Lifting the Fog of War: Militarism, Colonialism and Encyclopedic Pleasures in Digital Play

Dennis Jansen
Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University
Drift 15, 3512 BR
Utrecht, the Netherlands
d.jansen1@uu.nl

Keerthi Sridharan
Centre for Digital Humanities, Leiden University
Doelensteeg 16, 2311 VL
Leiden, the Netherlands
k.sridharan.vaidehi@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Keywords

ecocriticism, game design history, militarization, postcolonialism, wargaming

INTRODUCTION

Across various game genres that feature maps to be navigated and explored, we find a design concept called *fog of war* (FOW), commonly understood as the limiting of spatial and visual information until the player approaches or enters the obscured area. Montfort and Bogost (2009) trace the concept's origins to Warren Robinett's *Adventure* (Atari 1980), but early examples of the same idea can already be found in computer wargames like Walter Bright's *Empire* (1977) and Chris Crawford's *Tanktics* (1976). It is still applied in many different games, like *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian Studios 2023), *Civilization V* (Firaxis 2010) and *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (Intelligent Systems and Kou Shibusawa 2019), as well as popular real-time strategy games like *StarCraft II* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) and *Dota 2* (Valve 2013). These contemporary examples indicate that FOW is no mere symptom of digital gaming's roots in wargaming and Cold War-era technoscience, but that this martial legacy is very much alive in game design today (see Crogan 2011).

This talk highlights a change in the meaning and function of the FOW concept as it has spilled over from military simulation into entertainment gaming. Analog and early digital instances of FOW emphasized the challenges associated with limited information in accordance with military history and strategic theory; in contemporary videogames, FOW stimulates and rewards the exploration of unknown territories, allowing players to experience the joys of knowledge acquisition by 'lifting the fog'. We argue that 'lifting the fog' in contemporary videogames is often the enactment of a colonial fantasy that simultaneously also aligns with the ongoing wargaming renaissance in the Global North, which aims to produce military subjectivities for an age of perpetual war.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

FROM FOG-AS-RISK TO FOG-AS-FUN

The original concept of 'fog of war' is usually ascribed to military theorist Carl von Clausewitz ([1832] 1982), who never used the phrase as such but did use fog to illustrate "friction, which encompasses all of the unpredictable circumstances that constantly wreak havoc with military planning," and "uncertainty," which denotes "the impossibility of perfect data" (Packer and Reeves 2020, 66-67). Later scholars tend to deploy the term as a metaphor to argue that military planning is by necessity a matter of acting on incomplete and unreliable information with unpredictable outcomes (cf. Waldman 2010, 348-50). This is the concept that many designers of computer wargames in the 1970s and 1980s wished to convey, although some felt that most players did not appreciate their attempts at recreating the "confusion and chaos" of battle and preferred transparency and control. "So give wargamers what they want and dump fog of war," as Crawford concluded (Crawford et al. 1988, 24).

Instead of 'dumping' FOW, however, contemporary videogames retool the concept to minimize the confusion and chaos produced by limited information. Players are no longer meant to see darkness or obscured terrain as a source of risk, but rather as an invitation to venture forth. Bunting (2026, 38) states that FOW emphasizes the notion of unexplored areas on a game map as "unfinished business." FOW here is a cue that there is more information about the game world to be found in other areas. This cue evokes the curiosity and desire for knowledge of the "explorer" player type who "sets about penetrating the unknown and testing personal and geographical limits," and who "feels satisfaction in dispelling the fog of war as she advances into new territory" (Chang 2019, 135). Mechanically speaking, FOW is similar to the arrow that says "Go Here!", akin to an open door or a highlighted pathway. Even when the obscured area is skill-locked, such as in *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry 2017), FOW carries the implicit suggestion that it will be cleared away at a certain point. The player need not worry about being unable to traverse the fog, because it will remain in place until the player is 'ready' to enter the area waiting to be discovered. Its presence in such cases exists in deference to the player's skill level; *when* the player is ready to face the unknown, the fog *will* dissipate.

WAR, WHAT IS IT? GOOD FOG!

Chang (2019) and others (e.g. Fuller and Jenkins 1995; Jansen 2019; Lammes 2003; Magnet 2006; Mukherjee 2022) have argued that the cartographic impulse of the explorer-player is a colonizing exercise of power over a space, its environment and its inhabitants. Foregrounding the encyclopedic pleasures of information gathering and completionism is a way to reframe exploration as not belonging to the cruelty of the colonial project, but rather to a romanticized notion of the pursuit of knowledge 'for its own sake'. Lifting the fog in contemporary videogames thus functions as the realization in virtual space of a colonial imaginary – of *terra incognita* as unexplored potential.

Moreover, the framing of *fog-as-fun* in entertainment games offers the player a sympathetic reasoning for what is essentially still the objective of military simulation: eradicating friction and uncertainty through play. In both cases, FOW signifies potential knowledge about the game world that the player is entitled or obligated to acquire. Entertainment games make lifting the fog enjoyable by rationalizing this objective as learning about the unfamiliar. Professional wargaming may attempt to achieve something similar, since the core idea of wargaming is to capture the

complexity of the modern battlescape in models and use them to play out a "war on contingency" (Crogan 2011, 36) in a fun and safe way (see also Hirst 2024). By contributing to the imaginary of a "closed world" (Edwards 1996) that can be fully known and therefore completely anticipated and controlled, the ludic fog-as-fun sensitizes players both to the colonial pleasure of discovery as well as the militaristic pleasure of dispelling uncertainty. This affective overlap may be a lucrative vector for the recruitment of both players and designers into the growing wargaming industry and the military domain at large, heralding a further (re-)militarization of digital play. Beyond this, we hope to begin untangling the implications of this militarization for rhetorics of knowledge and pleasure in worlded play across extraludic media.

REFERENCES

Blizzard Entertainment. 2010. *StarCraft II*. PC game. Blizzard Entertainment.

Bright, Walter. 1977. *Empire*. PDP-10. Walter Bright.

Bunting, Ben S. 2026. "Languages of Power, Languages of Protest: Exploring the Rhetorics of Game Maps." *Games and Culture* 21 (1): 27–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241237303.

Chang, Alenda Y. 2019. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Clausewitz, Carl von. 1982. *On War*. Reissued. Edited by Anatol Rapoport. London: Penguin Books.

Crawford, Chris. 1976. *Tanktics: Computer Game of Armored Combat on the Eastern Front*. PC game. Avalon Hill.

Crawford, Chris, Steve Newberg, Roger Damon, Dave Arneson, and Ed Bever. 1988. "'Fog of War': A Clearer View." *Computer Gaming World*, April.

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

Edwards, Paul N. 1996. *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Firaxis Games. 2010. *Sid Meier's Civilization V*. PC game. 2K.

Fuller, Mary, and Henry Jenkins. 1995. "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue." In *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by Steve Jones, 57–72. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Hirst, Aggie. 2024. *Politics of Play: Wargaming with the US Military*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Intelligent Systems, and Kou Shibusawa. 2019. *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*. Nintendo Switch. Nintendo.

Jansen, Dennis. 2019. "The Environment at Play: Confronting Nature in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and the 'Frostfall' Ecomod." *Press Start* 5 (1): 1–18.

Lammes, Sybille. 2003. "On the Border: Pleasures of Exploration and Colonial Mastery in *Civilization III Play the World*." In *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference*, edited by Marinka Copier and Joost Raessens, 120–29. Utrecht: Utrecht University.

Larian Studios. 2023. *Baldur's Gate III*. PC game. Larian Studios.

Magnet, Shoshana. 2006. "Playing at Colonization: Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game *Tropico*." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30 (2): 142–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859905285320.

Montfort, Nick, and Ian Bogost. 2009. *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Mukherjee, Souvik. 2022. "Pathfinding Affect: Reading Maps, Bodies and the Affective in Colonial Videogames." *Parallax* 28 (2): 166–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2023.2184948.

Packer, Jeremy, and Joshua Reeves. 2020. *Killer Apps: War, Media, Machine*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Robinett, Warren. 1980. *Adventure*. Atari 2600. Atari, Inc.

Team Cherry. 2017. *Hollow Knight*. PC game. Team Cherry.

Valve. 2013. *Dota 2*. PC game. Valve.

Waldman, Thomas. 2010. "'Shadows of Uncertainty': Clausewitz's Timeless Analysis of Chance in War." *Defence Studies* 10 (3): 336–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2010.503678.