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Militarization and Contemporary Video Gaming

This project examines the influence of militarism, and the involvement of the U.S. military itself, in contemporary video gaming. The military's involvement includes developing its own, free of charge, video game title used as a recruitment tool, employing a host of training games many of which are used to desensitize new soldiers to the war environment and the act of killing, and participating in numerous consulting and marketing activities associated with the most popular war-oriented games for mass consumption. Surrounding this direct involvement by the military is a massive and increasingly lucrative gaming industry that markets war and killing in a "realistic" yet intensely glorified manner. Aside from documenting and describing in detail this phenomenon, we examine the macro-cultural and societal implications of this phenomenon.

Figure 1.1 – One Day Sales -- 2011

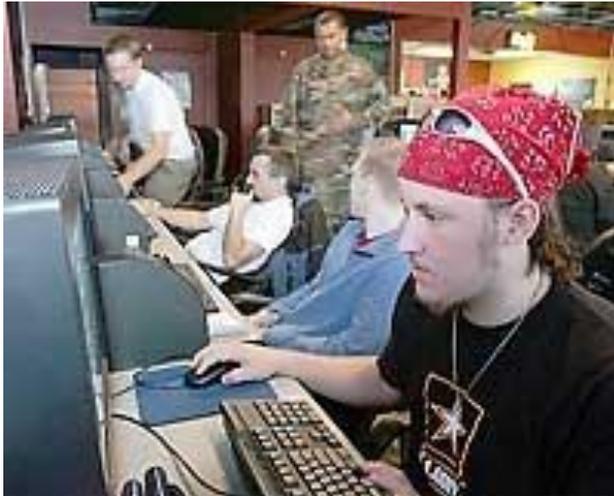


Context and Concepts

For three years in a row, the number one selling entertainment product during its release period has been a video-game – surpassing even block-buster movies such as Harry Potter and Star Wars. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* recently made \$775 million in its first five days in stores, and the *Modern Warfare* franchise has grossed more than \$6 billion. Its central and apparently successful marketing slogan is: “There’s a soldier in all of us” (Snider, 2011).

Of course what’s noteworthy to criminologists, is the type of game: extremely violent, highly realistic war environment, and one that glorifies killing and warfare. It takes only a superficial critical analysis to recognize that this game genre has tapped into an enduring and deep-rooted aspect of American culture – militarism; defined as an ideology that sees the use of militaristic force, or threat of force, as a desired means to solve problems, gain political power, or administer retributive justice. Militarism glorifies military power, hardware, technology, and organization as its primary tools to accomplish one or all of these ends (Kraska 2001). Militarism is a mindset so pervasive and persuasive that it even frames to a large extent how a large number of our male youth recreate (Kraska 1999).

Figure 1.2 – Army Recruitment Tool



This has not gone unnoticed by the U.S. military. We observed first hand the military's use of a war simulation van brought to Kentucky high schools to entice students to enlist. (They also gave away free demo versions of the war simulation software). The U.S. military is actually involved in the gaming industry in numerous ways – including, developing their own battle simulation software for training the troops, developing their own war gaming software to entertain the troops and to recruit new troops, consulting with for-profit companies in the development of games such as *Call to Duty*, and involving themselves in a host of marketing functions sponsored by the gaming industry (again for purpose of marketing the U.S. military to youth).

It is important to clarify the distinction between *indirect* and *direct* militarization as it applies to this research. Militarization is the implementation of the ideology, militarism. It is the process of arming, organizing, planning, training for, threatening, and sometimes implementing violent conflict. To militarize means adopting and applying the central elements of the military model to an organization or particular situation. Indirect

militarization is the process whereby some entity draws from, and patterns themselves around, the military model.

Clearly, in a society that holds “military superiority” as one of its guiding values, the *military model* (not referring to the military institution itself) influences many different aspects of social and political life. For example, the U.S. military does not dictate the way police departments conduct themselves; however, the military model is a strong influence in many police departments deploying paramilitary police units (SWAT teams) – using the military special operations tactics of hostage rescues – for conducting routine search warrants. Direct militarization, on the other hand, is the process whereby the U.S. military directly involves itself in funding or developing and implementing a policy or program that involves the process of arming, organizing, planning, training for, threatening, and implementing violent conflict.

The distinction between indirect and direct militarization is sometimes difficult to ascertain due to the numerous interrelationships between the gaming and military industries. A good example can be seen on the following website:

<http://www.callofdutyendowment.org/code-and-acti-vision-make-an-educational-investment-in-veterans%E2%80%A6/>

Note how in this example the gaming industry is attempting to “support the troops” by providing funding of war veterans for gaming educational programs.

A Brief History

To understand the implications and influence of the relationship between the military and the video game industry we have to look at the creation and history video gaming. *Spacewar!*, one of the first games produced, was made in 1962 by Steve

Russell. In this game two players, represented by rocket ship avatars, would confront each other, firing missiles until only one player remained. This was representative of the Cold War, nuclear threat, and the space race. In 1967 Ralph Baer, while working at Sanders Associates, a military electronics firm, invented the 'Television Gaming Apparatus'. This invention remained a classified military training tool until 1968, when it was given permission to be developed commercial development. These two inventions highlight how influential the military was in the creation of the video game industry; as stated by Matthew Thomson, "The games industry... grew out of the 'military-industrial-academic complex'"; which he holds to be "a variant of military funded computing developments intended for practical military purposes which included war gaming" (Thomson).

In 1971, Nolan Bushnell developed his own version of *Spacewar!*, and the following year founded the videogame company Atari. Bushnell's version of *Spacewar!* was simplified and became the immensely popular *Pong*. Atari quickly became the head developer of coin-operated video games, and in 1977 made crossed the threshold into American living rooms with the home gaming console Atari 2600 (Turse). The Atari 2600 was revolutionary in the video game industry due to its eight-bit graphics and interchangeable video game cartridges. After the release of the home game console and military-themed games such as: *Combat*, *Air-Sea Battle*, and *Battlezone*, Atari garnered over \$5 billion over the next five years (Turse).

Battlezone got the attention of the U.S. Army Training Support Centre (ATSC) to be used as training and skill enhancement. After modifying the controls of the game to be more similar to a real tank, the ATSC experimented using the game to develop hand

eye coordination (Thomson). In 1983, Ronald Reagan even acknowledged the value of video games in training pilots. Instances like these have led to a standing relationship between the video game industry and the military, leading to a dialectic relationship between both parties; becoming known as the ‘military-entertainment complex’.

Out of this relationship came the meeting of The Committee on Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense, and Marine directive 1500.00. The Committee was a request by the Department of Defense’s Defense Modeling and Simulation Office (DMSO); and, according to Thomson, had tasked the National Research Council’s Computer Science and Telecommunications Board to convene a committee to investigate areas for collaboration between the military and entertainment industries. The result of the committee suggested that a formal collaboration between entertainment companies and the Department of Defense (DOD) would be desired. Individual firms would create simulation and modeling technology to both and joint endeavors would be run by university research centers.

The 1990’s show the military expanding upon its virtual training by looking at civilian games altered for military use. A prime example of this is The Computer War Game Assessment Group evaluating and recommending 30 games in 1995 (Thomson). This assessment group led to Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak’s directive 1500.55 stating that:

The use of technological innovations, such as personal computer (PC) based wargames, provide great potential for Marines to develop decision making skills, particularly when live training time and opportunities are limited. Policy

contained herein authorizes Marines to use Government computers for approved PC-based wargames.

Out of this directive, the computer game *Doom* was altered by the Marine Modeling and Simulation Office to become *Marine Doom*. *Marine Doom* was used as a training tool equipped with bunkers, real weapons, friendly fire and fighting holes, and eventually tailored to represent a mission in the Balkans prior to deployment (Thomson). Later, in 1997, the Marine Corps awarded a contract to Mak technologies for the development of MEU 2000, which would be released as both a commercial and a military game. This was the first example of a ‘dual use’ computer game co-funded and co-developed by the Department of Defense and the entertainment industry (Thomson). The result of this type of joint endeavor, as stated by Turse, is the production of a “video game which is much more realistic than any other game ever produced for this genre, making its commercial success highly likely, while at the same time, giving the DOD the cost benefit of unusually high sales for a military training device”.

Figure 1.3 – “Battlefield” Image



Figure 1.4 – “Call of Duty” Image



Current History

“Modern Warfare” and the “Battlefield” series are arguably two of the biggest names in the commercial video game market. Modern Warfare reached \$1 billion within 16 days of its release. The previous record for this amount of sales was James Cameron’s film Avatar in 17 days (Stuart and Sweney).

Modern Warfare 3, while not used directly as a military training tool, received military advisement during its development. During a question and answer session, Robert Bowling, the creative strategist at Infinity Ward, had this to say:

Stars and Stripes: How much input from veterans and active-duty service members goes into the development of "Call of Duty" games?

Bowling: Active-duty service members and veterans make up a big portion of our community and provide invaluable feedback throughout the development of the game and are constantly providing input. Especially when it comes down to the personality and detail of the weapons, gear and tactics we use in the game. You can easily look at the textbook stats of a weapon and look at a standard-issue piece of gear right off the assembly line and get all the details you need, but what makes the game is the feedback from our military counterparts and players who are able to delve into the personality of their weapons, what makes them unique in their look and feel, the language and tactics used in the field and most important

how they alter and adjust their gear and loadouts to be more functional in the field.

What kind of feedback do you typically receive from servicemembers after a game is released?

We get a lot of positive feedback from servicemembers, especially when we highlight some of the more obscure roles in the military. I distinctly remember when we first featured the AC-130 Spectre Gunship in "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare" and started receiving emails and calls from crew members currently serving in them. In addition, our military players are some of the most passionate multiplayer community members we have and are always providing feedback on weapon balancing and gameplay mechanics they'd love to see.

What's something you hope service members will notice in "Modern Warfare 3"?

I hope they notice and appreciate the amount of detail that goes into every weapon. We use service member feedback, in addition to going out and getting hands-on time with every weapon we put into the game to really get the feel of every weapon. Its weight, how that impacts your speed, the way you reload it, the sound it makes as the magazine scrapes the side when removed and replaced, how your gear shakes and moves. Sometimes we have to rely fully on our military fans for reference on weapons we're unable to get our hands on, such as the XM25, which is featured in "Modern Warfare 3," something we had to reach out to our Delta Force counterparts and relied on for input.

America's Army, the official U.S. Army game that competes with commercial games, operates on similar context that Modern Warfare and Battlefield do; levels with mission objectives and competitive online multiplayer. This "free-to-play game has become a more effective recruiting tool for the Army than all other Army advertisements combined, according to MIT researchers (Hsu). According to Hsu, in 2010 America's Army has more than 11 million registered users having played over 260 million total hours and counting since 2002. In an interview with LiveScience, Marsha Berry, America's Army executive producer, stated that "the whole concept behind the game was that it was not going to be about scoring based on kills... We wanted it to represent Army values and career options... We wanted kids to be able to start playing at 13, if they

haven't thought about the Army by the time they get to 17, it's probably not something they'll do" (Hsu).

In America's Army players advance through the stages of soldierhood — drilling in basic training, taking target practice with an M-16, studying basic emergency medicine and, finally, going into combat. It's been such a hit that the Army has recently gone one step further with the game, organizing video-game parties around the country like this one in Woodinville, offering free game play, free "chow" and plenty of exposure to the Army's recruitment tactics. Woodinville and Bellevue recruiters plan to repeat the events every three months. The Army makes is candid about the fact that it designed the game to attract a new generation of potential soldiers reared on ever-more-realistic video games. Information on joining the Army is a mouse-click away through an Internet link. Since the Army released the game in July 2002, it has proved to be a low-cost advertising jackpot. The game has been downloaded more than 16 million times, and the Army estimates that nearly a third of all young people of prime recruitment age have been exposed to it (Downing).

The recruiter in charge signed up one new recruit from the Woodinville tournament. From the Bellevue event, recruiters said last week they have signed up one new soldier and are finishing testing and background checks to sign up two others. In the recruiting game, that's a pretty good rate of return. At a recent series of three tournaments in New York City, recruiters generated 320 new leads but only two enlistments. Each new soldier counts. Together, Martin and his recruiting partner in Woodinville, Sgt. 1st Class Harold Hunt, have a 46-enlistee annual quota. Across all the armed services, recruiting costs about \$4 billion annually, according to a 2003 government study.

Between 1998 and 2002, the military's annual advertising expenditures alone more than doubled, from \$299 million to \$607 million. That's why the America's Army video game has proved such a bargain. The first version cost \$7 million; costs of updating the game and operating the America's Army Web site are about \$5 million per year. A survey by the Army this year showed that 29 percent of all young American adults ages 16 to 24 had had some contact with the game in the previous six months. As part of the recruitment effort, Martin brought in active-duty soldiers with battle experience to join in the tournament (Downing).

The high number of young gamers that this recruitment method has brought in have forced changes in military training. In 2010 the Army announced that it would “reshape basic training to accommodate a new generation of tech-savvy recruits who may have more gaming skills than physical fitness” (Hsu). Using training versions of America’s Army, the military can integrate real military weapons or hardware with the game software, due to this soldiers can “physically hold the launch tube of a Javelin antitank missile and practice firing it in a virtual setting” (Hsu).

Conclusion

War-oriented video games represent a new and powerful medium for the transmission and reinforcement of militarism into our children and young men. Whether viewed as beneficial, or as a disturbing trend with many discomfoting implications, socializing youth to such realistic yet virtual war and killing activities should be viewed with critical lenses.

The implications of this phenomenon are far-reaching. It could be, for example, that a large segment of an entire generation is being desensitized to the horrors of war

using powerful new technologies. While some see this as analytical over-reaching, it has been some of the more influential (and conservative) military scholars that have voiced these concerns (see for example, Dave Grossman's *On Killing and Stop Teaching our Kids to Kill*, and Andrew Bacevich's *The New American Militarism*). Grossman, in particular, sees this near obsession among male youth with war games as a powerful training ground what some refer to as the new "Robotic Infantry". Controllers for current generation video game systems are being used in training soldiers how to control unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other military equipment. In a *Popular Mechanics* article Mark Bigham, director of business development for Raytheon Tactical Intelligence Systems, asserts:

There are a lot of important lessons to learn from the gaming community. In the past, the military far outspent the gaming industry on human-interface technology, but that's changed. It's never going to go back the other way. The gaming industry is such a huge market. The investment in R&D that they're going to spend on human factors is going to dwarf even what the Department of Defense will spend (Derene, 2008:1).

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[Wii All You Can Be? Why the Military Needs the Gaming Industry - Popular Mechanics](#)

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