From America’s Army to Call of Duty: Doing battle with the military entertainment complex

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Keywords: Video games industry, Video games political aspects, Military, Military Industrial Complex

Abstract

This paper explores the collaboration between the Pentagon and the entertainment industries at the site of the popular interactive format, the war-themed video game. The commercial media industry is heavily invested in the research and development of digital technologies used to create simulations, graphics, and virtual worlds, which are also essential to the networked protocols of military training and weapons systems. In addition, video games such as America’s Army have been developed by the United States Armed Forces as recruitment tools.

With advances in digital computer-based technologies, war-themed games make increasing claims to realism, authenticity and historical accuracy. Real war footage is frequently inserted into narratives and battlefield sequences. We compare the narratives of the experiences of gamers to narratives of recruits and soldier's experiences of war. Though war themed interactive games are taking simulated battlefields to higher levels of realism, including more intense graphic violence, the thrilling excitement of entertainment replaces the emotional truth of war, a trend with highly negative consequences.

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Robin Andersen, Ph.D., is Professor of Communication and Media Studies and Director of the M.A. Program in Public Communications at Fordham University. She also directs the Peace and Justice Studies Program. She is the author of dozens of book chapters and journal articles, and writes media criticisms for EXTRA! among other publications. Her books include Consumer Culture and TV Programming by Westview Press, and she co-edited the Oxford University Press anthology Critical Studies in Media Commercialism. Her book, A Century of Media: A Century of War by Peter Lang Publishing in 2006 won the Alpha Sigma Nu Book Award for 2007. She co-edited Battleground: The Media, a reference set in 2 Volumes for Greenwood Publishing in 2008. She also edits the book series, New Directions in Media for Praeger, and is a Project Censored National Judge. She is a member of the Board of Directors for F.A.I.R. and Deep Dish TV.
The military-entertainment complex is the cooperation between the military and entertainment industries to their mutual benefit, especially in such fields as cinema, multimedia and virtual reality. In Hollywood, many movie productions were directly supervised by the Department of Defense. Since 1989, the chief liaison between Hollywood and the DoD is Phil Strub. Directors looking to borrow Army material for their movies need to apply to the DoD, and submit their movies' scripts for vetting. Ultimately The latest installment of the Call of Duty franchise 'Modern Warfare' hopes to add newfound realism to the game, highlighting the "morally gray" side of modern proxy wars, but so far it seems to be more 'oorah' Western
propaganda. “It wouldn’t be doing justice to the unintended victims in these wars and the unsung heroes of these wars.” In this case unsung heroes are dodgy “aid workers” with a chequered past, shadowy backers and extremist friends. The designers reportedly name-checked both the ‘Last Men in Aleppo’ and the Academy Award-winning ‘White Helmets’ documentaries at a preview of the game at Infinity Ward’s Los Angeles headquarters recently. 25 with the release of “Call of Duty: Modern Warfare,” a title developed by Infinity Ward studio that figures to be one of the top-selling games — if not the top-selling game — of 2019. And its content has already been authenticated by two men who know well the game’s subject matter. Now the engine can handle both a massive battle on a wide-open field and a claustrophobic, close-quarters encounter. In the latter, the engine permits players to angle their weapons independently of the direction the character’s body is facing so they can make better use of available cover while firing, a real-life tactic used by special forces when breaching a room. Previous versions of “Call of Duty” have often featured a sequence in which the player barges into a room, gun blazing, to take out the bad guys. A new book unfolds how the “military-entertainment complex” entices soldiers to war and treats them when they return. A screenshot from America’s Army. According to popular discourse, video games are either the divine instrument of education’s future or the software of Satan himself, provoking young men to carry out all-too-real rampages. As Atlantic contributor Ian Bogost argues in his book, How to Do Things with Video Games, we’ve assigned value to games as if they all contain the same logic and agenda. We assume, unfairly, that the entire medium of video games shares inherent properties more important and defining than all the different ways games are applied and played. America’s Army is a freely available PC game, launched in 2002 but still available, that doubles as a military recruitment tool. Even the peripherals are shared between games and the military: the US and British armies both use Xbox controllers as an interface to control attack drones in live combat. The early Call of Duty titles were set in the World War II era but, in 2007 the setting changed to contemporary conflict with the release of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare. The change was in part to freshen the fiction, but it was also intended to allow for contemporary modes of combat. In one of Mo