The Military-Entertainment Hero Complex: Playing the War Hero

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

War-based video games have long been popular, whether players are fighting enemy human armies in contemporary times (e.g., *Call of Duty*), or the enemy alien armies of a science fiction future (e.g., *Halo*). These war games are often designed with a particular character archetype at their narrative centre: the hero. The "hero" archetype, not to be confused with referencing any main character, is known for its ability to defeat villainy and come out on top (Hourihan 1997), or, more colloquially, to "save the day." War video games often feature soldiers as hero-avatars, whose every militarized action is framed through a heroic lens. Heroic narrative framing, while not aborting consideration of the horrors of war, does justify the player-avatar's actions – however horrific those actions may be – because they are taken to stop allegedly greater horrors to, essentially, save the day. What this heroic framing often obscures, or indeed excuses, is how both patriarchal social oppression and neoliberal capitalist exploitation create, benefit from, and sustain modern warfare. Instead, patriarchy and capitalism are mechanically, if not narratively, presented as the best defences against the threat of war and its potential for societal collapse, through the war hero avatar's ludonarrative promotion of militarized masculinity and neoliberal crisis management. My research therefore argues that the war hero avatar offers gameplay and narrative framing which shore up patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist ideologies against sustained critique for their roles in generating individual, national, and global crises; critiques which are better applied by war-based video games which eschew conventional hero avatar design.

The troubling ideological baggage of war game design is of course well-researched elsewhere. For example, other scholarship has explored: the imperial capitalist influence video games inherit from the military-industrial complex (Hammar & Woodcock 2019; see also Lenoir & Caldwell 2018); the post-9/11 military shooter as reigniting American national mythologies, to "reset" the Americanized glory of war and global dominance (Payne 2016; see also Power 2007); the capacity for subversive war games to prompt player reflections on their complicity with in-game atrocities (Pötzsch & Hammar 2019; see also see also Murray 2017); war games from the West as promoting militarized masculinity, which valorizes young, white, cis-male soldiers

and demonizes feminized, racialized, and ethnic Others (Elyamany 2021; see also Höglund 2008; Patel 2016); and the villainous framing of particular groups in video game representations of historical warfare, which can simplify complex historical relations into "good" versus "evil" war stories (Binns 2024). I build on these discussions by focusing on the presumed "good" of the specifically war *hero* avatar, in video games which feature this archetype. The hero is an archetype in video games which has yet to experience sustained analysis for its ability to contribute to rather than challenge social marginalization (Jennings 2022). The hero archetype, across media, has a history of justifying marginalization by naturalizing ideologically constructed social dualisms, such as man > woman, white > black, rich > poor, and so on (Hourihan 1997, 17). In video games, the hero's socially marginalizing effects rise in part from how heroic gameplay positions the player to dominate rather than contemplate crisis.

The hero avatar provides players a safe but uncritical distance from which to confront crisis. Crisis itself arises from a threat to certain terms of existence; this may include a threat to mortal life but always means a threat to *a way of life*. Crisis can be considered "the result of an accident and of a destabilization" (Roux-Dufort 2010, para. 4). Crisis destabilizes the status quo, and so how one responds to crisis will inevitably be in service to reasserting the status quo, evolving the status quo, or replacing the current status quo with alternative terms, offering what is essentially "opportunities for habit change" (Chun 2008, 85). However, dominant ideologies, like patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, pressure us to update rather than authentically challenge their status quos (Brown 2015; Johnson 2014). This updating of patriarchal and neoliberal status quos is advanced in part by media which trains us to abate crisis (real or fictional) by relying on the logics of patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism, as is often experienced in war-based video games which centre the hero archetype.

The war hero's patriarchal and neoliberal response to crisis is designed into the very narrative and mechanical operations of war-based video games, such as *Battlefield 3* (2011), *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), and *This War of Mine* (2014). Through close ludonarrative readings of these games, I review how the war hero must successfully perform crisis management, which requires the player-as-war-hero's masculinized and militarized management of 1) resources, 2) morality, and 3) life and death. For an example from the first category, as soldiers in *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, and *Spec Ops*, players must manage resources like weapons and bullets, between combat sequences, in a way that expedites but also glorifies combat. Meanwhile, as civilians stuck in a civil war, players of *This War of Mine* must manage not only weaponry but basic survival items, like food, medicine, and crafting materials, around a day-time-crafting/night-time-scavenging play cycle. Important to note is that *Battlefield 3* and *Call of Duty 4* offer more conventional war hero avatar play and design, while *Spec Ops* and *This War of Mine* subvert several war game conventions to critique militarization and war as entertainment. Despite their valuable critiques, these latter games do rely on similar neoliberal management techniques to their more traditional war game counterparts. Yet by disrupting (*Spec Ops*) and removing (*This War of Mine*) the war hero avatar, these games allow players more critical engagement with and questioning of the patriarchal and neoliberal aspects of their gameplay.

Through crisis management play, the war hero avatar incorporates the player (back) into neoliberal capitalist and patriarchal subjecthood, rather than offering more equality-based updates to our ideological habits. Of course, players may interpret

war-based video games differently and will not themselves necessarily agree with each game's patriarchal or neoliberal dictates. However, these ideological patterns do remain in gameplay and will inevitably be performed without critique – as habit – by many players, so long as these patterns remain in game design. Meanwhile, players who do actively support patriarchal and neoliberal social oppression will have their viewpoints further validated by such gameplay.

Patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism fundamentally use the war hero avatar to position *crisis-as-threat*, which distracts from the possibility of *crisis-as-opportunity* to explore less-marginalizing ideologies. This distraction occurs by tapping into the player's desire to be empowered when virtually encountering reminders of real-world anxieties, such as the anxiety linked to death (be that literal death, of the physical self, or figurative death, to a habituated way of life). The war hero in video games, however temporarily empowering to individual players, ultimately updates rather than challenges our neoliberal and patriarchal habits.

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