive drama, relies almost entirely on cinematic language, as it presents itself as an interactive film.[313] *Six Days in Fallujah* (2023), while still in Early Access, is already showing a new frontier of military propaganda and mixing of mediums, as its campaign utilizes real news footage and interviews with veterans filmed specifically for the game.[314]

4.1.2 *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012)

The most popular game critique of military shooters (both in the gaming space and academia) is found in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). It is possibly the military shooter most talked about in academic writing, with multiple articles and a book fully dedicated to it, Keogh's *Killing is Harmless*.[315]

A warning before the analysis: the game was inexplicably bugged throughout my whole playthrough. Every diegetic element ran perfectly, but the menu and many elements of the HUD were corrupted: their text is either invisible or display what I assume to be raw code [Fig. 24].

[311] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019).

[312] Danger Close Games (2010). *Medal of Honor* [Video game]. Electronic Arts.

[313] Supermassive Games (2021). *The Dark Pictures Anthology: House of Ashes* [Video game]. Bandai Namco Entertainment.

[314] Highwire Games (2023) (early access). *Six Days in Fallujah* [Video game]. Highwire Games.

[315] Murray, S. (2016). Race, Gender, and Genre in Spec Ops: The Line. *Film Quarterly*, *70*(2), 38–48; Matthew Thomas Payne. (2014). War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line*. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *31*(4), 265–282; *Keogh, B. (2012). Killing is harmless: A critical reading of Spec Ops: The Line. Stolen Projects.*

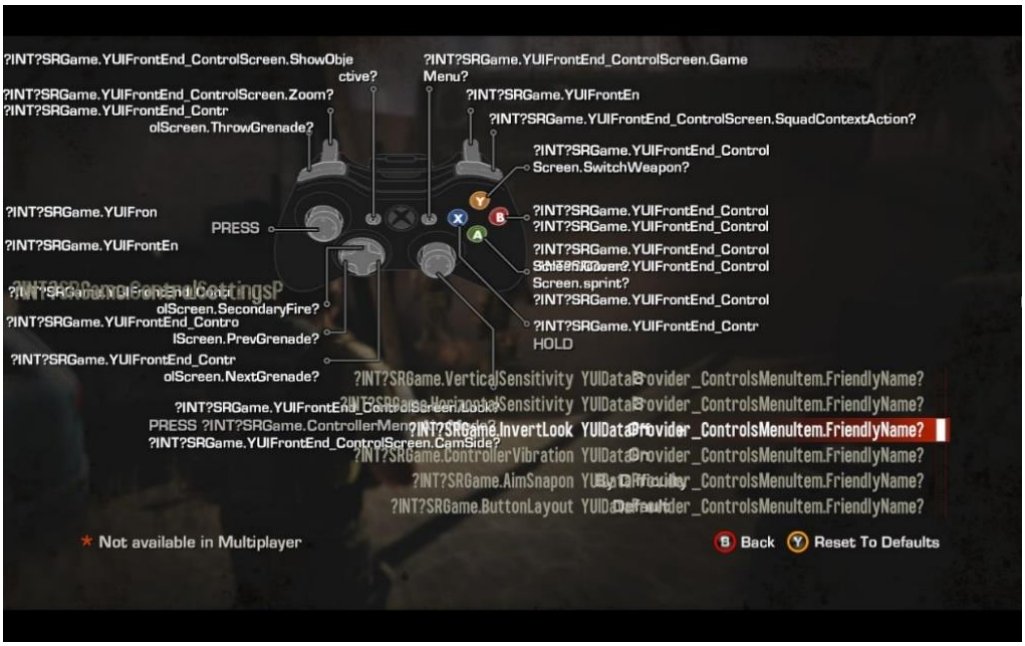


Fig. 24. Own screenshot.

Similarly bugged text appears in some of the figures of this chapter. That it is not an intended part of the game, but an unsolved bug also affecting other people which is likely never going to be patched, since the game is not available for sale anymore, not even on digital storefronts. In January 2024, its publisher delisted it everywhere, as "several partnership licenses related to the game" were expiring. *The Verge* reported that they were most likely referring to music licenses: the game menu plays Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner", and the in-game soundtrack includes music by numerous other artists, including Martha and The Vandellas, Björk, and Deep Purple.[316] While this corruption of the menu and HUD ended up reinforcing the game's artistic direction (especially as I had already played it once before), that is a fitting but unintended coincidence.

The game presents itself as a run-of-the-mill cover-based TPS (Third Person Shooter), much like its predecessors in the *Spec Ops* series (made by different developers almost a decade prior to *The Line*) and its contemporaries, as it came out during a peak in popularity for the genre, following *Medal of Honor* (2010), *Gears of War 3* (2011) and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011). *The Line* follows Walker, the leader of a small team of Delta Force operators tasked with a simple recon mission in a post-catastrophe Dubai (as it was partially destroyed and abandoned after a long series of sandstorms). An Army Battalion, the "Damned 33rd" (led by Colonel Konrad), has defied orders while returning from Afghanistan and went into the city to try and evacuate the survivors. They never

[316] Ash Parrish. (2024, January 30). *Spec Ops: The Line permanently removed from Steam and other digital stores*. The Verge. From https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/30/24055807/spec-ops-the-line-delisting-licensing-2k (last accessed January 29, 2025).; Yager Development (2012). *Spec Ops: The Line* [Video game]. 2K.

came back. Walker, Adams and Lugo just have to cross the storm wall (which is blocking all transmissions), check if there are any survivors, and, if so, come back to call support. However, everything starts immediately going the wrong way. As soon as they approach the city's outskirts, they discover that the 33rd's evacuation has horribly failed: abandoned Humvees and other cars fill the streets, with an American flag hanged upside down flying as a signal of extreme distress [Fig. 25].

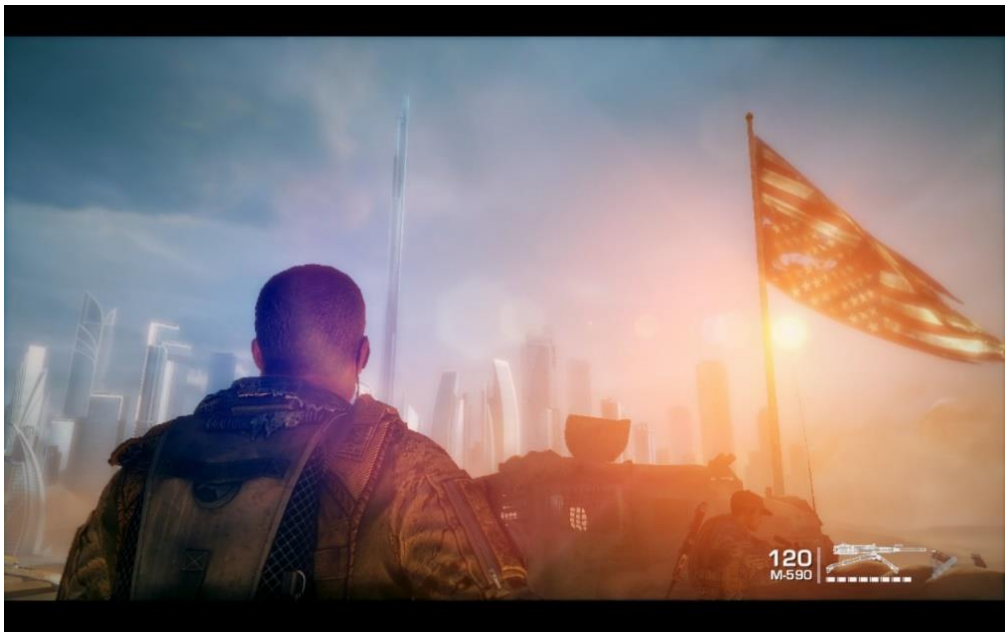


Fig. 25. Own screenshot.

The squad soon encounter corpses of the 33rd, just killed by a group of local insurgents, who also mistake them for members of the 33rd, ask if they are there to "kill them too" and eventually attack them: there is no choice but to fight back.[317] After this first encounter, Walker decides to disobey their orders and proceed forward to try and rescue the battalion. From this point on, the player starts mowing insurgents down, finally reaching a member of the 33rd who is still alive only to see him captured, to everyone's surprise, by a CIA agent. It turns out that the 33rd has gone rogue after the failed evacuation, fought amongst itself, declared martial law, and began a cruel occupation to attempt to restore order (that's why Delta Force was attacked on sight). The insurgents are being led by the CIA itself, in the person of agent Riggs, who is trying to stop the madness. Intercepting a call which reveals that the 33rd has kidnapped another agent, Walker and his team start fighting the 33rd among the ruins of luxurious hotels to save him, while they witness them also kidnapping civilians en masse [Fig. 26].

[317] *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012).



Fig. 26. Own screenshot.

The cruelty of the 33rd seems to know no bounds: rival soldiers have been hanged from light poles, insurgents executed, and deliberately bombarded with white phosphorous. As they walk amongst still burning bodies and toxic air, the team is rightfully horrified by this discovery, and even more invigorated to fight the Damned [Fig. 27].



Fig. 27. Own screenshot.

However, they soon find themselves blocked at “The Gate”, a gap between skyscrapers which seems to be the only entrance to the city proper too heavily manned to even try breaching alone. Walker quickly finds a solution: a leftover mortar armed with white phosphorous munitions. Lugo heavily disagrees and tries to dissuade him, but to no avail. Ultimately, a thermal camera is launched

into the air, letting the player easily kill all the enemy forces, although the last shot falls on a suspiciously tightly packed bunch of soldiers [Fig. 28]. Walker's face is unusually reflected in the screen, just like the player's face might be on their computer– a hint to what's to come.



Fig. 28. Own screenshot.

The squad solemnly walks amongst the slaughtered troops, some of them still burning to death, until they reach the gate. There, they find out that that final bunch were not soldiers but civilians – the same ones that they were kidnapping previously to, they now deduce, bring them to a safer place away from Delta Force. Lugo snaps, Walker is too shocked to talk at first. This horrifying *pietà* will be forever burned into his mind [Fig. 29].

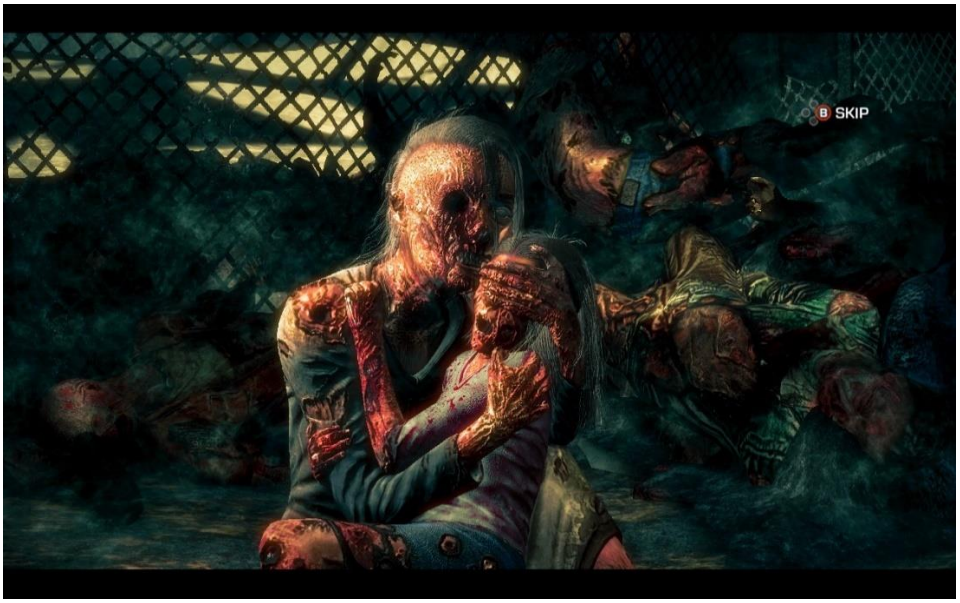


Fig. 29. Own screenshot.

At this point his own descent into madness begins. He immediately shifts the blame on Konrad, stating that they had no choice, they had to stop it, this was all Konrad's fault. Picking up a radio from executed soldiers, he starts talking directly to him, who rebuts by stating the obvious, that Walker is clearly the one responsible – he pulled the trigger. At this moment, the game's commitment to realism starts fading, as Walker begins to hallucinate. Random computer screens show the mother and child again, filmed from a camera which cannot exist. The statues of a mall appear burned as cinders, only for the vision to fade away [Fig. 30].

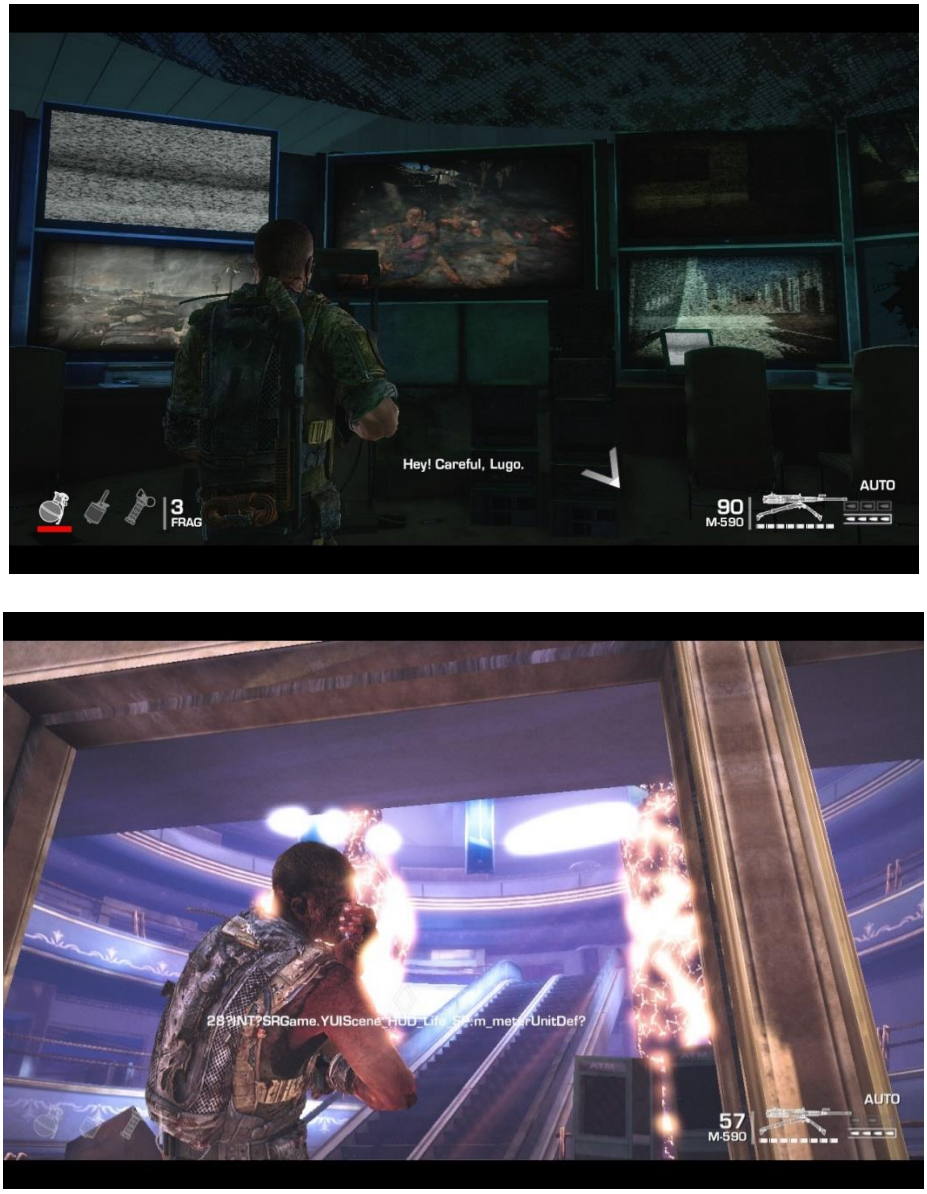


Fig. 30. Own screenshots.

Up until this point, the game "simply" seems to criticize the practices of the US military (represented by the 33rd) and the CIA. Even with the best possible intentions to march into a foreign country, the Army made everything worse and ended up brutally occupying another Middle Eastern

city. Both them and Delta Force, being trained to solve everything with guns, tried solving everything with guns, making up excuses along the way. It is important to state again that Walker's squad was supposed to immediately come back from Dubai, but, as military men loyal to their fellow soldiers, launched themselves into an unknown situation guns blazing, their lack of knowledge worsening the situation at every turn. The CIA, while it opposes the 33rd and formally supports the local insurgents, is not morally any better. Once Delta Force meets up with agent Riggs, they start helping them with their controversial plan: to steal the city's only remaining water supply in order to force the 33rd to surrender (Walker, of course, accepts immediately: Konrad must be stopped at all costs, especially after what he made him do). However, Riggs doesn't run away with the last water in the whole of Dubai to hold it for ransom. He instead destroys all the water trucks, damning the city to die of thirst. He dies in the crash, but not before using his last words to reveal his real plan: to kill everyone in the city in order to cover up what happened. The US cannot have its reputation tarnished by the Damned 33rd.

The game also depicts war as a corruptive force, although that is not shown by the character just taking more risks (but still for a positive objective) like in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), but by Walker becoming increasingly more disheveled, unhinged and violent. Thanks to the third person perspective, we can observe his appearance of a stereotypical military hero (broad shouldered, chiseled face, fully equipped) degrade: his uniform is ripped, his face covered in bruises, burns and soot [Fig. 31].





Fig. 31. Own screenshots.

His behavior also shifts. His mid-combat communications to the teammates go from professional ("Reloading"; "Focus on target"; "Enemy down"; "Heavy trooper is down") to vindictive and aggressive ("This is slowing me down"; Put down that fucking sniper!"; Kill is fucking confirmed"; "Heavy trooper is fucking dead"). After successfully assaulting a radio tower used by the 33rd and escaping via helicopter he orders Lugo to remain around the building to let him shoot everyone and everything because "I want to see what this gun can do!". During the final assault to Konrad's tower, he's at his worst: Lugo has just been lynched by the local population, and the hallucinations are becoming more frequent, with a burning hellscape sometimes fulling replacing reality, while Konrad torments him on the radio [Fig. 32]. Adams asks how they are gonna approach the assault, his only strategy is "kill everything that fucking moves".[318]

[318] *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012).



Fig. 32. Own screenshot.

Compared to *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *The Line* signification of war as corruptive is much more radical: war does not just turn soldiers into adrenaline addicts but into psychopathic killers, enacting a constant stream of unstoppable violence in order to (paradoxically) excuse their violence. Konrad made him use white phosphorus, he made him destroy the water supply, so anything is excusable to stop him. If the cycle of violence were to stop, he'd had to admit his culpability. The ending brings this point home by revealing that Konrad had been dead all along; Walker was just hallucinating his voice on the radio, literally making up someone else to pin his crime on. As "Konrad" says in the finale: "If the truth is undeniable, you create your own".[319] The game fully reveals itself as an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*, substituting the Belgian-controlled Congo for an American-occupied Arab city, like *Apocalypse Now* (1979) did with the Vietnam War. The inevitable heritage of *Apocalypse Now* itself is also evident, especially in a sequence which sees Delta Force having to run away from a helicopter trying to gun them down while it plays Verdi's *Dies irae*.

All these elements (having US troops being the enemy, undeniably turning the hero into a monster), are what Payne calls the "critic displeasures" of the game, unpleasurable aspects meant to break the game flow and make the player consciously question his actions (the opposite strategy of *Modern Warfare*). With its "brutal mise-en scene" and "intertextual references other war media" (the aesthetic of military shooters, elements of *Apocalypse Now*, and the achievements being named after war books or movies), *The Line* creates "a discordant feeling that lays bare the ease with which most

[319] Ibid.

video war games indulge in their power fantasies".[320] For Payne, these "displeasures" generate a feeling of *ludonarrative dissonance* "purposefully crafted and mobilized" for liberation.[321] Similarly to what Farocki does with his video installations, the game breaks its own flown in order to encourage self-reflection.

This strategy is made immensely more effective as *The Line* gradually breaks the fourth wall, literally interpellating the player. The first diegetic break is simple: the opening credits include the player's username as "Special Guest". They get much more intense after "The Gate", seemingly corrupting the game itself like the events it depicts are corrupting Walker. First, the menu gradually changes [Fig. 33].

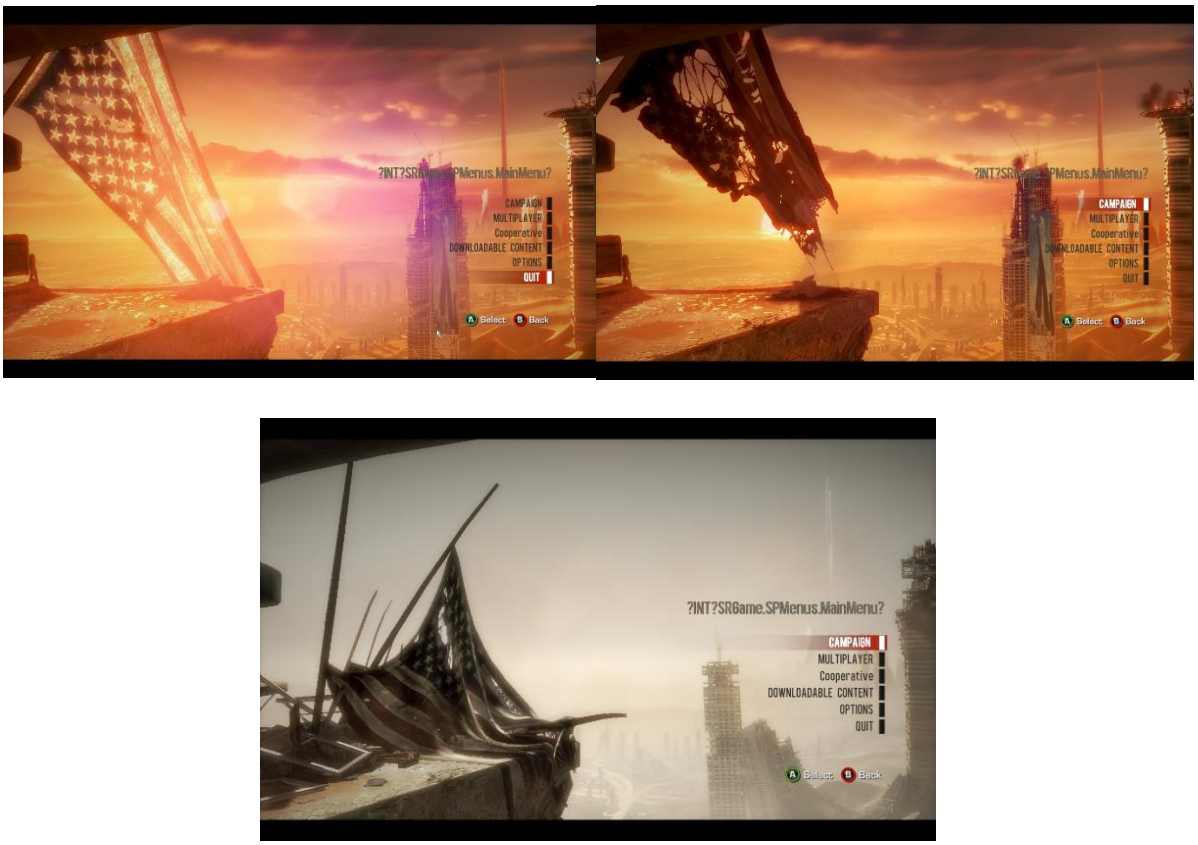


Fig. 33. Own screenshots.

Second, the loading screen messages switch from standard, useful tips on gameplay and story to accusations directed at the player. They are expecting tips like these:

[320] Payne (2014), p. 270.
[321] Ibid.

"If the squad sees that you're pinned down, the Stun Command becomes available. Use it to get out of a tight spot"

"Time is running out for Dubai. Delta must evacuate the city before everyone dies of thirst"

"Agent Riggs is the only CIA still alive in Dubai. He is Delta's only chance of stopping the 33rd"[322]

Instead, they are shocked hit with:

"Walker's obsession with Konrad has brought nothing but destruction – to Dubai and his squad"

"To kill for yourself is murder. To kill for your government is heroic. To kill for entertainment is harmless"

"Can you even remember why you came here"?

"Do you feel like a hero yet?"[323]

Their presence is rendered even more effective by their variation in frequency, as these callouts substitute normal tips more and more often as the game gets harder and the player dies more often, resulting in exponentially more accusatory "tips". Moreover, as documented by Jacob Geller, the tips do not appear at all on rare occasions. If the player dies in certain advanced sections, when the alternative messages would now be almost routine, they are further surprised by visions: a blurred image of Konrad kneeling on you, or the victim of white phosphorous surrounded in a blinding-white light – the visions which are haunting both Walker and the player, now recognized as one and he same.[324] Meanwhile, the diegetic hallucinations and violent combat barks worsen. The player and player-character both fall deeper into the rabbit hole, they journey melded together, to the point where Konrad's final accusations, leveled in front of another reminder of the WP massacre, become clearly aimed towards both: "Your eyes are opening for the first time. It hurts, doesn't it? […] This is no game" [Fig. 34]

[322] *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012).
[323] Ibid.
[324] Jacob Geller. (2024). *What We Don't Talk About in "Spec Ops The Line"* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KSl_lMN7-c. (last accessed February 1, 2025).



Fig. 34. Own screenshot.

As Payne puts it:

> "The human slaughter that dominates Spec Ops is excessively mundane, an ordinariness that abounds in military shooters. […] Walker rationalizes away these atrocities in the name of completing his mission, just as the gamer sets aside disquieting feelings to finish the game."[325]

The Line accuses the player of being complicit in the actions it plays, of being an instrument of the military-entertainment complex. To this aim, it bears to mention that the accused gamer should not be identified as simply the player of *The Line*, but of military shooters in general (as it was meant to lure in that playerbase). The game industry itself is of course also the subject of its criticism (although this might not come through enough inside the game itself). The lead writer himself accused it of letting killing stay "so mundane", believing that "violent games desensitize to violence in games".[326] *The Line* was meant to lure military shooter players with its seemingly routine premise to then shock them and make them reflect on how militainment naturalizes their ideology, revealing the potentially horrific premise hiding behind the pleasure machine. Like those mainstream shooters, it initially presents war as a tragic inevitability, with their protagonist privileging "character and protecting one's band of brothers above understanding the social policies that begat [sic] the conflict".[327] These last characteristic is identified by Payne in Hollywood's response to Vietnam, but, as we have seen, it is also a common trend in movies like *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022).

[325] Payne (2014), p. 279.
[326] Quoted in Payne (2014), p. 278.
[327] Payne (2014), p. 279.

Spec Ops: The Line (2012) willingly presents itself as another shooter of its era, using all its basic game mechanics. It is by weaponizing ludonarrative dissonance and employing "critical displeasures" that it manages to avoid the turning war into a fun spectacle, an issue seemingly integrated in the genre itself.[328] Moreover, making the vast majority of the enemy US soldier avoids the fundamental problem of war cinema described in *Jarhead*: one cannot hype themselves up for killing the state's enemies when they are killing their fellow soldiers. As we have stated, *Modern Warfare* (2019) perfectly adapts to Garite's model, simulating an illusion of control, while invisibly interpellating the player, silently playing them. *The Line* does the exact opposite, calling them out as players and thus unveiling the ideological workings of the military shooter (which makes the player enjoy the act of essentially being a blameless war criminal).

It also specifically calls out most games' illusion of narrative choice, as the player is presented multiple times with explicit moral dilemmas which ultimately prove to be pointless. At one point, for example, Konrad has two men hanged by their arms from a street sign: one, a civilian, has stolen water; the other, a soldier, killed his whole family to apprehend him. Snipers are behind them, threatening to kill them both. He asks Walker to make a choice: shoot one of them, and the other will be allowed to walk free. The player can choose one of them or even find other solutions, like shooting at both ropes to free them, or quickly kill the snipers before they shoot the men. But the choice does not actually matter: in a flashback at the end of the game, it is revealed that Walker hallucinated the whole thing. In reality, there were just two hanged corpses, and the scene was yet another attempt by Walker's psyche to rationalize his monstrous behavior as something forced by someone else. Not that it would have mattered too much, had the choice been real: the whole of Dubai will still die of thirst. The only good choice would have been to follow their mission; to turn back as soon they saw a single survivor. Like the player, whose only good choice is implied to be to not to play.

It could be argued that the blame is too heavily put on players rather than on the industry which systematically shapes them. However, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) still stands as a remarkable example of how a game can be used as an instrument for challenging hegemony and for critical thinking by breaking the flow and rendering explicit its processes of interpellation.

4.1.3 Serious games and the war on terror

Spec Ops: The Line (2012) challenges the video game industry and gamers themselves: its main force is in its reveal and deconstruction of, specifically, the implicit messaging of military shooters. In a sense, we could say that it challenges the hegemony of the medium from the inside, turning its

[328] Payne (2014); Gill (2022).

own techniques against it; much like *Redacted* (2007), which best utilizes what Eugeni calls a "reworking of extra-medial materials", the language of the *docufiction*, and the *first person shot* (so prevalent in the action thriller of Kathryn Bigelow and Ridley Scott).[329]

The games discussed in this section follow a different path, as they fall into the category of *serious games*. Those are, according to Fassone's definition, games which escape Caillois' definition of game as something "rigorously unproductive". They instead found their existence on productivity, and are built specifically to "produce some form of verifiable knowledge", favoring education rather than fun (essentially an inversion militainment, which has the exact opposite aim).[330] They also tend to be very short and mechanically simple, usually requiring a couple of minutes to learn and play, which favors their use in a classroom, company or journalistic setting. Moreover, they are usually aimed at an audience of non-gamers, and they are distributed outside of mainstream channels, often for free. The three games were chosen for their relative notoriety and their thematic similarities, as they all talk about the war on terror, with two of them focusing on drone warfare (albeit all utilize different rhetorical strategies). We will see how they tackle the signification of war in a different manner than the previous examples, as they aim to reproduce (and critically analyze) the procedures of war itself rather than its representations in mainstream war games.

Before proceeding with the discussion, we must note that even the term *serious games* has faced criticism. The term was born (in its current use) from the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which has founded the Serious Games Initiative, "an ad hoc networking and knowledge-sharing group" which aims to facilitate "contacts between government/industry and developers" in order to create games for "government and other public or private organizations"[331] According to Bogost, this mainstream serious games movement is then to be understood as serving the interests of governments and corporations – not exactly a challenge to hegemony.[332] Moreover, the terminology itself implies that all other games are not *serious*, not important, eliminating "a wide variety of games from persuasive speech […] a foolish gesture that wrongly undermines the expressive power of videogames in general, and highly crafted, widely appealing commercial games in particular".[333] This understanding would exclude both *Modern Warfare* and *The Line* from being considered *serious*, for instance. For these reasons Bogost (himself a *serious games* author and serving the advisory board of the Serious Games Summit) advances the term *persuasive games* "as an alternative whose promise

[329] Eugeni (2015), pp. 59-60 (my translation).
[330] Fassone (2017), pp. 359-360.
[331] Bogost (2007), pp. 55-56.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid., p. 59.

lies in the possibility of using procedural rhetoric to support or challenge our understanding of the way things in the world do or should work".[334]

In any case, I have used the term *serious games* in the title of this chapter as it is still a well-understood category of games which

1) Are not primarily focused on entertainment
2) Share design elements (short to play, simple mechanics, available to play online for free)
3) Share the same rhetorical approach (focus on one singular issue and on procedural rather than audiovisual rhetoric)
4) Because of these commonalities are still commonly understood to belong to the same genre (whether they are termed *educational games, serious games*, *newsgames*, *didactic games* or *playable criticism*)[335]

Most importantly, whether one considers the use of the term fair or not, the three games we will now analyze adopt a similar approach in countering the hegemonical discourse, an approach that is radically different from that of *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) or *This War of Mine* (2014) (which we'll talk about in chapter 4.3.1) which are all longer-form, mechanically more complex and work largely within the gameplay bounds of their respective genres.

September 12 (2004), a self-defined "newsgame" was developed by Gonzalo Frasca for *newsgaming.com*. The term itself was invented by the newsgaming group to describe the emerging genre of "videogames based on news events".[336] While the two games downloadable on the website (which also used to be able to be played online) were self-published, *newsgames* are now most often developed for traditional news outlets like the Financial Times, Vox, ABC and Bloomberg as a support "to inform users about topics related to the news by walking them through the context of complex situations or systems that are difficult to explain without experiencing firsthand".[337] The Financial Times is especially productive in this area, having created the popular *The Uber Game* (a simulator of the harsh gig economy), *The Climate Game* (where you try to reach net emissions as a

[334] Ibid.

[335] Altomonte, J. A. (2019). Playing Killbox: Didactic Gaming and Drone Warfare. In *Video Games and the Global South* (pp. 61–74); Cabales, V. (2019, June 10). *A Brief Introduction to Newsgames*. Northwestern University Knight Lab. From https://knightlab.northwestern.edu/2019/06/10/newsgames-intro/- (last accessed February 3, 2025); Fassone (2017), p. 365.

[336] *newsgaming.com—Faq*. (n.d.). From http://newsgaming.com/faq.htm (last accessed February 7, 2025).

[337] Cabales, V. (2019, June 10). *A Brief Introduction to Newsgames*. Northwestern University Knight Lab. From https://knightlab.northwestern.edu/2019/06/10/newsgames-intro/ (last accessed February 7, 2025).

"global minister for future generations") and *Dodging Trump's Tariffs* (which simulates the job of a trade consultant trying to avoid 2019's tariffs on Chinese exports).[338]

Frasca's *September 12th* (2004) is mechanically much simpler than those titles, although it faces an even more controversial topic: the war on terror. As its introductory instructions state, the rules are simple: "there is no way to win or to lose, you can just decide to shoot or not" [Fig. 35].

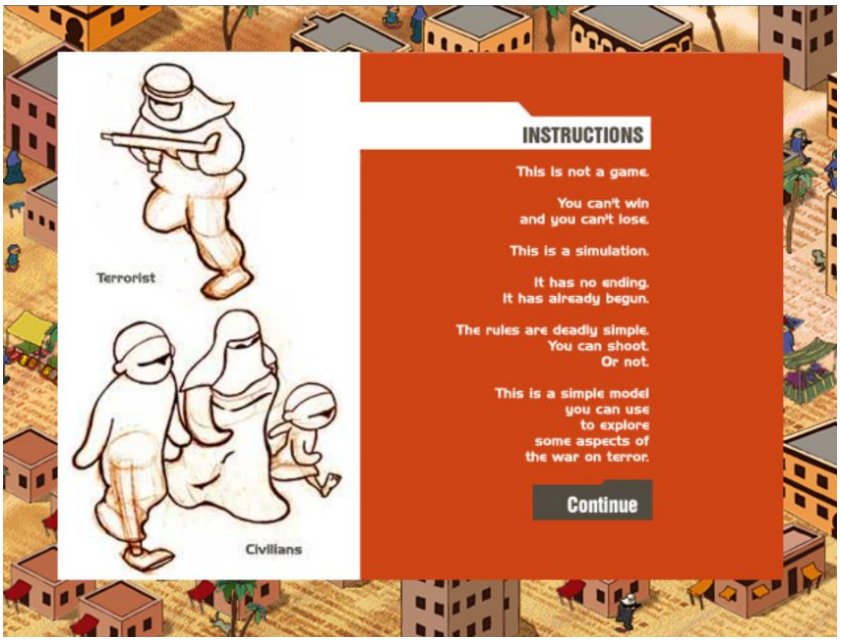


Fig. 35. Own screenshot.

The gameplay is minimal: you move a crosshair around and click to shoot a missile which arrives a couple seconds later, killing everyone in the area and damaging buildings. The implied objective is to kill only terrorists, but that soon reveals itself to be impossible: due to the population density, the building hiding people from view and the delay in firing, the player is gonna kill civilians. While killing just terrorists has no effect in the world, killing civilians does: those who survive and happen to walk near the cadavers will stop to mourn and then turn into terrorists themselves, be they men, women or children (who instantly grow up). There is no possible way to eliminate all terrorists, and as a consequence the game cannot end: after a couple minutes the screen is going to be populated by ten times the terrorists among a smattering of semi-destroying buildings (which are reconstructed after a while) [Fig. 36].

[338] *The Climate Game* (2022). Financial Times. https://ig.ft.com/climate-game; *The Uber Game*. (2022). Financial Times. https://ig.ft.com/uber-game; *Dodging Trump's Tariffs*. (2019). Financial Times. https://ig.ft.com/trump-china-tariffs/.



Fig. 36. Own screenshot. Scaffolding (which appears some time after a building is destroyed) can be observed in the bottom left.

It is a very straightforward example of how a video game can be used to transform a textual political argument into a procedural one. After the very brief reminder of the introduction ("it has already begun"), the faulty logic of the war on terror is procedurally translated and put into motion. The absence of additional text or dialogue plays into rhetorical strength as it forces the player to actively exercise critical thinking, letting them draw their own conclusions from the events they caused (contrary to *Modern Warfare* or even *The Line*).

This simplicity is the game's biggest strength but also its biggest limitation, as it necessarily excludes the human tragedy of the war of terror and drone strikes: all civilians are faceless and spend their time just walking around, stopping only to mourn and become terrorists. There is a market, but no one selling or buying goods. It is self-evident that *September 12th* does not aim to de-humanize the victims of war, but it does show the possible consequences of reducing the argument against the war on terror to an argument on its efficacy. A particularly callous player (who didn't care too much for the presence of civilians and children) could deduce that a solution to the problem presented by the game could be a change in parameters: shortening the delay between a missile launch and another and reducing its blast area could result in an elimination of all terrorists, with "limited collateral damage". Moreover, while the game clearly implies a criticism of the impersonality of aerial bombings their cartoony and faceless representation could partially fail in recalling their inhumane consequences. The following games address both issues.

Molleindustria's *Unmanned* (2012) focuses entirely on drone warfare, but it levies a different criticism of it, pointing at the absurd disconnection between its operation and its effects. A character-driven narrative game, it follows a day in the life of a blond, square-jawed, broad-shouldered American drone operator. The player advances by playing a series of minigames which range from simulating shaving while avoiding paper cuts to following and bombing a person of interest allegedly planting IEDs [Fig. 37].[339]



Fig. 37. Own screenshots.

With the screen divided into two, the player works their way through dialogue at the same time. The similarity between the minigames and the near-constant dialogue highlights the absurd banality of the job like, as shooting Hellfire missiles thousands of miles away is as challenging and smoking a cigarette or and as serious as flirting with a colleague. Every element of the game augments the sense of disconnection that permeated the game. As stated by Molleindustria's founder Paolo Pedercini,

[339] Molleindustria (2012). *Unmanned*. [Video game].

> "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. On another level, you can see the whole game as 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 US covert operations are regularly taking place"[340]

With these constant reminders of disconnection, *Unmanned* points to how drone warfare inherently dehumanizes its victims and how it risks becoming as unserious as a video game. This stance is reinforced by the dialogue, which often sees the protagonist trying to cope with the cognitive dissonance that comes with his job: his dreams are haunted by nightmares which see him in foreign soil trying to escape the people he's bombing during the day, while the only blood he could shed is from shaving cuts. In the second-to-last minigame, *Unmanned* also finds a way to criticize military shooters, as we play as him playing "Contemporary Warfare" and "Duty Call" with his son.[341] This moment of gameplay in the gameplay shows how the referenced are doubly disconnected from the reality of war: not only are they extremely unrealistic depictions of combat, they are also focused on a kind of face-to-face combat which is increasingly rarer in the context of the RMA. Moreover, they thwart the son's perception of war, who seems to be able to relate to his father's job and his great-grandpa memories of war only in gaming terms: it makes sense that the sniper rifle was the great-grandpa's favorite weapon, as it is "better for headshots" and it doesn't make you "lose health". The cherry on top comes from *Unmanned*'s achievement system: by doing certain actions, the player can earn medals, which clearly parrot real ones, and further show the disconnect of their job while also representing their "ambitions and moral compass" [Fig. 38].[342]

[340] Orland, K. (2012, February 23). *Unmanned presents a nuanced, psychological perspective on modern warfare*. Ars Technica. From https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2012/02/unmanned-presents-a-nuanced-psychological-perspective-on-modern-warfare/ (last accessed February 4, 2025).

[341] *Unmanned* (2012).

[342] Orland (2012).

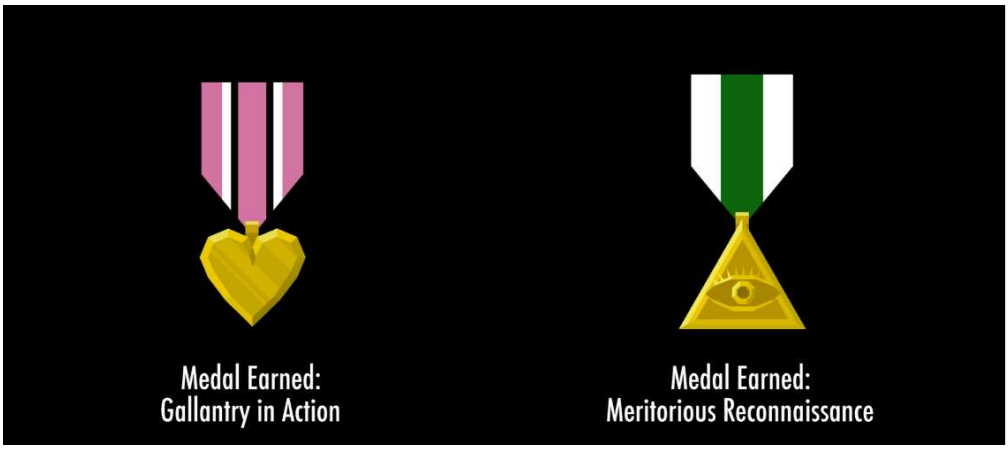


Fig. 38. Own screenshot.

Killbox (2016), produced by Joseph DeLappe and Biome Collective, approaches the issue of drone warfare from yet another angle, as it shows how UAVs operate not by having a diegetic protagonist operate one but by placing you, the player, in the pilot's seat (and then in the place of a children playing in the area of the strike) [Fig. 39].

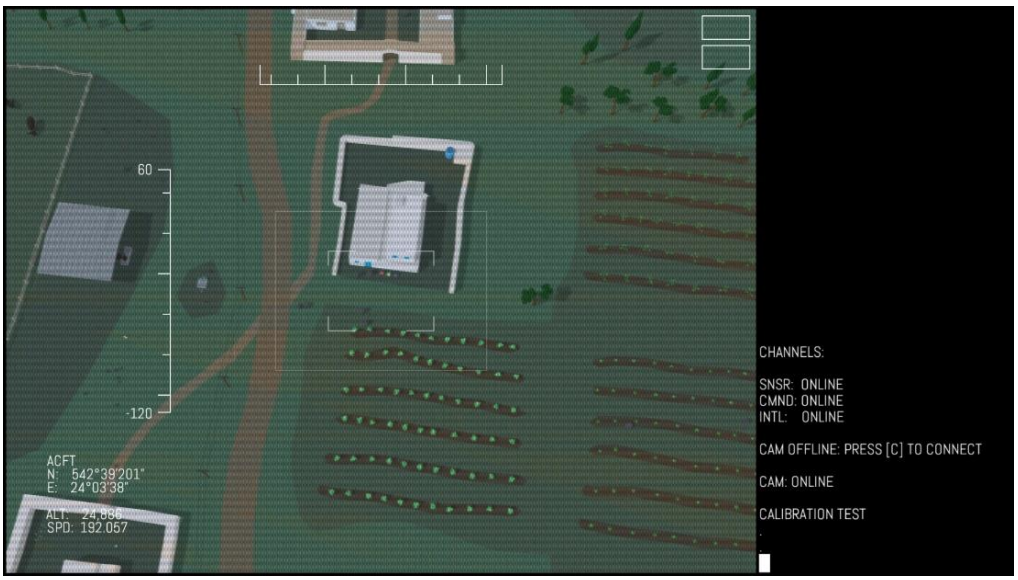


Fig. 39. Own screenshot.

A series of information and commands directly interpellate the player, and turn their computer into a UAV controller itself. By mimicking the ideal functioning of a drone, it shows again how disconnected it is from the reality it targets, how it turns war into an algorithm. The player is forced into conscious self-reflection when the console asks how many kills are confirmed: they have to manually type the number, making them confront their work. Did they hit those children playing or were they far enough? Would it have been different if they had timed their shot differently?

Where the game shines even more, however, is in its forced double perspective: after embodying the UAV operator, the player is made to re-live the scenario once again from the point of view of a child, represented as a sphere [Fig. 40].

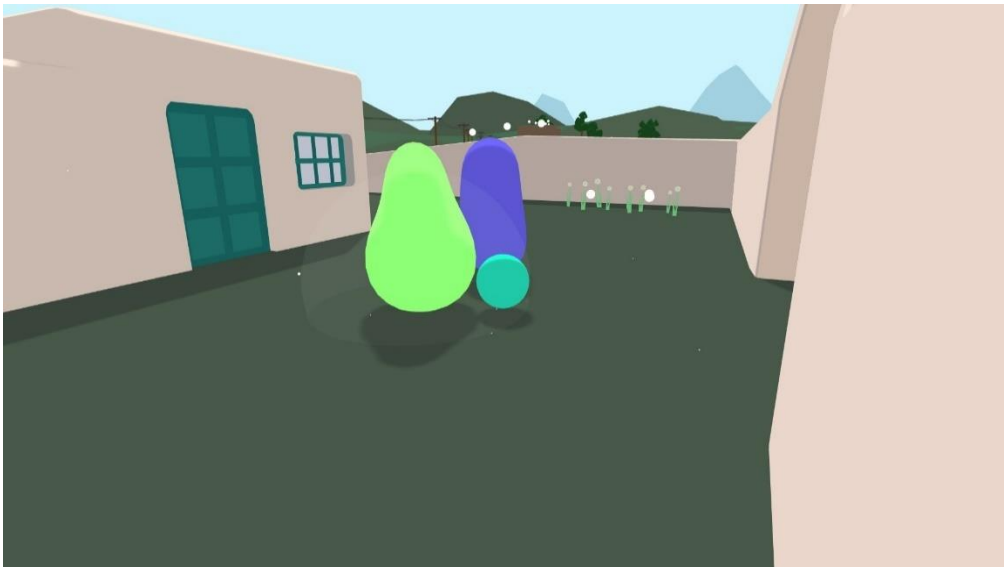


Fig. 40. Own screenshot.

According to *Killbox*' developers, they are represented as such for three reasons: to avoid making the game too hard to experience, to further better discussions (when the game is played at a gallery as an art installation) and, most importantly, to literally give life to those victims who are so often represented as dots on a graphic.[343] The dot becomes human again by being simply active: the second player has no objectives, and is quite literally free to play as a child does: bouncing around, exploring, interacting with adults, other children or animals (whose shapes play a note and change color when collided with). Then, it all stops when the missile hits. The sky turns grey, the player cannot jump anymore [Fig. 41].

[343] Biome Collective. (2019). *Killbox—V&A Dundee short film* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hC-2pCs8Tmc (last accessed February 4, 2025).



Fig. 41. Own screenshot.

They could have tried looking for the drone before (which they knew was coming if they previously played as the operator), as there is a command specifically to look up. But drone, just as is in the real world, are impossible to spot with the naked eye. If the dot player is directly hit, they miraculously do not die, but become just hurt, and they switch to a tilted first-person perspective. They have no chance, however, when the second missile comes to "confirm the kill".

This representation of war could still be considered too abstract to constitute a remarkable counter-hegemonical signification, as it creates empathy for its victims but is still too disconnected from actual specific conflicts, somewhat like *September 12th* (2004) and *Unmanned* (2012). This effect is avoided during the game ending, as it shows a simple summary of historical facts, repositioning itself firmly in real history: it reveals the strike to be a reconstruction of a drone hit in Waziristan, Pakistan, one of many which have killed over three thousand people "from screens in cubicles thousands of miles away". The first of such strikes killed "four people including two children".[344]

It is to be noted that *Killbox* (2016)'s efficacy varies based on where it is played: in its original instance as an art installation, it was played by two people at the same time, physically in front of each other at [Fig. 42].

[344] Joseph DeLappe and Biome Collective (2016). *Killbox* [Video game].

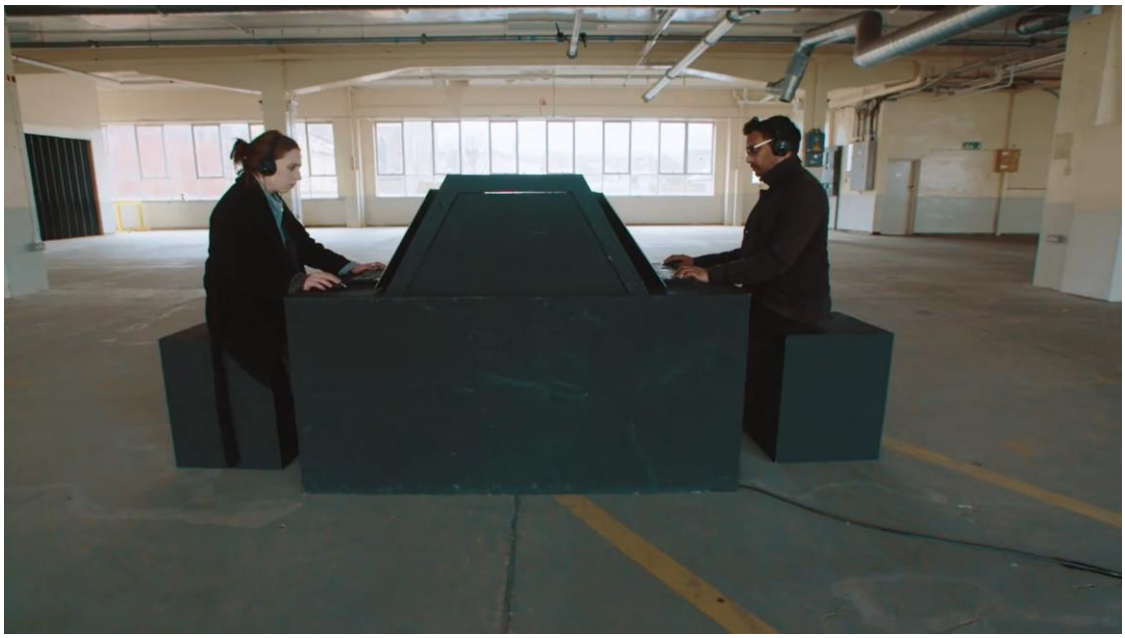


Fig 42 *Killbox* as an installation, courtesy of Biome Collective (2019). *Killbox—V&A Dundee short film* [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hC-2pCs8Tmc (last accessed February 15, 2025).

This mode of experience the game once again recalls Solanas and Getino's stance on the importance of public projections: according to the developers, reactions were very strong with people "upset and distressed", some crying, some thanking them, and, most importantly, all actively watching and discussing it.[345] It undeniably loses some of this potential for critical reflection as a stand-alone, single player game, showing how crucial it might be for all the discussed games to be talked about instead of just played alone: any collaborative and/or public play would have a more meaningful impact in countering the hegemonical consensus. However, it should be noted that literally transforming one's own personal computer into a drone-operating console could have a more powerful impact compared to the unfamiliar device one would find at an installation. It could better show the critical disconnection between the crude effects of war and the distance of the instruments used to wage it. Like the direct interpellation of the player in asking to confirm the kills, it might also make a player feel even more complicit in the act, and thus more prone to critically engage with the matter at hand.

As we have seen, these three titles all tackle the war on terror (and drone warfare) in different ways, although they all simulate it more or less directly. *September 12th* (2004) simplifies the larger geopolitical mechanisms of the whole conflict to show its faulty premise; *Unmanned* (2012) gamifies

[345] Campbell, C. (2016, August 31). Kill Box is a troubling game about drone warfare. *Polygon*. From https://www.polygon.com/features/2016/8/31/12651442/kill-box-drone-warfare-game (last accessed February 4, 2025).

the whole day of a drone operator to demonstrate how killing can be absurdly banal; *Killbox* (2016) makes the player themselves both victim and executioner to position them as (and make them empathize with) the people involved in the conflict. While their specific rhetorical aims vary, all of them share one commonality: the direct interpellation of the player: *September 12th* through its introduction, *Unmanned* through dialogue choices and *Killbox* through orders, multiplayer (in certain contexts) and its final historical exposition, which invites players to go to the game's website for more info on the topic. This approach is opposite to that of *Modern Warfare*, which, as shown in chapter 4.1.1, works to naturalize its signification of war to render it a self-evident fact. Similarly to *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), but even more effectively, they do not render it entertaining to play at all; the only enjoyable moment of gameplay is *Killbox*'s short-lived blissful child play.

They also propose a quite unique way of translating the procedures of war directly", rather than utilizing the established grammar of war games or other genres. In this way, they can tackle the issue without filtering it through the forms of militainment (an inherently risky proposition), while also becoming more easily accessible to a public of non-gamers: this is also helped by their minimal length, mechanical simplicity, and availability. As demonstrated by the feedback from the art installation of *Killbox* (as well as by a good percentage of its few reviews on Steam), "serious games" such as these offer a unique opportunity to counter the dominant discourse on topics of war, although extreme simplicity is always at risk of weakening their argument.[346]

4.2 Issues of Representation by the Global North in war games

As anticipated in paragraph 2.2.1, we will now delve deeper into how the Global South (and especially the Arab world) is depicted in mainstream contemporary war games, taking into consideration not only *Modern Warfare* and *The Line* but all the games I have played for the present chapter (with the exception of *Six Days in Fallujah*, as its campaign is too far from being completed).

Medal of Honor (2010), entirely set in Afghanistan during a fictionalized version of Operation Anaconda, does not vary substantially from the representations analyzed by Šisler and Mirrlees, to the point where there is not even much to analyze. While it does briefly depict the normal life of civilians during its opening cutscene, the vast majority of the game is spent in paramilitary compounds or terrorist infested mountains where the only Arab people are enemies. The story is only focused on the heroic operations of Tier One forces, and Afghanistan serves only a playground where

[346] *Killbox*. (n.d.). Steam. From https://store.steampowered.com/app/652480/Killbox/ (last accessed February 4, 2025).

they can showcase their technological and strategical superiority, a country populated only by members of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. As is normal for the genre, the military operations of the US Army only target confirmed terrorists, and no civilian (when present) is ever put in harm's way.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019) partially breaks from in this kind of purely stereotypical representation. Farah is presented as a fierce leader, a strong Arab woman who decided to free her country from foreign influence with her own hands, helped by a mostly female force (possibly inspired by the Kurdish YPJ). However, while she is an integral and active part of the plot, it is to be noted that her interests somehow always align with the US agenda. She is a positively portrayed Arab insurgent, but one which is essentially subservient to US forces, even letting a whole squadron of Marines carry out an operation in Urzikstan with little to no objection: the perfect ally to Western hegemony. That is especially evident as she is constantly compared to her brother Hadir. A fellow member of the Urzikstan Liberation Forces, he quickly betrays them by allying with Al-Qatala to drive Barkov away, and uses chlorine gas on Russian forces, an act deemed absolutely unredeemable by both Farah and Price's squad. While chemical warfare is obviously always to be condemned, it must be noted that the game's first mission opens with Alex ordering a bombardment of white phosphorous on their enemies, a substance with arguably more horrifying effects. What actually matters is that Hadir is not an American ally, and his actions thus become evil, in contrast to those of Farah, the one good Arab. Moreover, *Modern Warfare*'s invention of a fictional Middle Eastern countries lets it avoid any issues of respectful cultural representation while still maintain the aesthetic of the war on terror: a tendency exemplified by the depiction of Al-Qatala, clearly meant to stand in for Islamic terrorism but completely non-religious in-game (like Farah and Hadir themselves).

The flashback missions played as Farah do offer an unprecedented representation of the difficulties of life in the Middle East under occupation by a foreign power, and they do not shy away from depicting the horrors of war for civilians: the player first sees through Farah's eyes while she is trapped under the rubbles of a collapsed building helplessly staring at her mother's lifeless corpse [Fig. 43].



Fig. 43. Own screenshot.

However, this is again only shown as to justify US interventionism in an Arab country to help to "liberate" it. Knowing how many innocent civilians died under US bombing, this crude representation comes off as extremely tactless, like the waterboarding minigame.

Being not a shooter but at an interactive drama, *The Dark Pictures Anthology: House of Ashes* (2021) offers more space for accurate representation. Set during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, it tells the story of four US troops and one reluctant member of the Iraqi Republican Guard, Salim, who all accidently fall into an ancient, vampire-infested Sumerian temple during a shootout. There, they must learn to fight as allies to defeat the common enemy. This premise should offer different perspectives on the Iraq War, but it rarely does. Salim is not happy with the American occupation, but he also quickly gave up on fighting it (he is present during the shootout only because he was forced to), and just wants to rest and be happy for his son who got accepted at a London university. *House of Ashes* does portray the negative results of American paranoia: two of the protagonists, Nick and Jason, struggle throughout the game to deal with the fact that they have previously killed an innocent civilian at a checkpoint out of fear. Moreover, just before falling into the temple they attack a peaceful village of shepherds in search of non-existent WMDs (although the shepherds are then revealed to be drug dealers and possible pagan worshippers of the vampires, somewhat retroactively justifying the attack). Not that Salim has any strong issues with all of this. If he is talked to kindly enough, he will reassure Jason that he did the right thing when shooting that civilian at the checkpoint, and he might even forgive him for shooting a fleeing unarmed civilian and for using white phosphorus grenades on his fellow Iraqi soldiers (two choices which are left to the player). As *Kotaku*'s Sisi Jiang put it,

"Salim doesn't survive because he's simply an outstanding soldier. He survives because he's a Good Minority with western [sic] education and connections".[347] A good minority who, I'll add, goes as far into assimilating to the West that he ends up adopting the Marine motto ("Semper Fi").

We have already seen how *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) successfully reverses its genre conventions, dissecting the problematic depiction of violence in military shooters. However, that does not make it immune from criticism. As Murray points out, "the game is decidedly progressive in its critique of genre conventions, yet it conveys both a strangely retrograde image of women and a deeply racialized vision of an Arab global metropolis as a new 'heart of darkness.'" According to her, the game presents Dubai as "a contemporary cultural moment of rapid modernization and industrialization in Asia […], one that has produced anxiety for the West". In this context, the sandstorms can be interpreted as having not destroyed those Arab space, just returned them to their essence "conceived as implicitly barbarous". It essentially mimics the same issue as *Heart of Darkness*, which denounces European colonial violence in the Congo while also painting it as a "savage dystopia devoid of logic and reason".[348] Payne, on the contrary, finds no issue in the portrayal of Dubai, as it is, in his view, not meant to represent the city itself, being instead an allegorical proxy for Walker's state of mind and the "social and psychological costs of American militarism". Moreover, he sees it as the "abandoned opulence of Western civilization: a TV studio, an aquatic coliseum, luxury hotels and spas, an aquarium".[349] The game itself does partially support this interpretation of Dubai as the ruins of capitalism: in-game intel (pieces of texts which can be optionally collected during the levels) reveals that "every expat and fat-cat Emirati hightailed it outta Dubai" before the storm hit, leaving behind poor people and migrant laborers.[350] The state of Dubai and its remaining citizens could then be seen not as symbolic of a return to its "essence", but rather as the straightforward consequence of capitalist cruelty and hubris in the face of climate change. All the "barbarism" could have been prevented if the ruling class revealed the information about the storm on time (it is also revealed that they waited two days before announcing it was coming to make their evacuation easier). Instead, those who actually built the city are left trapped and surrounded by mountains of useless riches, making bullets out of silver and dolls with "diamond earrings for eyes" and "silk for a dress".[351] Moreover, the surviving citizens of Dubai are not just shown as insurgents or victims: throughout the levels, traces of their

[347] Jiang, S. (2021, October 26). *House of Ashes: The Kotaku Review*. Kotaku. From https://kotaku.com/house-of-ashes-the-kotaku-review-1847938233 (last accessed February 4, 2025).
[348] This and the previous quotations are from Murray (2016), pp. 43-44.
[349] Payne (2014), pp. 270-271.
[350] *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012).
[351] Ibid.

passage reveal how they dealt with tragedy by printing out missing posters, painting graffiti and lighting countless candles.

These hints to their humanity and agency, are, however, all indirect, as they come through intel or environmental design, not from actual characters. In any case, Murray's second point, that women in the game only "function as a tool of the larger critique it claims to be making" is much harder to dispute. As she puts it, "Women in *The Line* exist only as victims of torture and friendly fire; as the subject of casual joking between men; as burned, dead, casualties—precious, perhaps, but fundamentally secondary."[352] There is only one extremely brief instance of a woman having an active role in the game: a girl which throws the player a rock after the mob has lynched Lugo. The only other notable female presence is the mother who died in the white phosphorous attack, serving as the quintessential victim.

While the representation of non-Western people and civilizations in mainstream war games has become slightly better, it is clear that all the issues identified by Šisler are still endemic in the genre. Actual non-Western characters like Farah and Salim are at least more common (and more developed as people than the Saladin), but, as we have seen, they still fall into the stereotype of the "one good Arab". Surprisingly, *Modern Warfare*'s Farah is the most sympathetic portrayal of an Arab combatant we have seen, but she is allowed this positive portrayal only because she serves American interests in a fictional Middle East seemingly untouched by the empire.

4.3 Playing the war on terror: civilian POV

4.3.1. *This War of Mine* (2014)

Polish 11 Bit Studios' *This War of Mine* (2014) has the player controlling a group of civilians trying to survive a civil war in an Eastern-Europe inspired city. While the setting is fictional, it was informed by events in Bosnia, Kosovo (February 28, 1998–June 11, 1999), Chechnya (December 11, 1994–August 31, 1996 and August 26, 1999–April 15, 2009), Libya (January 5–October 23, 2011) and Syria (March 15, 2011–present).[353] The survivors will have to manage their hiding place during the day (cooking food, making medicine, tools, heating it up for the winter) and go out and scavenge during the night, when they can traverse the streets without being seen by soldiers or rebels [Fig. 44].

[352] Murray (2016), p. 44.

[353] Kwiatkowski, K. (2016). Civilian Casualties: Shifting Perspective in This War of Mine. In *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming* (pp. 691–702). The MIT Press., p. 694.

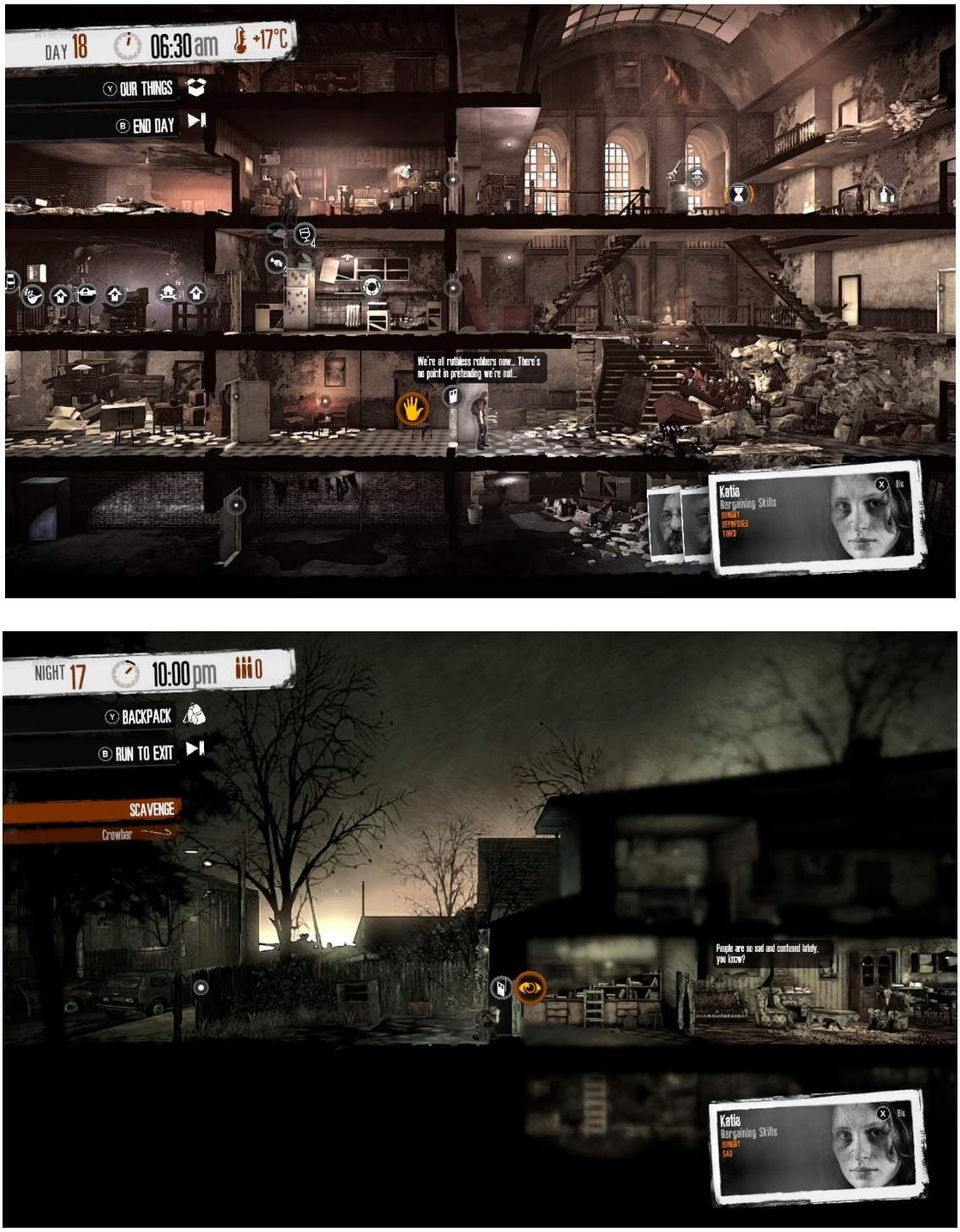


Fig. 44. Own screenshots.

The game is remarkable in its reproduction of the conditions of civilians during a war – aside from the simple fact that dedicating an entire game to the life of civilians in a warzone is by itself a radical act, given the industry's tendencies. While there is the possibility of combat (an exceedingly dangerous option, as a dead character will stay dead with no possibility to revive them or reload the save), its focus in on just trying to survive, and figure out how to do it. The complete absence of a tutorial immediately puts the player into the same position of helplessness as the characters, as they

both come into the situation completely unprepared. Moreover, even when they have learned everything needed to play "well", that never stops the tension: the situation of the survivors is always frail, and one single mistake can lead to an unstoppable chain of events leading to everyone's death or departure. A single loud step in a supermarket infested by thugs could lead to a character dying, leading to another character leaving out of desperation, leaving the last one unable to guard their house, leading to everything being stolen by thieves, leading to depression and suicide. Even playing perfectly doesn't always result in a smooth experience. A warehouse where you could reliably trade moonshine for raw food might become inaccessible to due fighting in the streets, or your house might be ransacked even when boarded up and well defended. As a developer pointed out: "There are some situations in the game where you don't have any good recourse. It's just shit happens. You can just deal with it or sometimes die."[354] The statement comes from a production study carried out by de Smale, Kors and Sandovar which reveals how the game has been designed with the aim of developing a "realistic moral experience of war": the developers wished to depict not only the material difficulties of finding oneself in a war, but also the moral dilemmas which stem from it.[355]

Some of the choices the player can make are binary, with a clear morally correct choice: for example, during the day a neighbor might come to ask for medicines for their ailing wife or support to defend their house from thieves. It is to note, however, that even these choices might be more difficult based on the survivors' status: is it fair to give food away to help one other person if your situation is dire and all three of you risk going hungry? Most other "moral" choices the player can encounter are defined by de Smale et al. as "ambiguous choices": whether to steal or not (and if so, from whom and what), whether to kill cruel bandits, whether to simply donate medicines to a hospital or ask for something (or a lot) in return… The fact that these choices do not have obvious solutions and that they are not clearly rewarded distances the player's behavior from "the strategic gameplay mode that instrumentalizes play", helping to humanize the experience of war instead of turning it into a series of parameters to be balanced. This process of humanization is helped by many little details (like having the inventory named "our things" and not having a character's health or mental status being represented by numbers) and by including conditions normally never portrayed in a game: that includes a character possibly suffering because of traumatic events or even boredom (a crucial aspect of the experience, as discovered by the developers after extensive research and interviews with actual

[354] De Smale, S., Kors, M. J. L., & Sandovar, A. M. (2019). The Case of *This War of Mine*: A Production Studies Perspective on Moral Game Design. *Games and Culture*, *14*(4), 387–409.

[355] Ibid., p. 388.

survivors of war). As pointed out by the study itself, many of these aspects were "designed to simulate discomfort as did *Spec Ops: The Line*", which in turn arouses "the ethical agent within the player".[356]

However, I would argue it is precisely because of the procedural representations of unusual gameplay aspects that playing *This War of Mine* can sometimes result in unwanted narrative implications or failure in the "emotional realism" the developers wished to achieve.[357] As stated, a character's mental state of being is not numerically represented in-game, ranging instead from "Content" to "Broken". It is, however, actually programmed as a simple numerical value. The morale of a given character can instantly go down after traumatic events (like a fellow survivor dying) or by having someone in the group commit acts which the character personally deems immoral, such as stealing or killing unarmed civilians (according to the game's fan wiki, killing thugs or soldier does not negatively affect anyone).[358] This makes logical sense, and the distinctions in reactions between each character further heighten emotional realism. However, morale also instantly goes up if the character (or group) does a good deed (like exchanging medicine with a hospital), with no limits coming from the repetition of an action or having committed particularly heinous deeds: it is just a number freely going up and down. The structure of the system can create bizarre implications: apparently, it does not matter how deeply a character has been traumatized, they can always become happy again by donating an x number of pills, or talking to another character for x minutes. As morale is tied to morality, this also results in weird equivalencies, as any horrible act can be balanced by any minor good act repeated often enough.

This is not a new problem for games which try to codify morality: the act itself always requires the developers, to some degree, to arbitrarily judge an action as "good" or "bad". In this case, even if character reactions vary (some may be indifferent towards stealing from everyone), there are no actions considered as good by one character and bad by another: everything is pre-assigned. *This War of Mine* is still an innovative iteration of the system, positioned at a distance from previous disastrous attempts. In the post-apocalyptic RPG *Fallout 3* (2008), for instance, the player can decide to blow up a town with a nuclear bomb to help the residences of a luxury hotel (as it is ruining their view): while the action lowers their (numerically visible) karma score by a great deal, donating 20 water bottles to one beggar completely nullifies its effect. By removing the numerical visible representation of morale and by making the effects of some action be character-specific, the game avoids most of the system's shortcomings: a player could never even realize that morale works so simply. Moreover,

[356] Ibid., p. 393.
[357] Ibid., p. 396.
[358] *Morale*. (n.d.). This War of Mine Wiki. From https://this-war-of-mine.fandom.com/wiki/Morale (last accessed February 5, 2025).

some choices do seem to permanently affect their character, although this can be visible only during the ending (which consists in a simple description of a character's fate after the end of the war): too many unmoral choices or too many traumas result in worse endings. This iteration of procedural morality, however, is still far from perfect, raising doubts over whether a convincing iteration could even be possible.

4.3.2 *Liyla and the Shadows of War* (2016)

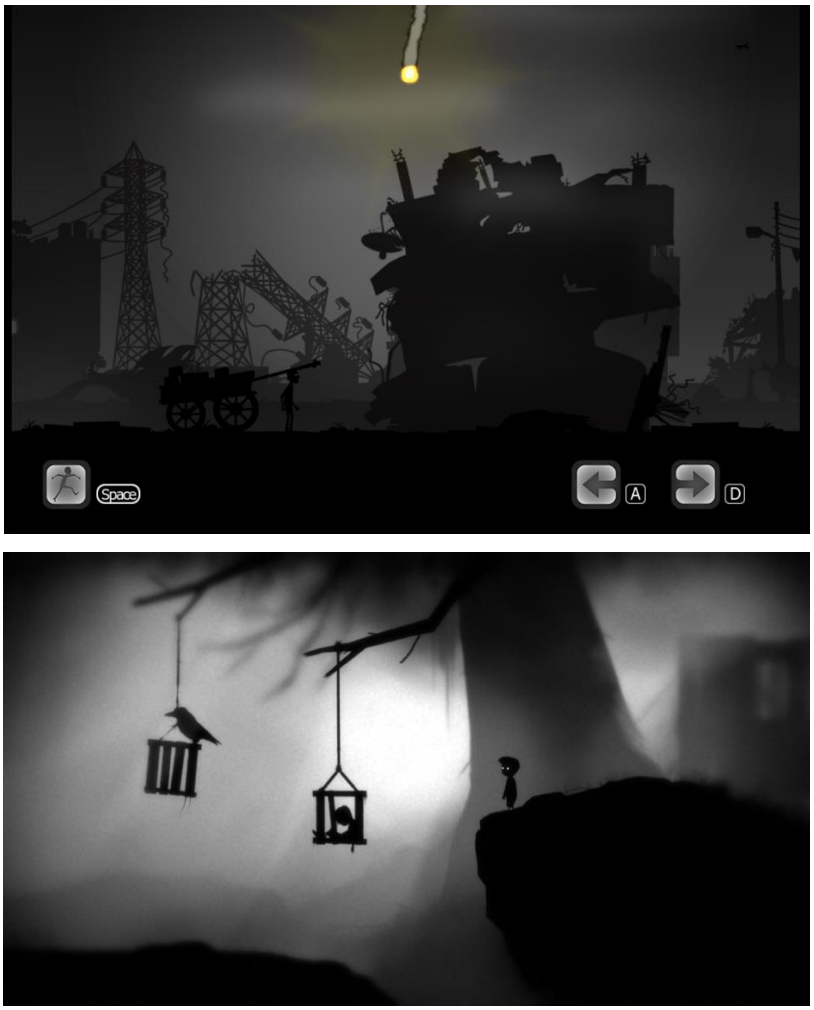
A completely different approach to the representations of civilians during a war is shown in *Liyla and the Shadows of War* (2016), a short adventure created by Palestinian developer Rasheed Abueideh. The game, which follows the brief story of a family trying to escape Israeli night bombardments during the 2014 Gaza war, encountered a great number of development obstacles due to Israel's government. As Abueideh mentioned in a talk at the 2017 Game Developers Conference, Palestine is essentially cut out from the game industry, and even the act itself of developing a similar game can be outright dangerous. On the logistical side, the first obstacles to surpass are Israel's many limits imposed on online payments, essential in today's game industry (his company had a small gaming department, but he was forced to shut it down for this reason after the production of one minor mobile game).[359] The worst risk, whoever, comes from the threat of persecution, as every activity which involves militant actions or simple criticism of Israel could result in arrest. His small team had to develop the game in secret, almost completely without funds. The only financial help came from Suomalaiset Nettikasinot, the gaming team of a Finnish online casino[360].

The problems didn't end after *Liyla*'s publication. Scheduled to be released on May 18, 2016, it was rejected by the Apple Store: due to its politically charged content, it was considered "not appropriate" to be classified as a game (while *Israeli Heroes*, a game focused on the Israeli perspective on the Gaza war, remained freely available).[361] Four days later, after some outcry from the community and specialized press, Apple reconsidered its decision, and the game was released as freeware for iOS and Android.[362] After its publication it received immediate attention and appraisal, winning various

[359] Abueideh, R. (2023, November 16). *GDC 2017* [Video]. LinkedIn. From http://bit.ly/3TheCgU (last accessed February 5, 2025).
[360] Abueideh, R. (n.d.). Liyla: The Game. From https://liyla.org/ (last accessed February 5, 2025).
[361] Kamen, M. (2016, May 19). *Gaza Strip iOS game isn't a game, says Apple.* Wired. From https://www.wired.co.uk/article/palestinian-game-liyla-apple-app-store-ban (last accessed February 5, 2025).
[362] Frank, A. (2016, May 20). *Palestinian political platformer rejected by Apple App Store, 'not appropriate' for games (update).* Polygon. From https://www.polygon.com/2016/5/20/11723856/apple-palestinian-game-rejection-liyla-and-the-shadows-of-war (last accessed February 5, 2025).

independent video game awards.[363] It was later re-popularized in 2021, when the PC version as the centerpiece for a charity relief bundle offered by indie game developers on Itch.io in response to the 2021 Israel–Palestine crisis.[364] There it helped raise almost 900,000$ for the cause, which were donated to the UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East).

Liyla's uniqueness does not stem only from its country of provenance, as it has a novel approach to the representation of war. It neither follows the hyper-simplistic approach of serious games nor the structure of traditional genres like *The Line* or *This War of Mine*. On an aesthetical level, it borrows its visuals from the well-known supernatural horror game *Limbo* (2010), immediately creating a critical friction between the surreal atmosphere evoked by the style of *Limbo* and the terrifying reality of the subject [Fig. 45].



[363] *Liyla and the Shadows of War—Funded by Suomalaiset Nettikasinot*. (n.d.). Liyla. From https://liyla.org/ (last accessed February 5, 2025).
[364] itch.io. (2021, June). *Indie bundle for Palestinian Aid*. Itch.io. From https://itch.io/b/902/indie-bundle-for-palestinian-aid (last accessed February 5, 2025).

Fig. 45. Own screenshots. *Liyla* (above) and *Limbo* (below).

The gameplay is composed of a mix of light puzzles and platforming alternated with narrative-based choice-making. It is in the choices that the game continuously subverts the player's expectations. Liyla and her father must make apparently obvious possibilities, like deciding whether to seek shelter in Liyla UNRWA school or keep running in the open, or whether to go ask four boys who are playing on the beach to join them in the escape or ignore them. These choices are portrayed in a traditional way, simply displayed on-screen along with a rapidly depleting bar pushing the player to quickly make a decision [Fig. 46].

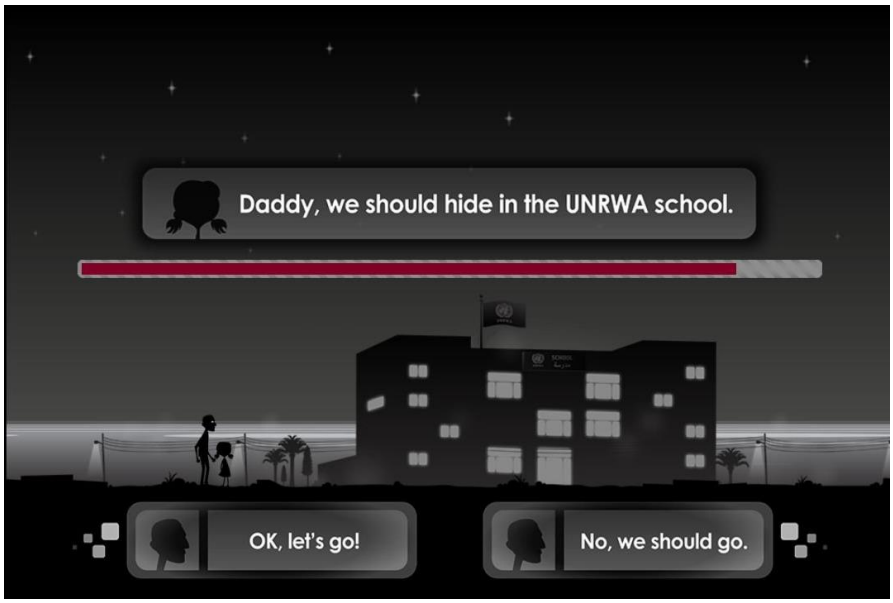


Fig. 46. Own screenshot.

The inversion of expectations happens at this moment, not by changing the traditional gameplay (it is still a binary choice with fixed outcomes), but by inverting the logics of common sense. While the player is instinctually pushed towards the obvious option, helped by mechanical urgency, they find themselves in the wrong with every choice. If they decide to go to the school, it gets bombed, and Liyla dies. If they decide to go ask the boys to join them, they get bombed, and Liyla dies. Both the attack on UNRWA schools and the murder of the four boys really happened in 2014, with the latter being documented on camera in Jabaly's *Ambulance* (2016). Abueideh created an algorithmic path which mirrors the uncertainties of the conflict, and its actual inversion of common logic derived

from the routine violation of human rights. The inescapable nature of the pre-programmed path parallels the destiny of many civilians under the occupation, especially with its finale.

Contrary to most games, *This War of Mine* included, there is no way to "win" at *Liyla*. After making every possible correct choice, Liyla is finally put in an ambulance to be evacuated. The game gives you a false sense of security for a couple of seconds, as the ambulance moves and a final hopeful cutscene starts playing. But the vehicle is hit by a rocket, and Liyla dies. The last images of the game are of her soul, along those of her mom, the four boys killed on the beach, and dozens of others go up to the sky to become stars [Fig. 47].

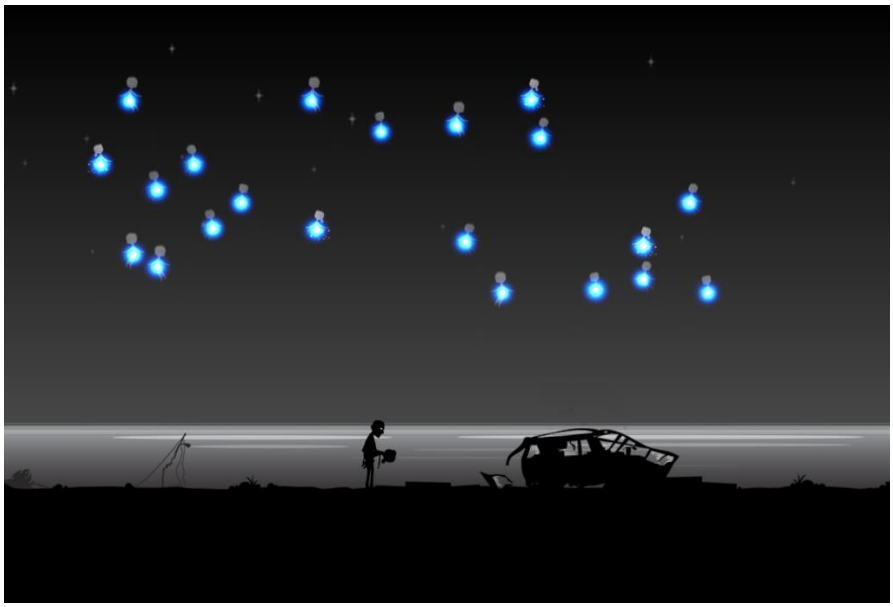


Fig. 47. Own screenshot.

In its final moments, *Liyla* inverts the foundational logic of the video game, portraying an unwinnable conflict and encouraging conscious reflection by breaking fundamental player expectations. This is not to say that its message is of complete hopelessness. First, the developing of the game itself in an act of resistance in line with Palestinian cinema.[365] Second, during the end credits, educational information on civilian victims and Israeli war crimes (along with useful links) are shown to invite players to better inform themselves. A challenge to the hegemonical narrative made once again more effective through explicit interpellation.

This War of Mine bends the traditional gameplay of a survival game to have the player empathize with the conditions of the survivors, but it can be played perfectly to avoid any death and never

[365] Dabashi (2006); Bahar, S. (2021). *Documentary cinema in Israel-Palestine: Performance, the body, the home* (First edition). I.B. Tauris.

compromise one's morals, even considering the possibility of unlucky events. On the other hand, *Liyla* completely breaks traditional gameplay, avoiding any possible uncertainty and better showing the cruel absurdity of Gaza's constant oppression.

With this comparison I do not mean to state that *This War of Mine* would be a better game, or even a more persuasive one, if it was harsher and death descended truly at random. As the developers pointed out, they had to keep it entertaining enough to not have players abandon it out of frustration and to have it sell well enough to sustain their livelihood.[366] *Liyla*, like the serious games of chapter 4.1.3, is allowed to be that unfair by virtue of being much shorter game (a playthrough lasts under twenty minutes) which was able to be developed with minimal funding and did not necessitate the amount of research of *This War of Mine*. The games were chosen as a pair to illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of two different approaches: choosing to display war from the point of view of civilians is already a radical act which contrasts with the routine dismissal of the innocent lives in war games. Moreover, just mechanically portraying war not as something to be won but survived completely changes its signification.

In this chapter we have shown how inverting the player's expectations, breaking the game flow, employing critical displeasures and rendering explicit the interpellation of the player are often successfully employed in games to meaningfully counter hegemonical representations of war. Considering these findings, *This War of Mine* could be seen as theoretically less "pure" of a challenge to hegemony than *Liyla*, *Killbox* or even *The Line*. However, while it is surely closer to the mainstream (occasionally to its detriment), that does not result in an absolutely less effective approach: its proximity to traditional development ultimately led to a longer, deeper (especially in regard to its system of "ambiguous choices") and more successful game. That, in turn, can lead to developers having more freedom with their next project. *Liyla* was exceptional in its good reception, bringing enough notoriety to Abueideh and his team to let them fully finance their upcoming project (*Dreams on a Pillow*, a game about the 1948 Nakba) through crowdfunding; however, not all independent developers have this opportunity.[367] Moreover, the closer-to-mainstream appeal of games like *This War of Mine* results in more people being exposed to it, and remaining be approachable by a more traditional gamer public. *Spec Ops: The Line* did manage to achieve comparable success while remaining more disruptive, but it did so in part by luring unaware shooter players during one of the most wildly popular eras for its genre. Even then, it required a mainstream

[366] De Smale et al. (2019).

[367] Carpenter, N. (2025, January 7). *Historical Palestinian game Dreams on a Pillow surpasses funding goal*. Polygon. From https://www.polygon.com/gaming/504479/dreams-on-a-pillow-palestinian-1948-nakba-game-funded (last accessed February 6, 2025).

publisher to take an unusually big swing, which still cost the developers some freedom (they were made to include a multiplayer mode which has nothing to do with the rest of the game) and, ultimately, the permanent disappearance of the game from digital stores.[368]

It would be foolish to claim that there is only one good way to challenge hegemonical discourse. As we have seen, there are commonly used strategies which are more effective than others, but every step away from mainstream development comes at a cost.

4.4 Resistance through *countergaming*

As we have stated in chapter 1.1, the video game medium offers the possibility of counter-hegemonical action not only through creation of new games, but also through modification and alternatives modes of play. Modification is of course possible in other entertainment media, although "modding" (that is, the modification of a video game) is unique in that it can be encouraged on a practical level by the developers themselves and digital storefront. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), for instance, can be freely modded through the Steam Workshop, requiring nothing more than the push of a button. *Europa Universalis IV* (2013) is also frequently modded on the Workshop. As a grand strategy game simulating history, it offers great potential for multiple perspectives in history, including indigenous ones, as Loban has discovered in creating his own "Indigenous people of Oceania" mod.[369] However, simply adding different perspectives to these games is not enough. As Loban and Apperley point out:

> "Modding EUIV from the indigenous perspective necessarily involves positioning indigenous culture in relation to the concepts of nation, state and sovereignty that were used by European colonial powers and white settlers to justify displacing indigenous people from their land by violence or other means."[370]

Challenging hegemony through the act of playing itself is however unique to the medium, as it allows for interactive resistance, and even re-signification of the text, without any modification of the code. We will call this type of action *countergaming,* a term coined by Galloway.[371] While his research focuses on the actions of major artistic re-writing and modifications of games, Fassone argues that we can essentially define *countergaming* as "every practice carried on by subjects

[368] Krupa, D. (2025, August 29). *Spec Ops Dev: Game's Multiplayer "Should Not Exist"—IGN*. IGN. From https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/08/29/spec-ops-dev-says-its-multiplayer-should-not-exist (last accessed February 6, 2025).

[369] Altomonte, J. A. (2019). Playing Killbox: Didactic Gaming and Drone Warfare. In *Video Games and the Global South* (pp. 61–74).

[370] Ibid., p. 95.

[371] Galloway, A. R. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. University of Minnesota Press., p. 107.

different from the institutional developers of the game which results in/represents a critical approach to a given video game or that highlights its problematic aspects".[372] Galloway describes these actions as *foregrounding*. Through unexpected modifications/play practices (both by the software and by other players) they bring to the foreground the hidden political aspects of the simulation; somewhat my own attempt to systematically shoot everything that moves in *Modern Warfare*, which revealed its unstated stances on civilian casualties. [373] There is a substantial amount of general research on the topic: *Transgression in Games and Play*, for instance, is a notable collection of essays analyzing many examples of what it terms "transgressive play".[374] However, research of transgression in war games is much rarer. In the book, for instance, only *This War of Mine* and *Spec Ops: The Line* are referenced, and only as forms of transgressive game-making.[375] There is, however, one notable exception in the critical response to Joseph DeLappe's pacifist performance *dead-in-iraq*.

4.4.1 *dead-in-iraq*

In 2006, DeLappe (also one of the creators of *Killbox*) logged on *America's Army* (2002) with the nickname dead-in-iraq. He then started a game, but refused to play in any intended way. His avatar stood still as he started writing the names of American soldiers killed in Iraq after March 19, 2003, stopping only if he was killed or kicked out of the chat (only to continue during another match). He interrupted the performance only in 2011, when US troops retired from Iraq, having already written the names of 4,500 troops. The action has been described by the artist as "anti-war, pacifist gesture, but also a memorial".[376] According to Fassone, it can be used to "prove the existence of a mediatic specificity of acts of protest inside of video games" by analyzing in terms of *stasis, foregrounding* and *reappropriation*.[377]

Stasis, in this case, is not only the result of the tradition of pacifist protest (although the performance can also be considered as a digital sit-in). In a video game, it is an act of resistance to kineticism itself, imposed by the interactive premise of games, which makes the performance even more discomforting.

Moreover, *dead-in-iraq* interacts with the game through extremely effective *foregrounding*. War in *America's Army* is hyper-sanitized, even more than in action games like *Call of Duty*: there is no

[372] Fassone, R. (2020), *Anti-War Games. Attivismo antibellico nel gioco digitale*. In «Cinema e storia», 1, p. 222 (my translation).
[373] Ibid.
[374] Jørgensen, K., & Karlsen, F. (Eds.). (2018). *Transgression in games and play*. The MIT Press.
[375] Jørgensen & Karlsen (2018).
[376] Quoted in Fassone (2020), p. 224.
[377] Fassone (2020), p. 225.

trace of gore or blood, and death only makes the avatar disappear (and reappear for the next round). By incessantly reminding what is waiting for player on the other side of the recruitment portal, it highlights the extreme artificiality of its representation.

DeLappe also uses his pacifist gesture to *reappropriate* the space of digital games, dominated for much too long by the hegemony of the defense industry, reclaiming it in the name of *game art* by placing a time-based, growing "anti-memorial" inside *America's Army*.[378]

To our point, *dead-in-iraq* shows how re-signification can happen in a game without modifying its code but by interacting with it in unintended ways. An act especially effective when carried out in multiplayer, as it guarantees an audience and lets the artist-player also subvert social codes. It is of course possible to *countergame* in single player: it is in effect what Farocki does in *Parallel III* (2014) by exploring the invisible borders of open-world games.[379] Thanks to the popularity of live streaming, it is also possible to have live, semi-interactive single player performances. Celine Song's reenactment of Chekhov's *The Seagull*, realized entirely in *The Sims 4* (2014) live on Twitch during the Covid pandemic is perhaps the most notable exploration of these new possibilities [Fig. 48].[380]



Fig. 48. Screenshot of the performance. Courtesy of *THE SEAGULL ON THE SIMS 4*. (n.d.). New York Theater Workshop. From https://www.nytw.org/show/the-seagull-on-the-sims-4/ (last accessed February 7, 2025)

[378] Ibid.
[379] *Parallel III* (2014).
[380] *THE SEAGULL ON THE SIMS 4*. (n.d.). New York Theater Workshop. From https://www.nytw.org/show/the-seagull-on-the-sims-4/ (last accessed February 7, 2025).

In the realm of wargames, however, other organized performances of *countergaming* are exceptionally hard to find (especially in recent years), with one notable exception which we will now analyze.

4.4.2 Play by the Rules

On April 15th, 2023, the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) launched the Play by the Rules initiative. Through a dedicated website, the Committee challenged FPS players to play their favorite games according to "the real Rules of War, to show everyone that even warts have rules – rules which protect humanity on battlefields IRL."[381] The challenge was supported by a dedicated day of streaming by major Twitch gamers (publicized on the website) who played various FPSs according to four tenets:

1) "**No thirsting**: when an enemy is down and can't respond, you can't keep shooting at them. (Rule of War: Prisoners of war must be protected from violence, intimidation, and ill treatment).
2) "**No targeting non-violent NPCs**: bots that don't fire unprovoked are considered civilians, and you can't target or harm them (Rule of War: Civilians cannot be attacked and must be protected)".
3) "**No targeting civilian buildings**: in any given game map, houses, schools, or hospitals are considered safe zones that you cannot harm. When fighting in these spaces, you must do everything you can to avoid damage. (Rule of War: Civilian infrastructures are protected areas)".
4) "**Use med kits on everyone**: if you have an unused med kit that works on others, you must give it to those who need it—be they friendly or enemy (Rule of War: The sick and wounded must be cared for on both sides)".

As reported by Carpenter, the fundamental idea behind Play by the Rules is not new, as the ICRC "has been in discussions with game developers for more than a decade, encouraging them to build incentives into their point system for players to follow fundamental rules of humanitarian law".[382]

[381] ICRC. (n.d.). *Play by the Rules*. Play by the Rules. From https://playbytherules.icrc.org/ (last accessed February 7, 2025).

[382] Carpenter, C. (2023, May 23). *The Red Cross Wants Gamers to 'Play by the Rules' of War*. World Politics Review. From https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/red-cross-video-games-war-crimes-play-by-the-rules/ (last accessed February 7, 2025).

The general initiative was first described on the ICRC website in 2013, and it builds on research "arguing that integrating war law into video games 'can improve knowledge of the rules of war among millions of players' and 'offer the promise of greater respect for IHL on tomorrow's battlefields.'"[383]

Their interaction with game developers had already resulted in games partnering with the ICRC "to develop stories that showcase humanitarian law in the gameplay".[384] *Arma 3* (2013), for instance, released the *Laws of War* DLC in 2017, an expansion which lets gamers play as humanitarian workers. It was also used for charity, as half of the revenue from direct sales was donated to the ICRC.[385] The DLC was featured in the 2023 streaming, along with the "Play by the Rules" *Fortnite* mode, which was apparently created *ad hoc* for the stream by Beyond Creative, a marketing firm specialized in developing branded content for games.[386]

The initiative is not meant to actually change gamer behavior long-term (either in-game or in real life). It instead an effort to socialize them into understanding the real rules of war in accordance to "the wider ICRC agenda of strengthening civil society's commitment to the laws of armed conflict".[387] Contrary to popular belief, the Committee is not only an aid organization: a large part of it is focused in on the "dissemination" of the knowledge of international law (which they also carry on through social media and the training of university professors). While the effects of any isolated initiative are difficult to determine, the aim of the larger effort is backed by research which shows that even simple knowledge of the laws of war does change the public's tolerance towards war crimes.[388] In a way, the reflection proposed in these pages wishes to raise awareness around the representation of war in the audio-visual artefacts at stake and the strategies connected to them; in so doing, it embraces, albeit moving from a less ambitious position, a similar spirit.

Going back to the Committee, it is thus challenging to determine how much Play by the Rules contributed to their dissemination: The self-imposed changes to gameplay for the streamers lasted only a couple of hours, although it did receive some attention from the press.[389] It is possible that the vast majority of viewers simply saw it as a fun occasional change, as pacifist runs often are. *Doom* (1993), for example, has a popular pacifist speedrunning category, challenging the player to beat the

[383] Ibid.
[384] Ibid.
[385] *Arma 3 Laws of War*. (n.d.). Steam. From https://store.steampowered.com/app/571710/Arma_3_Laws_of_War/ (last accessed February 7, 2025).
[386] *Red Cross: Play by The Rules*. (n.d.). Beyond Creative. From https://www.beyondcreative.gg/branded-games/play-by-the-rules (last accessed February 7, 2025).
[387] Carpenter (2023)
[388] Ibid.
[389] Ibid.

game as fast as possible on the hardest difficulty ("Ultra Violence") without killing any demons.[390] It is easy to see how it was implemented for entertainment rather than to promote peaceful human-demon interactions. Still, the evidence presented by the ICRC does show that even the simple dissemination of knowledge can contribute to shaping the consensus of civil society, pointing to the efficacy of smaller initiatives (although more research is sorely needed).

4.4.3 Spontaneous pacifism in violent games

While organized *countergaming* performances in war games are rare and far between, there is anecdotal evidence which points to an intriguing undercurrent of spontaneous pacifist play in some multiplayer shooters. While this kind of play is seemingly motivated by a pure search of entertainment, the existence of relatively frequent acts of resistance to intended play should be caution against the study of multiplayer games as a monolithic text: in these cases, social rules could be signifiers as impactful as game rules. Most importantly, the study of these behaviors could prove fruitful to understand how a multiplayer game's ideological workings could be challenged with non-static interventions.

Proof of spontaneous pacifism can be found in Valve's *Team Fortress 2* (2007), a cartoony squad-based multiplayer FPS. Its players who do not engage in any kind of combat are common enough that they have received a community name, "friendlies".[391] These players most commonly go around the map repeatedly crouching (a global signal for non-violence commonly agreed upon in multiplayer games) and throwing healing sandwiches at everyone regardless of their team. This behavior seems to be generally accepted by non-friendly players as a fun distraction, and it is common practice not to shoot them (although not everyone agrees).[392] Punishing this friendly behavior could even result in a disadvantage, as the player would end up spending limited time and ammo eliminating an advantageous non-threat. Playing as a friendly actually inverts the gameplay incentive for killing, rendering it a mechanical mistake. This practice is clearly not carried out with the aim of countering the trivialization of violence in war games or educating its playerbase. Friendlies are simply considered as a divertissement which renders the gameplay of an almost twenty-year-old title more varied and fun, both for them and those who play it as intended. However, they do show a game's logic can be turned against itself much more easily than one could expect: it doesn't even require

[390] *UV pacifist*. (2025, August 2). Doom Wiki. From https://doom.fandom.com/wiki/UV_pacifist (last accessed February 7, 2025).
[391] *Community fads*. (n.d.). Team Fortress 2 Official Wiki. From https://wiki.teamfortress.com/wiki/Community_fads. (last accessed February 7, 2025).
[392] Ibid.

statis, as simple unconstructed play might be enough, while also opening the possibility for more players to join.

Team Fortress 2 (2007), however, is a game which already incentivizes pro-social behavior. First, players always fight in teams. Second, the community is incentivized to collectively contribute to the development of the game by Valve by designing and submitting items: in fact, over 1,400 community-contributed items have been added since March 2010.[393] Is transgressive play possible in truly hostile games? To this end, we will now briefly talk about two documented attempts at pacifist gameplay in *Fortnite* (2017), a multiplayer TPS which incentivizes violent gameplay not only through its match structure, but also its FOMO-fueled in-game economy.

In 2018, bestselling author and internet personality John Green released a series of YouTube videos documenting his attempts to win a match of *Fortnite* as a "pacifist": he would try to avoid combat as much as possible, and never shoot unless shot at.[394] This behavior is much harder to sustain than in *Team Fortress 2*, as *Fortnite* belongs to the "battle royale" genre. Taking its name from Fukasaku's *Battle Royale* (2000), it sees 100 players battling to death on an ever-shrinking map. Death is permanent, and there is only one winner (who, in *Fortnite*, achieves a "Victory Royale"). In the game, following the intended way of playing is not only encouraged by its basic premise, but also by its economy: killing other players rewards the player with experience points, which go towards unlocking time-limited cosmetic rewards. While winning without killing anyone does grant some experience, the amount is minuscule compared to what one would gain by going on a (successful) killing spree. John Green's attempts are amusing, but he did not fully interact with all the game's elements, opting to try and win by hiding until the very end. Moreover, his approach was not as pacifist as it could be, as he was always able to shoot back.

Jonathan McIntosh, host of the YouTube channel *Pop Culture Detective*, tried to emulate and elevate Green's challenge, as he showed in *Searching for Humanity in Fortnite's Battle Royale*.[395] First, he refused to deal any damage to other players, even if they were actively shooting him. Second, he tried to not hide all the time, aiming to make friends in the game, to see if anyone was willing to potentially renounce to a victory royale until the very end. All to answer his question, "will the human

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[393] *List of community-contributed items*. (n.d.). Team Fortress 2 Official Wiki. From https://wiki.teamfortress.com/wiki/List_of_community-contributed_items. (last accessed February 7, 2025).

[394] hankgames. (2018, April 15). *John Green is a Fortnite Pacifist: Episode 2* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjRa1RQhy-w&list=PLlfLHAPCj1GLTvCf7nBr8rc7bpsvwz-UI&index=4 (last accessed February 7, 2025).

[395] Pop Culture Detective. (2023, November 1). *Searching for Humanity in Fortnite's Battle Royale* [Video]. YouTube. From https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SArtgoMMDNg. (last accessed February 7, 2025).

urge to be social ever outweigh the psychological manipulation of an addictive reward structure?"[396] The term "psychological manipulation" is not an exaggeration: the game employs every possible tactic to manipulate its young playerbase into spending real money and as much time as possible to look better in the game and get exclusive skins, to the point that *Fortnite*-based bullying has become an issue in some classrooms.[397] Surprisingly, McIntosh managed to reach the end with an in-game friend on multiple occasions.

While the result is impressive in and of itself, what is especially useful to us is seeing how he managed to use exploits the game's mechanics to successfully resist its strongly intended play. First, he used aesthetics to present himself as non-threatening, buying and equipping skins (different character models) and emotes (gestures) commonly associated with cuteness and non-aggression, like a teddy bear costume and the motion of sitting down or hugging (which has the advantage of requiring synchronized interaction by another player). Secondly, he also used repeated crouching to approach others, threw gifts at them, and used every other tactic to "break their gameplay loop", getting them out of the flow to persuade them to, in effect, *countergame*.[398]

These examples serve to demonstrate that there is still great, untapped potential for *countergaming* in war games. The efforts we discuss have however notable limits: they are isolated examples, they were realized in non-military shooters, and, in the last case of *Fortnite*, they did partially rely on bought skins (an intended and strongly encouraged action). Still, they do show that collaborative free play, or even counter-play, is possible even on platforms dominated by the strictest fine-tuned capitalistic incentives. Ethnographic or autoethnographic studies carried out in different games could aid in answering a great variety of questions: how can hegemonical play best be countered? How much do aesthetics matter? How does a spontaneous pacifist vocabulary come to be? Could it be expanded?[399]

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[396] Ibid.

[397] Hernandez, P. (2019, May 7). *Fortnite is free, but kids are getting bullied into spending money*. Polygon. From https://www.polygon.com/2019/5/7/18534431/fortnite-rare-default-skins-bullying-harassment (last accessed February 6, 2025).

[398] Pop Culture Detective (2023).

[399] For some examples of ethnographic approaches to conflict-driven games see: Sundén, J., & Sveningsson, M. (2013). Gender and sexuality in online game cultures: Passionate play. London: Routledge; Ståhl, M., & Rusk, F. (2020). Player customization, competence and team discourse: exploring player identity (co)construction in Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. *Game Studies, 20*; Miller, K. (2008). The accidental carjack: Ethnography, gameworld tourism, and grand theft auto. *Game* Studies, 8.

Conclusion

The three questions posed at the beginning of this research were: how do war games support the military hegemonical status quo? Can they be used, instead, to counter it? If so, how?

To answer these queries, we have first looked at how the institutional support behind the development of militainment works. As we have seen, there is ample proof which points towards a systemic interference of the DoD (and the US government at large) in its production. With a great number of the most influential productions receiving help from the Department, almost the whole market is shaped to their design - not through coercion but through material incentives and the formation and upholding of common sense through approved media. That is not to say that the DoD is the only driving force behind the current mainstream representations of war. It is, however, an undeniable example of how the US *political society* works in tandem with its *civil society* to uphold the status quo. This influence is, possibly, even more deeply rooted in video games, as it marked them from their conception. While we have tried to establish how much the DoD is actively participating in the production of war games in the present day, a great deal of research is still needed on the topic: it is evident that they still collaborate with a number of major studios, but the details of this collaboration are buried between thousands of pages of official documents. An in-depth study of this aspect would need to extract and organize all this information, as well as try to request more through FOIA. Although both tactics would be quite time-consuming, the formation of a coherent and searchable database of DoD-supported militainment would be of great help to every researcher looking into the topic. More information could be obtained through the games' paratexts (especially in marketing material, as collaboration with real soldiers is often used as a selling point) or interviews with their developers.

In chapter 3, we have analyzed a substantial corpus of post-9/11 war movies to gauge how war is signified in the mainstream in service to the current US-led military hegemony. Through this analysis, we have seen how war is paradoxically represented both as spectacle and as a terrible, sometimes corrupting (but always necessary) practice. This framing serves to further glorify the results of US interventionism, turning every American soldier (no matter how flawed) into a self-sacrificing hero, but not without encouraging future generations to enroll. It was especially notable to see how war has been continuously sanitized in media, rendered almost non-real since the Vietnam war. Moreover, we have seen how these movies systematically misrepresent historical events to shape the narrative in favor of the DoD, CIA, and FBI, downplaying both the horrific effects of US occupations and the role of other foreign powers (even frequent allies like the UK and Canada). By analyzing films which try to meaningfully criticize this signification from the inside of the general discourse, we have also

seen how this effort can often result in a further reinforcement of the status quo even when the DoD is not involved, due to them accepting the premises of the general consensus. We have then looked at movies which successfully, wholly counter the dominant narrative utilizing various strategies. First, by centering not soldiers but actual victims of war, real representations of the people who suffer under US and Israeli occupation (and who are still often caricaturized in Western cinema): Palestinian cinema being, of course, an exceptional (but not the only) example of this mode of resistance. Second, by actually representing the reality of warfare and the political reasons behind it, as is the case of *Redacted* (2007), *Jarhead* (2005) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Third, by challenging the images and technology which drive modern warfare themselves, as can be seen in the work of Harun Farocki: the artist revealed how both operational images (such as those created by targeting systems) and simulation software de-humanize and shape warfare. This discussion on cinema was concluded by a brief consideration of the production issues which still end up shaping these counter-hegemonical projects, sometimes limiting their authors (like Brian De Palma), but also granting it an unreplaceable aura and political strength, as is the case with Gazan documentaries. Finally, we ended this chapter with a preliminary consideration on how the interactivity of video games should be taken into account when discussing their signification of war, ultimately highlighting how it could be interpreted (in some cases) through an updated model of Althusser's theory of interpellation.

In the final chapter, we have first thoroughly dissected *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2019), seeing how it not only utilized the same rhetoric found in DoD-supported war movies, but also how it supported it through interaction; both by justifying war crimes and the killing of civilians and by naturalizing its interpellation of the player, who finds themselves shaped into a modern citizen-soldier. We have then seen how the genre of military shooters can still be utilized for counter-hegemonical purposes with *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). Yager's game brilliantly shows how their insidious rhetoric can be turned on itself by rendering its mechanisms visible, directly interpellating the player, and utilizing a series of critical displeasures to avoid turning war into a pleasurable spectacle. In a similar vein, *September 12* (2004)*, Unmanned* (2012) and *Killbox* (2016) have been shown to utilize some of the same tactics (like critical displeasures and de-naturalizing gameplay) to directly show the flawed and dehumanizing logic of the war on terror and drone warfare.

We have also utilized two examples of the representation of war from a civilian point of view, *This War of Mine* (2014) and *Liyla and the Shadows of War* (2016) to show the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to this particular topic. On the one hand, *This War of Mine* paints a more complete picture of war as a civilian, utilizing a longer format which has attracted more players. However, by trying to procedurally represent every aspect of the conflict it occasionally falls

into unwanted narrative repercussions. *Liyla*, on the other hand, paints a smaller picture to a smaller audience, but by choosing simplicity it does capture more effectively the emotional impact of the war on Gaza, while also inverting common gameplay logic for a greater procedurally rhetoric effect.

Finally, we have briefly looked at the practice of *countergaming* as a form of resistance and counter-hegemony, showing how the logic of multiplayer shooters can also be turned against itself simply by playing games in unintended ways. While there is not much published research on this topic (and basically none for war games), we have concluded the chapter with two documented examples of counterplay in *Fortnite* (2017) to hypothesize possible future avenues of research and performance.

While this dissertation does not aim to be conclusive, we have managed to answer our starting questions, finding that war games, while being deeply steeped in military propaganda, can still be utilized to oppose hegemonic narratives – even in the case of military shooters. This hegemonic counter seems to be at its most effective when it explicitly reveals its procedural logic and directly interpellate the player to force them to consciously engage with the text, much like the foremost examples of counter-hegemonic cinema do with their spectators.

Still, more research is needed in every area we have covered, with the field of production studies being especially promising. There is also a great need for in-depth analysis of more individual games: *The Line* and, to a lesser extent, *This War of Mine* stand almost alone as (relatively) recent war games which received notable academic attention. As we have shown with *Modern Warfare*, the processes of signification of a singular game can be exceptionally dense, even in titles which outline their ideological stance very clearly. To reach a complete understanding of how war games reinforce the military hegemony (and how they can oppose it) we are still in need of both more quantitative and qualitative studies: the former might explore how the industry operates as a whole and how the dominant discourse is evolving, and the latter how *procedural rhetoric* is being used as an instrument of signification in a wider variety of contexts and genres.

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