Gamers at War: The Relationship Between Military and Esports

Pablo Nolla Michel
Staffordshire University
pnolla@me.com

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the deep-rooted relationship between competitive videogames, otherwise called esports, and a focus on the U.S. military realm. Examining how post-World War Two technological progress is imbued with the military's rationale. Looking at the development of esports as military training tools, providing more accurate simulations of the reality of war. Ultimately exposing how the development of the esports scene through the Internet, has been met with an interest by the military complex in the players and business. All of the above, has manifested in a historical, cultural, and technological link between the armed forces and the esports industry.

Keywords
Military, videogames, esports, simulation, war, technoculture, military-entertainment complex.

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the armed forces and the sub-culture of videogames, esports. It is important to state that as a relatively new academic field, esports is constantly evolving (Karhulahti, 2017, 45). As such, this analysis will be based on the definition of esports as an organised and competitive approach to playing computer games (Witkowski, 2012, 350). Technology and warfare have been intrinsically co-dependent since the very beginnings of humanity. Indeed, the advances in technological and industrial capacities at the end of World War Two, had profound changes in warfare and society. Built on the back-bone of technology designated to fulfil military objectives, humanity was able to recreate communication and life through the virtual digital realms. As a by-product of military thinking, communities like esports, which shared a deep and competitive passion for videogaming technology, were able to develop and prosper.

As technology progressed, so did videogames and warfare. Over the last twenty years players have had to adapt in order to meet technological advances; in turn developing specific skills which require them to play and potentially thrive in a competitive setting. Similarly, warfare has had to adapt to succeed in the increasingly digitalised world, which has proven difficult given the sudden change from a mainly physical presence, to a digital one. The overlap between the technological foundations and skills required in both modern combat and esports, has manifested previously through the development of military videogames. Currently, the popularity of commercial esports has been met with a renewed interest by the armed forces (Katwala, 2020). Whether for recruitment or technological purposes, their presence in the industry needs to be analysed, especially as their involvement can potentially be detrimental in jeopardising the free and open nature of the internet; something which the gaming community has proved to highly value (Pötzsch & Hammond, 2016).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

RESEARCH METHODS

The first part will examine the historical and technological developments of post-war military thinking, to establish how these would become the foundations on which videogames are built. These technological developments would engrain any future technology with a cybernetic rationale which is accentuated when analysing esports. The design and mentality required in esports, that is, critical thinking coupled with fast didactic engagement, brings out the extreme of both human and machine; achieving exactly what the technology designed for military means sets out to do.

Secondly, the creation of videogaming and esports technology sponsored by the armed forces will be discussed. This serves as the basis to understand the reasoning behind their engagement with the industrial and entertainment complexes, to present the creation of smart weapons and the reasoning behind their pursuit of videogames as both training and recruitment tools. More precisely, how the notion of humanity fits within technology, especially as the human-machine relationship fulfils the military vision of the cyborg soldier.

The last parts provide an understanding of previous endeavours by the armed forces, helping to establish their current trends in the videogaming and esports ecosystem. The renewed efforts, predominantly by economically developed nations, in exploiting existing gaming and esports communities to promote their ideals. Taking advantage of the cyber capabilities of esports players, while in addition, engraining the general population with their values.

PART ONE – BEGINNINGS

Total War

Warfare had undergone drastic changes by the 1940s. The technological developments allowed for warfare to become faster (Gray, 1997, 195). This dromotropic increase changed the strategic conduct of war, as weapons like long-range airplane bombers or ballistic missiles, demonstrated the capability to destroy a target anywhere and fast. Additionally, the supporting infrastructure and logistics of warfare, would likewise benefit from said increase in speed. Communications technologies such as radio and radar, would ultimately dictate the difference in battles, especially in the defence of Great Britain (Trim, 2002, 301). The expanded geographical nature of the conflict and increased lethality of combat tools, highlighted the importance of fast communication and information transferring, attacks could now be coordinated in real-time from the other side of the world.

The geographically universal nature of war after WWII can be attributed to the creation of the home front. From an American perspective, technological progress had destroyed their isolationist nature, as the advantage which their geographic distance had provided, was now within short reach (Edwards, 1988, 250). Paul Virilio credits the United States as the first to develop the State within the State, as governmental documents from the 1945-50s, reveal the importance given to logistics, every aspect of the nation's potential, needed to be transferred to its armed forces, both in war and peace (Virilio & Lotringer, 2007, 32). Especially in a democratic country, the importance of maintaining support and good morale in the home-front proved to be vital. Activities such as sport, which have a sociocultural impact, would have to re-instil militaristic national values (Collins, 2013, 52). All parts of the war effort, including education, economy, and science, whether directly or indirectly, contributed towards this technological militarised logic.

The individual is forgotten, everyone must work together to support the war and their country. The result, as Virilio states, is the creation of a less identifiable and more

diffused military class. Everyone that contributes directly or indirectly, during war or peace, towards this totalitarian nature of war, belongs in this class (2007, 34). Everything that was developed is intrinsically instilled with these militaristic values, as both the humans, and the enabling technologies for videogames, developed under the guise of this mindset.

In an attempt to strengthen its world presence, the U.S. would begin by aiding scientist in developing new technologies that would support the war effort. It was within this U.S. military-sponsored milieu, that Wiener began working on computerised anti-aircraft (Crogan, 2011, 2). Predicting and anticipating where the planes would be was a skill that could be refined through computerised calculations. The servomechanical enemy, as the tank driver or the pilot, was seen as a single unit; the human acted as the enabling factor, technology was the weapon of man (Kaldor, 1977, 121). The predictor itself was operated by a human who through a physical remote, would didactically press the keys to fire the AA (antiaircraft gun), the computer would simultaneously predict where the enemy would be, in the real and in the virtual, through the screen (Galison, 1994, 234). The enemy was nothing more than a blip on the screen, and this cyborg-esque vision of human-nonhuman, became the basis for Wiener's technology.

Cybernetic Foundations

While the predictor ultimately failed as a concept, it gave way to Wiener's new wartime enterprise – cybernetics. He described it 1947, as the new science of control mechanisms in which the exchange of information would play a central role (Wiener, 1965, 12). This technology is ultimately responsible for the way in which simulation technology developed, of which videogames and esports, are central to. He would categorise and reduce the human and the technological within a single system, claiming that the behaviouristic tendencies of humans mirrored that of machines (Galison, 1994, 250). Indeed, cybernetics does not distinguish between both, it boils down behaviours and tendencies, to specific functions. What made it such a powerful tool was its ability in being able to predict future actions by studying the past behaviour of the organism, replacing the traditional approach of simply looking at the structure. Humans become nothing more than self-correcting entities with sets of inputs and output signals (Crogan, 2011, 94). The war and cybernetics had ingrained the belief that there was practically no difference between shooting down an enemy bomber or a self-controlled missile. They both served the same purpose, to destroy, and the human element of the former did not change that.

Cybernetics, as developed for, and under the supervision of the armed forces, had become a bigger project than simply the AA predictor, it could be applied to anything. The war-machine was not just about "smart" weapons, it was about communication and speed of delivery (Virilio & Lotringer, 2007, 35). Wiener believed that the world-picture was nothing more than nodes of communication interacting by the exchange of orders or commands (Galison, 1994, 255). The science itself is based in a universe of opposition, originating in human-nonhuman operator and enemy airplanes, to incoming and outgoing communication messages. This framework would become the basis for U.S. military thinking in the new era of information and control, ushered by the post-war developments and the bipolarisation of global politics. Wiener had tried to distance cybernetics from military doctrines after he witnessed the destruction of nuclear weapons and feared how powerful they could become if controlled cybernetically (Wiener, 1965, 177). Nevertheless, the science and ontological approach he developed would be now employed in creating the technology used to solve military issues. Cybernetics was a product of war, and simulation technology inherited these technological characteristics of opposition and speed.

Equally as important, it is within this context that the first computer game, Spacewar, was developed, out of military-funded projects at MIT (Crogan, 2011, 38). The similarities are already apparent in the design of both military technologies and commercial videogames. The representation and interpretation of simulated information has been a key feature of videogames since their foundation (Crogan, 2003, 2). The ability of being able to read virtually displayed information, like the mini-map on the user interface (UI) to understand where the enemies are located, is crucial for most gaming genres. More importantly, the similarities between cybernetic technologies and esports become more apparent when analysing their milieus. The former was developed for a fast-paced environment which could cognitively perform decision and problem-solving. It relies on the human and non-human collaboration and on quick information transfers. The latter one could argue, is exactly the same. The performance of a professional cyberathlete is reminiscent of the technologies from which it originated from. The player is more often than not, in a race against time, the same way the human operator of the AA predictor would have to translate the computerised information and make a decision. The faster the cognitive ability of a player in being able to translate what he visually sees into physical inputs, the better he will be (Witkowski, 2012, 362). The competitive environment in which esports is performed, highlights the basis in which simulation and computerised technology was developed. It represents the epitome of cybernetics in modern society, as the environment in which it is utilised maximises the potential of its technological basis.

War-(E)sport Simile

The war-sports simile is one that is deeply embedded in history. Many of the sporting activities at the Olympic Games have been influenced, some have even been derived from the conduct of war (Collins, 2013, 60). Inevitably, they will always share a close relationship as the competitive, mental, and physical elements of both, makes them the perfect match. At least since the Civil War, the sport and war comparison has had its place in national politics (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, 3). Sports have the ability to cultivate community and national values and as such, they play a crucial role in contemporary sociocultural developments. General Schwarzkopf's explanation on the strategy for the war on Iraq was described through American football terms. Making claims, like the enemy had been defeated in the first half or that the battleplan had been a football hail Mary (Gordon, 1991, 9)

This was also the case in sport competitions, as the Super Bowl commentators would drive home the sport-war narrative by describing running through the field as dodging landmines (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, 5). The overlap is apparent in the shared technology they use. Live games of American football now incorporate replays from the commercially available simulation-based videogame of the sport, Madden NFL (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, 47). The mixture between live footage and replays from the virtual world, not only promotes the gaming-sport-military overlap but demonstrates the cognitive advantages of simulation technology. The videogame allowing to reconstruct the play which happened in the Super Bowl, showing other angles or potential outcomes. With the emergence of this technology, the blur between the real and the virtual increases. The former as Baudrillard argues, has ceased to exist since infotech and cybernetics (Baudrillard, 1994, 45). Videos from the war in Iraq had to be accompanied with the message that it was real footage and not just a game. It was increasingly becoming difficult to distinguish what is real and what is not.

While military practices have been transformed into sports, as seen with the example above, the opposite is true as well. War gaming has been a staple of military doctrine since the early 19th century when invented by the Prussians, yet it only began being used for training purposes by the U.S. in the 1880s (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005, 5). It was not until nearly a century later, that videogames would begin being used for training

purposes. What differentiates electronic sports and traditional sports from a military perspective, is not the physical characteristics but rather, their simulational potential for learning. The military-industrial complex had flourished into the 1980s, bringing together the educational and scientific communities under governmental agencies like the Defence Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA) (Edwards, 1988, 245). Interest by the U.S armed forces in commercial videogames, commenced around the same time. The Army led the way, as they turned to the industrial company SPI in 1980, to develop the computer-assisted simulation Strategic Analysis Simulation (SAS) (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005, 9). Eventually, projects like SIMNET, which were created under DARPA, would revolutionise military war gaming and foment a new revolution in military affairs (RMA) (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, 103).

The recent push behind implementing videogaming technology into military thinking was twofold. Firstly, the reduced cost compared to live training was significant. Secondly, simulation provides a link with history, while at the same time, being a dynamic training vehicle for the future (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005, 19). What differentiated SIMNET from other projects however, was the NETworked approach. Unlike previous videogames or simulations, SIMNET purpose was for collective training (Macedonia, 2002, 163). The combat armour simulator allowed for the soldiers in their combat units to be the centre of the simulation, rather than the vehicles of it. While the graphic fidelity was lacking, SIMNET demonstrated a new possibility of training for wartime practices during peace. Videogame simulations gave the armed forces the training time they could otherwise not afford, both in terms of cost and time. It also demonstrated the advantages of using videogames for training purposes, especially in a networked environment. It could perhaps be considered as one of the first instances of an esports, as the necessity for the soldiers to survive in the virtual brings out their warlike behaviour and competitive side. Therefore, they must play like the virtual is the real, where the only prize is survival. While SIMNET was not visually innovative, the military cybernetic assumption implied that the only limitations of the technology rested on their inadequate ability to give the microworld complexity (Edwards, 1988, 252). Given enough power, it could be expanded to blur reality itself. This technological breakthrough in simulation technology, coupled with the changes in geopolitics and warfare in the 1990s, would result in a revision of the military-industrial alliance. The inclusion of the entertainment industry into the equation called for increased collaboration between the commercial and military realms, especially in regard to the development of videogames.

PART TWO – DEVELOPMENTS

The Virtual Human

The 1990s were accompanied by a complete change of doctrine from an American perspective. The collapse of the USSR was accompanied by a significant reduction in military spending, there was no longer a risk of a global war (Mead, 2013, 23). Not only did the size of the active armed forces have to be reduced, but so did the in-house technological innovations. The latter would now be purchased from the commercial industry and adapted for military use (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005, 21). Technological progress ushered in the new era of digital information, the roles of operators could now be replaced with computers. While weapons had been the instrument of humans, it now appeared that their role had changed into becoming the instrument of the weapon system (Kaldor, 1977, 121). The cybernetic properties of these technologies had given them the ability to take over as the controlling organism of the system. The role of the soldier had completely changed as they became an extension of machines (Gray, 1997, 199).

This vision of the cybernetic organism has resulted in the soldiers of today having to develop new capabilities to operate in modern war. They must become cyborgs, quasi-programmable machines that fit integrally into weapon systems and train to overcome their biological limits to better respond to real-time information (Robins & Levidow, 1989, 120). All of this computer technology, founded on the cybernetic vision of opposition, encourages, and promotes the omnipotence fantasy and control over everything (Robins & Levidow, 1995, 108). As a part of a system, the individual soldier has less chance to deviate from expected behaviour. Videogames, and especially esports, because of the competitive element, serve as means of indoctrination, the simulated and real conditions are almost identical, training the human out of the cyborg. T. L. Taylor's similarly explores this notion through the materiality and embodiment of videogames. The players during intense periods get in the "zone", fully inhabiting their body that is commingling with the ludic and technological system, gameplay going back and forth through them (2012, 38). The intensity of esports therefore requires players to be more fully immersed in this cybernetic network, they are not only in the "zone" but become part of it. The human is integrated within the technological network, their role is reduced to the catalyst of the cyborg equation, attempting to create the most fluid and efficient information transferring between the real and the virtual.

Nations necessitate support for the war, whether virtually represented or in the real. Through the cybernetic state, they are then able to appeal to the subordination of individual reason, in favour of a rationality dedicated to the system maintenance (Levidow & Robins, 1989, 172). Videogames present the perfect milieu where a limited anxiety can be controlled by mastering the mechanics and thinking of the game (Robins & Levidow, 1995, 109). The environment in which the player finds himself in, can help in developing skills to make fast-spaced decisions during stressful times. In contemporary warfare, cognitive decision-making became as important as having shooting skills (Mead, 2013, 50). Videogames become the primary means through which popular culture experiences war and conflict, as both civilians and soldiers alike, are exposed to their technology (Robinson, 2019, 12). While it is known that the foundations of videogames relied on the technological developments of the military, what has now changed is the emergence of a military culture that accepts their usage as powerful tools for learning, socialization, and training (Macedonia, 2002, 167).

(Re)soldering the Soldier

The Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) based at the University of Southern California, is a governmental agency which seeks to revolutionise how the armed forces train. It epitomizes the intersection of military planning, computer simulation, video game developers and the educational sector (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, 102). One of their most defining videogaming creations is Full Spectrum Warrior (THQ, 2004), designed as part of the governmental paradigm shift which would redefine the role of the U.S. military-thinking up to the year 2020. Simulation technologies commence being central to the doctrine, as the digitised construction of scenarios and conflict situations will be the driving force behind shaping future operations (U.S. Department of Defense, 2000, 35). The purpose of the game was to demonstrate to soldiers, the situations in which their commanding officers would find themselves in, and to help understand their thinking and rationale. The game was outsourced and was developed by Pandemic Studios and published by THQ, the latter would develop a commercial version of the game as well which would be sold to the general public (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Both the commercial and military versions, were developed for the Xbox and PlayStation 2, benefitting from the familiarity of users with their gaming consoles and controllers.

The only notable differences between both game versions can be summarised as the differences seen between a videogame and the esport-driven version. The military version of FWS had no mini-map, was harder to find cover from enemy fire and included more non-player characters (NPCs), who were also more hostile. Compared to its commercial counterpart, the military version forced soldiers to utilise their cognitive and critical thinking skills. Although technologically advanced, the game gave the soldier no advantages. The lack of a UI and a more realistic interpretation of autochthonous populations by the NPCs, provided the players with a higher level of fidelity to the reality of war.

From a military perspective, it is important for soldiers to train under the realest of conditions. Just like technoscience, they go to the end of their aspirations, it becomes a delirium of a science of pure performance (Virilio, 2007, 188). Esports can be considered the equivalent of extreme sports in videogames; technology, science, and human performance, reaching the limits of what is possible, surpassing that of the real. However, from a civilian perspective, it is important they'd be let to believe that the war effort is justified. NPCs in the commercial version are meant to depict a welcoming populace to American invasion. Moreover, the mini-map depicts U.S. soldiers with incredibly advanced technologies able to overpower their enemy. Inevitably, both serve the same purpose, to support the U.S. through different means. As Baudrillard analyses with the film Apocalypse Now, new forms of entertainment, in this case videogames, have become extensions of war through other means (1994, 59). They play with the representation of the real, their ability to blur the factual from the virtual creates the hyperreal. It goes beyond being an object of representation and becomes an ecstasy of denegation, it becomes more real than the real has ever been (Baudrillard, 1983, 142). The global success of the film contrasted with the historical loss by the U.S. in Vietnam. Videogames, and esports as this accentuation of the hyperreal, also serve the same purpose in contemporary digital culture.

The Human-Machine Cyborg

Max Weber argues that the discipline of the army gives birth to all discipline. Indeed, the doctrinal change by the military post-WWII, increased their role in determining cultural and societal developments (1946, 257). Their rapprochement with the scientific and economic spheres would have ripple effects. Economic funding provided by the government instilled militaristic values in the industrial complex. The technologization called for precise calculations and regulations, as the development of these authoritarian technics created complex human-machines (Mumford, 1964, 7). All parts are standardized and can be replaced. It places the role of science and technology above that of the individual. The parallels between the perfect performance of an operator within a human-machine complex and that of a cyber-athlete, become more apparent.

The displacement of life, that is, the transferring of attributes of life to the mechanical collective (Levidow & Robins, 1989, 161), can be observed in esports. What has stereotypically been the difference in the gaming community between casual and power players, has been boiled down to the latter's lack of a "real life" (Taylor, 2009, 70). Their winning and goal-driven mentality separates these players from the rest, as their enjoyment of the videogame goes beyond the normally associated limits of leisure. Their in-game activities become quasi-robotic, they break-down their objectives into smaller tasks and are capable of enduring long hours of repetitive activities to complete them (Ibid, 206). They become the AA-predictor, learning from failure and repetition, adapting to find the most efficient way to progress, pushing the limits of the game's mechanics and human cognition in order to do so. The player's treatment of units in the game as just units, rather than their real-life counterpart, neglects the intended educational perspective (Frank, 2012, 128). However, while their disregard for the implied "real" elements of simulation-based technology can be seen in this negative

light, this can act as a double-edged sword. While they disregarded the real in the virtual, they can also do the same in the virtually-assisted real. The technological changes in warfare, with technology having the finger on the trigger with weapons like UAVs or drones, requires operators who think and act like computers. Power gamers can maximise the potential of the technology while distancing themselves from the real-life consequences of their acts of war. The psychological toll of war can be potentially reduced, or eliminated, through the usage of power gamers as cybernetic operators.

Esports, have traditionally been considered non-physical, resulting in their categorisation as non-sporting. However, the embodiment required to display a skilled performance necessitates a complete naturalisation between the body at play and the instruments of play (Taylor, 2012, 38). The degree of familiarity the user has with esports can render actions as mimeomorphic, especially within single-player esports and under a power gamer mentality. Their actions are conducted within a cybernetic system, enabling tasks to be reduced to simplistic choices and performed quickly (Collins & Kusch, 1999, 35). Nevertheless, in order to fulfil its potential, it is important that the body matches the complex cognitive coordination of the technology, which can only be achieved through constant training. The nuanced circuitry between corporeality and virtuality, becomes less evident the higher the degree of skill the cyber-athlete can display. Indeed, studies have demonstrated how their constant work in simulated environments, makes them take quick decisive actions when required (Wheatcroft et al. 2017). While their play can become mimeomorphic, they are grounded in the polymorphic nature of human-enabled activities. They must juggle with the complexity of action, rules, and structure, while constantly engaged in the act of playing (Taylor, 2012, 84). The circuitry of cybernetic systems, whether it be weapons or videogames, requires the human to act as the enabling catalyst for it to be complete. Their capacity to connect with the technology, mirroring the behaviour of a computer, coupled with their ability to use human rationale if required, has become the target for the armed forces. Already since 2003, governmental documents highlighting the future of conflict for the U.S., promoted the importance of videogame-based education, especially as a tool for reprogramming soldiers (Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, 2003, 48). Technology and the human come together as the cyborg, acting like a robot, thinking like a human.

The work of Orvis et al is of particular importance, as it revealed that trainees who had previous experience with games, had higher training performances and reported higher levels of training satisfaction (2010, 153). Values such as duty, honour, and integrity, are all more prevalent in the competitive counterpart to videogames. The fact that there is something on the line, whether it be money, or potentially life-saving practice in a military setting, creates a more militarised milieu. The introduction of multiplayer elements to militarised games, like in Marine Doom, quickly created online communities, otherwise now known as clans, whose sole purpose was to compete against others (Richard, 1999). The emergence of these power players demonstrated levels of cyborg capabilities and camaraderie hard to replicate during peacetime (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005, 39). Regardless of the person playing, esports promotes skills and values which the armed forces strive to look for. They are used for retooling the soldier and the home-front.

PART THREE - TRENDS

Militarised Commercial Videogames

The boom seen in the esports industry has created extremely dedicated communities to specific genres or even games (Jevsejevas, 2020). As examined by T. L. Taylor, power gamers tend to be more committed to their community given their higher degree of involvement playing the game (2009, 84). Especially prevalent in esports driven games, like Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (McWhertor, 2018), the values which the game developers would instil through the narrative elements of the game, predominantly through single player campaign, have been downplayed or removed. Severely handicapping the military's ability to educate through emotions (Macedonia, 2002). The armed forces simply do not have the time or money, to develop a full-fledged game able to compete with their commercial counterparts. The solution has been to exploit the participatory culture of existing esports, essentially taping into already establish social networks (Nieborg, 2006, 12).

This is not only a phenomenon restricted to the U.S. armed forces, companies have similarly attempted to attach their brand to the videogaming and esports entertainment industry. Most notably, Medal of Honor: Warfighter (MoD:W) had several partnerships with weapon manufacturers (Gaudiosi, 2012). Not only were the weapons players used in game sponsored by companies, but this too extended to a real-life collaboration. The game's website had direct links to buy actual weapons through their partners, where users could even order a specially branded MoD:W tomahawk knife.

The predecessor to Medal of Honor: Warfighter, Medal of Honor (MoD), featured a multiplayer where you would play as the Taliban and kill occidental forces. Unsurprisingly, this was negatively received by western nations, especially as the conflict in Afghanistan, which was the basis for the game, was still ongoing. At the time, the UK Defence Secretary called for a ban of the game, while GameStop banned the sale of the game in the U.S. military stores altogether (Crecente, 2010). The repercussions came from politicians and governmental officials, as the representation of the Taliban clashed with the values they were trying to defend. The game humanised them and jeopardised the propagandistic image of western soldiers as superior, it was a remainder they could also be easily killed. The backlash EA received as the developer of MoD:H and their collaboration with the military-industrial-entertainment complex came from the videogaming and esports industry (Robinson, 2016, 268).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the efforts which the armed forces previously devoted to the entertainment industry, through the creation and sponsorship of movies, is being replaced by videogames (Crogan, 2011, 74). Both MoD games had former and active military personnel involved, employing their knowledge to create more authentic and positive player experiences (Robinson, 2019, 13). Commercial esports, as the name indicates, are economic by nature (Karhulahti, 2017, 49), their goal is to sell copies and not train for conflicts. From a gaming perspective, one could argue that the in-game usage of the actual weapons and promotion of values utilised by the U.S. armed forces, creates a more accurate military esports and sells better. However, the goal of the penetration by the armed forces in the esports ecosystem, through their sponsoring of videogames, tournaments and even teams, is not to create more accurate simulators, but rather to promote their image and obtain new recruits. Critical aspects of warfare, like the psychological toll of combat with rampant issues like PTSD, are never included since it would tarnish their efforts. Videogames and esports, it is said, serve the military-entertainment complex by legitimising the militarisation of western society (Robinson, 2012, 512).

Especially because of the war on terror, the enemy is omnipresent and cannot be eliminated militarily, it is essential therefore that esports, as part of popular culture, pushes towards supporting the war effort. The countless hours esport players dedicate to the game, will keep them constantly engaged in virtual war (Robinson, 2019, 21). Sadly, many gamers are unaware or simply do not care of the dimensions of the videogame beyond gameplay (Nieborg, 2006, 15). In their eyes, the utilisation of more realistic looking weapons or watching an esports tournament which is sponsored by the U.S. armed forces, only adds to their experience. The representation of historical events through digital technology has accentuated the hyperreality of modern culture (Baudrillard & Poster, 1988), particularly through esports, as the factual is being replaced in the virtual.

The Virtual War on Afghanistan

After a 20-year conflict, the Taliban forces have captured the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul, signalling the end of the war and the failure of American-led forces in achieving peace in the region (Zucchino, 2021). The history of esports and warfare will always be intrinsically linked to this conflict. The terrorist attacks of September the 11th, enabled for the wider adoption by the U.S. armed forces of videogaming technology as an effective tool for war (Crogan, 2011, 17). Unsurprisingly, the reaction to the attacks can be summarised by looking at the usage of in-game modifications, otherwise called mods, in the game Counter-Strike. The support for a military intervention, which the U.S. government had been pushing for, manifested culturally in a mod that allowed players in Counter-Strike Source to chase and kill Osama bin Laden (Robinson, 2012, 514). Users similarly created reproductions of his compound, using information the U.S. Department made publicly available after his capture, as playable multiplayer maps (Fletch, 2011). Essentially, this was the same process the U.S. army used to reproduce the Battle of 73 Easting on SIMNET for future virtual training purposes, by employing recorded information during the battle (Mead, 2013, 22). In many ways, this presented the perfect milieu in which popular support would be garnered, displaying Osama bin Laden as the public enemy number one, while simultaneously familiarising esport players with killing him in a competitive setting. It is not too farfetched to imagine that videogaming technology was utilised in training the troops which ended his life, especially as some of these soldiers were later internally reprimanded for their involvement as consultants for the game Medal of Honor: Warfighter (BBC, 2012). Perhaps in the near future it will be normal to see more soldiers like the character D.VA from Overwatch, who turned from a professional gamer to a mech pilot in order to defend her country (Blizzard, 2016).

Copies of the videogame Counter-Strike were found at Osama bin Laden's house, potentially indicating their use by the Taliban forces to train soldiers and minds like the U.S. (Hayes, 2017). The popularity of videogaming technology has not only been limited to western nations, their efforts have been mirrored by Middle Eastern based gaming companies. These companies developed videogames, like Under Siege, which likewise depict military themes, who, although vary in political ideology, all share distaste for the West (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, 120).

Military and militants alike, all utilise videogaming technology as forms of training and indoctrination, therefore their adoption of esports to achieve the same results does not come as a surprise. Interestingly, with the surge of online gaming during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Afghani government banned the South Korean developed esport PlayerUnknown's Battleground (PUGB). The country, although in the midst of a civil war, considered the videogame as one of the main perpetrators for their young population in developing a violent mindset and rejecting their autochthonous cultural values (The Economist, 2021). Similarly, the U.S. armed forces also banned any users who commented about American war crimes during their esports livestreams on the

website Twitch (Vincent, 2020). Obviously, nations will use esports to portray facts in ways that benefits them (Baudrillard, 1994, 60). Given the Taliban victory in Afghanistan, it will therefore not come as a surprise when they subsequently ban any esports and by extension videogames, that portrays them in a negative light. At the same time, the U.S. will be pushing a narrative that presents them as victorious in their so-called peacekeeping mission.

How do you do, Gamers?

While the U.S. armed forces will always be involved in technology, they have only just begun to market themselves as an endemic brand in the commercial esports industry, and although their efforts may seem benign, it is important to consider whether their involvement will benefit or harm the industry. Most importantly, to prevent their efforts in the market from jeopardising the thriving participatory culture which the gaming community has nourished.

The surge of esport seen during the COVID-19 pandemic served as a steppingstone for the armed forces to launch their marketing campaigns. Additionally, the economic struggles many suffered during the pandemic created an unprecedented opportunity for the armed forces in dealing with their recruitment difficulties (Uhl, 2020). Given the role of participatory culture in videogames, they have gone after the actors in the industry that play a critical role, especially as sports are vehicles for cultivating and displaying community, national values, and identities (Jansen & Sabo, 1994, 13). They are no longer partnering with the developer, and have focused on sponsoring esport organisations, players and tournaments. Once again, using the already established communities in the esports industries to obtain their support while simultaneously recruiting future generations. The latter being especially important given the digitalisation of warfare and the cybernetic propensities displayed by esport enthusiasts. As weapon systems and the U.S. military doctrine change, so will the industry, only making it more pervasive (Nieborg, 2006, 14). The U.S. Navy has signed a partnership with tournament organiser ESL (Hitt, 2020), the U.S Army with the Call of Duty esports league (Luongo, 2020) and the U.S. Navy with teams like Dignitas and Cloud9 (Nicholson, 2021). Their involvement in all aspects of the industry indicates their long-term commitment to it, especially given the $14 million spent in social media platforms for recruitment in 2020 by the U.S armed forces (Sands, 2021). Since society has moved to the digital realm, so have the armed forces. They now try to win virtual hearts and minds.

Although the majority of the esport community remains uninterested in the involvement of the military, some have questioned their interests and morality. An increasing number of national militaries have been introducing virtual gaming as a response to the current pandemic, to train for future conflicts and gain public support. The UK armed forces are currently developing a virtual replica of the whole country (Warrell, 2020) and recruiting gamers. This has been coupled with the creation of esport centres and competitive teams for enlisted soldiers (Hartle, 2019). The People's Republic of China engagement with esports has been mostly motivated by nationalism. Their success in competitive gaming serves as a soft power approach, engaging with the international community by demonstrating their prestige and national strength (Ismangil, 2018, 202).

The U.S. even have different teams for each branch of the armed forces. Their marketing campaigns on websites like Twitch, have highlighted their need for gamers, and how you can "stay up all night staring at a screen and we'll pay you for it" (Uhl, 2020). Although the quote was taken directly from the U.S. Navy Twitch channel, they claim to not actively recruit through the platform (Bollinger, 2020). However, Twitch was recently forced to reprimand the U.S. Army as a giveaway link to an Xbox

controller on their channel, took users to a recruitment form with no mention of prize, essentially targeting any user regardless of their age (Hern, 2020). While the minimum age to contact for recruitment is 17 in the United States, this served as an easy mechanism to collect information of younger generations. Creating content and catering to younger generations through esports plays the same role which games like Full Spectrum Warrior did. While the U.S. spearheaded this initiative, it is only a matter of time before other armies engage in these activities. It is therefore of upmost importance that the esports industry is aware of these approaches and seek to question them.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the connection between the military and esports realms. Initially discussing the ingrained mentality of post-1940s technocratic and military thinking. All subsequent technologies, like videogames and esports, would be fundamentally engrained in this technological framework. The development of cybernetics as a system for communication and control, present in all existing technology, would be accentuated in the competitive setting of esports.

The embodiment at play of the human-machine operator, reducing the role of the human to observational, where they are simply required to maintain the cyborgian circuit complete, is a military trend where they believe esport enthusiast will shine. Their interests lie in creating a soldier that acts like a machine yet remains capable of thinking like a human when required. This realisation, coupled with their training of current soldiers and recruitment efforts for future generations, materialised through the development of their own in-house military games. Working with, and alongside, the entertainment, industrial and educational complexes in developing simulation-based technology.

The last part culminated in a discussion of current trends by national militaries and warned of future involvement from not only the military-industrial complex, but also militants and extremist groups. They have now turned to utilising existing commercial esports titles and their gaming cultures, as vessels to instil their values through. The involvement of democratic militaries post-pandemic has also increased, signalling a more active and visible role in the industry.

Lastly, although this work explored some of the overlap between both communities, there still remains much to be discussed. The historical symbiotic link between technology and warfare means that the relationship between esports and the military will inevitably continue to evolve. New conflicts, like the war in Ukraine or new technological developments like virtual reality, can signal towards what the future trends of said relationship will be.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Afkar Media. 2005. Under Siege. Singe-player Game. Dar al-Fikr.

Baudrillard, J. 1983. Simulations, translated by P. Beitchman, P. Foss and P. Patton. Foreign Agents Series. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Semiotext(e)

Baudrillard, J. 1988. Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, edited by M. Poster. Stanford, CA, USA: Stanford University Press.

Baudrillard, J. 1994. Simulacra and Simulation, translated by S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor, MI, USA: University of Michigan Press.

BBC. 2012. Bin Laden unit Seal Team Six punished over video game. Online article. BBC, 9 November. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-20262504.

Blizzard Entertainment. 2016. D.VA. Online game character. Blizzard Entertainment. https://overwatch.blizzard.com/en-us/heroes/dva/.

Bollinger, L. 2020. Navy Esports Resumes Streaming on Twitch. Online article. U.S Navy, 30 July. https://www.navy.mil/DesktopModules/ArticleCS/Print.aspx?PortalId=1&ModuleId=685&Article=2294774.

Collins, H. & Kusch, M. 1999. The Shape of Actions: What Humans and Machines Can Do. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Collins, T. 2013. Sport in Capitalist Society: A Short History. London, England: Routledge.

Crecente, B. 2010. Video Game Pulled Globally from Military Stores Over Taliban Inclusion. Online article. Kotaku, 9 February. https://kotaku.com/video-game-pulled-globally-from-military-stores-over-ta-5628741.

Crogan, P. 2003. "The Experience of Information in Computer Games." Paper present at the MelbourneDAC 2003 Conference Papers. Melbourne, Australia, 19-23 May: RMIT University.

Crogan, P. 2011. Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Danger Close Games. 2012. Medal of Honour: Warfighter. FPS Single-player and Online Game. Electronic Arts.

Dyer-Witheford, N. & de Peuter, G. 2009. "Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games." Electronic Mediations. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Edwards, P.N. 1988. "The Closed World: Systems Discourse, Military Strategy and Post WWII American Historical Consciousness." AI & Society. 2 (1). 245–255. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01908547.

Electronic Arts Digital Illusions (DICE). 2010. Medal of Honour. FPS Single-player and Online Game. Electronic Arts.

Electronic Arts Sports. Madden NFL. 1998 – current. Electronic Arts Sports.

Fletch. 2011. fy_abbottabad. Counter-Strike: Source Mod, Gamebanana. https://gamebanana.com/mods/111283.

Frank, A. 2012. "Gaming the Game: A Study of the Gamer Mode in Educational Wargaming." Simulation & Gaming. 43 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878111408796.

Galison, P. 1994. "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision." Critical Inquiry. 21 (1). http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343893.

Gaudiosi, J. 2012. Electronic Arts Cuts Gun Maker Promotion in 'Medal of Honor' Website. Online article. The Hollywood Reporter, 27 December. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/electronic-arts-cuts-gun-maker-406442/.

Gordon, M.R. 1991. WAR IN THE GULF: Strategy; Outnumbered and Outgunned, Allied Forces Outfox Hussein. Newspaper article. The New York Times, 28 February. https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/28/world/war-in-the-gulf-strategy-outnumbered-and-outgunned-allied-forces-outfox-hussein.html.

Gray, C.H. 1997. Postmodern War: The New Politics of Conflict. London, England: Routledge.

Hartle, L. 2019. RAF Opens E-Sports Centre as Military Gaming Takes Off. Online article. Forces.net, 2 September. https://www.forces.net/news/raf-opens-e-sports-centre-military-gaming-takes.

Hayes, C. 2017. Was Osama Bin Laden A Gamer? CIA Trove Shows His Favorite Games, Like 'Counter-Strike'. Online article. Newsweek, 11 February. https://www.newsweek.com/was-osama-bin-laden-gamer-turns-out-you-could-have-played-terrorist-counter-699884.

Hern, A. 2020. US army retreats from Twitch as recruitment drive backfires. Online article. The Guardian, 23 July. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jul/23/us-military-tactically-withdraws-from-game-streaming-site-twitch.

Hitt, K. 2020. United States Navy Signs Numerous Partnerships, Will Field CS:GO Team. Online article. Esports Observer, 25 February. https://archive.esportsobserver.com/usnavy-esl-twitch-eg-dbltap/.

id Software & United States Marine Corps. 1996. Marine Doom. Military Online FPS Game. GT Interactive.

Ismangil, M. 2018. "(Re)creating the Nation Online: Nationalism in Chinese Dota 2 Fandom." Asiascape: Digital Asia. 5 (3). https://brill.com/view/journals/dias/5/3/article-p198_3.xml?language=en.

Jansen, S.C. & Sabo, D. 1994. "The Sport War Metaphor: Hegemonic Masculinity, the Persian Gulf War, and the New World Order." Sociology of Sport Journal. 11 (1). https://journals.humankinetics.com/view/journals/ssj/11/1/article-p1.xml.

Jevsejevas, T. 2020. Gaming and eSports could be the best solution to military recruitment shortages in Europe. Online article. Euronews, 15 April. https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/15/gaming-and-esports-could-best-solution-to-military-recruitment-shortages-in-europe-view.

Kaldor, M. H. 1977. "The Significance of Military Technology." Bulletin of Peace Proposals. 8 (2). https://doi.org/10.1177/096701067700800204.

Karhulahti, V-M. 2017. "Reconsidering Esport: Economics and Executive Ownership." Physical Culture and Sport: Studies and Research. 74 (1). https://sciendo.com/article/10.1515/pcssr-2017-0010.

Katwala, A. 2020. The military is turning to Twitch to fix its recruitment crisis. Online article. WIRED, 18 August. https://www.wired.co.uk/article/british-army-video-game-recruitment.

Lenoir, T. & Lowood, H. 2005. "Theaters of War: The Military-Entertainment Complex." In Volume 1 - Collection, Laboratory, Theatre: Scenes of Knowledge in the 17th Century edited by H. Schramm, L. Schwarte, & J. Lazardzig, 427-456. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter.

Levidow, L. & Robins, K. 1989. “Towards a military information society?” In Cyborg Worlds: The Military Information Society edited by L. Levidow & K. Robins, 159-177. London, England: Free Association Books.

Luongo, C. 2020. Call of Duty League partners with Twitter and U.S. Army. Online article. Esports Insider, 9 March. https://esportsinsider.com/2020/03/call-of-duty-league-twitter-us-army/.

Macedonia, M. 2002. “Games, Simulation, and the Military Education Dilemma.” The Internet and the University: 2001 Forum. EDUCAUSE. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2002/1/games-simulation-and-the-military-education-dilemma.

McWhertor, M. 2018. Treyarch explains why Black Ops 4 won’t have a single-player campaign. Online article. Polygon, 18 May. https://www.polygon.com/2018/5/18/17366980/call-of-duty-black-ops-4-no-single-player-campaign.

Mead, C. 2013. War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict. Boston, MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Mumford, L. 1964. “Authoritarian and Democratic Technics.” Technology and Culture. 5 (1). http://www.jstor.org/stable/3101118.

Nicholson, J. 2021. Dignitas takes flight with U.S. Air Force partnership. Online article. Esports Insider, 20 July. https://esportsinsider.com/2021/07/dignitas-us-air-force-partnership/.

Nieborg, D.B. 2006. “FCJ-051 Mods, Nay! Tournaments, Yay! – The Appropriation of Contemporary Game Culture by the U.S. Military.” The Fibreculture Journal. 8. https://eight.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-051-mods-nay-tournaments-yay-the-appropriation-of-contemporary-game-culture-by-the-u-s-military/.

Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, U.S (2003). Defense Science Board Task Force on Training for Future Conflicts. United States Department of Defense. https://dsb.cto.mil/reports.htm.

Orvis, K.A., Moore, J.C., Belanich, J., Murphy, J.S. & Horn, D.B. 2010. “Are Soldiers Gamers? Videogame Usage among Soldiers and Implications for the Effective Use of Serious Videogames for Military Training.” Military Psychology. 22 (2). https://doi.org/10.1080/08995600903417225.

Pötzsch, H. & Hammond, P. 2016. “War/Game: Studying Relations Between Violent Conflict, Games, and Play.” International Journal of Computer Game Research. 16 (2). http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/potzschhammond.

PUBG Studios. 2017. PlayerUnknown’s Battleground. Online Game. Krafton and Microsoft Studios.

Richard, B. 1999. “Norn Attacks and Marine Doom.” In Ars Electronica: Facing the Future: A Survey of Two Decades edited by T. Druckrey, 336-346. Cambridge, MA, USA; London, England: MIT Press.

Robins, K. & Levidow, L. 1989. “Socialising the Cyborg Self.” In Cyborg Worlds: The Military İnformation Society edited by L. Levidow and K. Robins, 119-125. London, England: Free Association Books.

Robins, K. & Levidow, L. 1995. “Soldier, Cyborg, Citizen.” In Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information edited by J. Brook & I. A. Boal, 105-113. San Francisco, CA, USA: City Lights Publishers.

Robinson, N. 2012. “Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or Embedding the Military–Entertainment Complex?” Political Studies. 60 (3). https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00923.x.

Robinson, N. 2016. “Militarism and opposition in the living room: the case of military videogames.” Critical Studies on Security. 4 (3). https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2015.1130491.

Robinson, N. 2019. “Military Videogames.” The RUSI Journal. 164 (4). https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2019.1659607.

Sands, M. 2020. U.S. Military Recruitment On Twitch May Be Controversial But Isn’t Likely To Stop Anytime Soon. Online article. Forbes, 20 July. https://www.forbes.com/sites/masonsands/2020/07/20/military-recruitment-on-twitch/.

Steve Russell. 1962. Spacewar. Two-player Game. Steve Russell.

Taylor, T.L. 2009. Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Taylor, T.L. 2012. Raising the Stakes: E-sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

The Economist. 2021. A popular video game sparks a moral panic in Afghanistan. Online article. The Economist, 16 January. https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/01/14/a-popular-video-game-sparks-a-moral-panic-in-afghanistan.

THQ Nordic. 2004. Full Spectrum Warrior. Online Game. THQ Nordic.

Treyarch Corporation. 2018. Call of Duty Black Ops 4. Online Game. Treyarch Corporation.

Trim, R.M. 2002. “A Brief History of the Development of Radar in Great Britain up to 1945.” Measurements and Control. 35 (10). https://doi.org/10.1177/002029400203501003.

Uhl, J. 2020. The US Military Is Using Online Gaming to Recruit Teens. Online article. The Nation, 15 July. https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/military-recruitment-twitc h/.

U.S. Department of Defense. 2000. “Joint Vision 2020: America’s Military: Preparing for Tomorrow.” Washington, DC, USA: U.S Department of Defense. https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=446826.

Valve Corporation. 2004. Counter-Strike Source. Online Game. Valve Corporation.

Vincent, J. 2020. US Army esports team unbans commenters who asked about American war crimes. Online article. The Verge, 6 August. https://www.theverge.com/2020/8/6/21356771/us-army-esports-stream-unbans-resinstates-commenters-asking-questions-war-crimes.

Virilio, P. & Lotringer, S. 2007. Pure War, translated by M. Polizzotti and B. O'Keeffe. Foreign Agents Series. Los Angeles, CA, USA: Semiotext(e).

Warrell, H. 2020. Covid-19 crisis accelerates UK military's push into virtual war gaming. Online article. Financial Times, 19 August. https://www.ft.com/content/ab767ccf-650e-4afb-9f72-2cc84efa0708.

Weber, M. 1946. From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology. New York, NY, USA: Oxford University Press.

Wheatcroft, J.M., Breckell, A.L. & Adams-White, J. 2017. "Unmanned aerial systems (UAS) operators' accuracy and confidence of decisions: Professional pilots or video game players?" Cogent Psychology. 4 (1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2017.1327628.

Wiener, N. 1965. Cybernetics or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Witkowski, E. 2012. "On the Digital Playing Field: How We "Do Sport" With Networked Computer Games." Games and Culture. 7 (5). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412012454222.

Zucchino, D. 2021. Kabul's Sudden Fall to Taliban Ends U.S. Era in Afghanistan. Online article. The New York Times, 17 August. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/15/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-kabul-surrender.html.