Danger Close: Contesting Ideologies and Contemporary Military Conflict in First-Person Shooters

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ABSTRACT

More and more military first-person shooters situate their action in contemporary conflicts, with some claiming to various degrees to realistically depicted that conflict. Using the recently released game *Medal of Honor* as an example, this paper shows that such realism is made impossible by the presence of three ideological constructs found in military shooters: the FPS apparatus, the military-entertainment complex and neo-Orientalism. These constructs respectively naturalize violent intervention, frame the U.S. military as just heroes, and present Afghanistan and its inhabitants as fundamentally terrorist. Each of these constructs thus works to strip elements of military conflict of context, and reinforces the others' tendency to turn a complex war into a simple case of good vanquishing evil.

Keywords

First-person shooter, ideology, military-entertainment complex, neo-Orientalism

INTRODUCTION

Among video game genres, the military *first-person shooter* (FPS) enjoys an unprecedented popularity (e.g. Plunkett 2009). Within this genre, the focus has almost entirely shifted from situating gameplay in past conflicts like World War II, to situating them in more contemporary conflicts, with some recent games even going so far as to present players with a digital version of actual conflicts that are still being fought. One of these games is Electronic Arts' *Medal of Honor* (Danger Close 2010), which is loosely based on Operation Anaconda, and puts players in the shoes of four soldiers from different companies during the opening days of the invasion of Afghanistan (Ransom-Wiley 2008). According to the developers, the aim was to recreate the experiences of the soldiers involved as realistically as possible (Wallis 2010).[1] This is a laudable goal, to be sure, that could in theory lead to a better understanding of the particularities and contexts of military conflict in those who play these games. Yet, while such games have become increasingly adept at rendering military action in a realistic fashion—guns fire realistically, bodies react to bullet impact realistically—the staples of the FPS genre seem to prohibit the framing of such action in equally realistic contexts. Far from the realistic experience of war promised by the developers, players are given a simplified, even glorified, account of military intervention.

In this paper, I will use the game *Medal of Honor* as an example to show how the three main components of the FPS—the player, the enemy and way interaction between the two is framed and facilitated—fundamentally prohibit an accurate representation of the complexities of war. I argue that each of these components is formed in conjunction with an ideological construct that actively seeks to simplify and polarize. Specifically, I will show 1) that the FPS as an *ideological apparatus* serves to naturalize violent intervention as a means of conflict resolution; 2) that the role of the military, and thus the player, is framed through the lens of the *military-entertainment complex*, and presents a sanitized and glorified view of the military; 3) that the "enemy" is framed through the lens of what some have termed *neo-Orientalism*, presenting a gross overgeneralization as well as oversimplification of both the enemy being fought and the enemy as an abstract concept (see Figure 1).
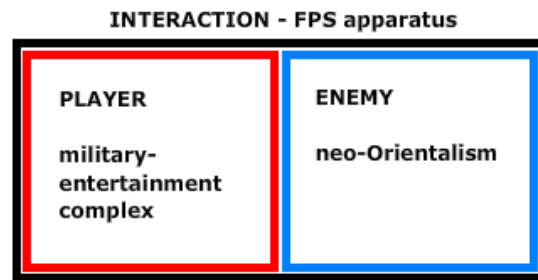

Figure 1: Schematic overview of the core three interrelated ideological constructs present in FPS games.

THE FPS APPARATUS

The FPS genre is arguably born in 1990 when Virgin Games releases *Corporation*, an action adventure game featuring role-playing, hacking and stealth elements, and one of the first to implement a human viewpoint and full 360 degree freedom of movement (Moby Games n.d.). Perhaps because of the complex gameplay and difficult controls, however, the genre did not gain widespread popularity until Apogee released id Software's *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) two years later. This game used algorithms to present players with a vanishing-point perspective of the game environment that changed according to the player's movement, thus simulating a 3D experience (Bryce & Rutter 2002). The avatar's weapon is prominently featured in the middle of the screen, and moves with the camera, creating what Klevjer terms the "subjective camera-gun". The gameplay in *Wolfenstein 3D* consists of navigating maze-like levels ("floors") while killing any and all enemies the player encounters. With hordes of enemies waiting behind every corner, and a host of increasingly ridiculous weapons with which to dispatch them, *Wolfenstein 3D* is generally considered to be the progenitor of the FPS as we know it today—the archetype on which subsequent games have been modeled (Bittanti 2007, Bryce & Rutter 2002, Klevjer 2006b, Kurtz 2002, Mactavish 2002).[2] Since then, FPS games have modeled themselves more and more after Hollywood conventions, presenting players with increasingly spectacular visuals, audio and narrative. At the same time, the element of exploration found in earlier shooters has given way to a more linear, "on-rails" experience, better suited to these games' streamlined Hollywood narratives and cinematic ambitions (Klevjer 2006b: 4).[3] Even contemporary FPS games, which provide players with increasingly realistic game worlds and gameplay, and which situate that gameplay in increasingly realistic contexts, still conform largely to this original, simplistic format: you, the player, navigate a more or less linear environment from the protagonist's

perspective, while dispatching the enemies you encounter with a variety of weapons (Kurtz 2002, Klevjer 2006a, 2006b). While this template is relatively unproblematic when the action takes place on Mars and the player is fighting aliens, its use in representing actually existing nations in contemporary military conflict warrants further investigation.

In "First Person Shooters – A Game Apparatus", Sue Morris (2002) explains how what she calls the FPS apparatus (after Baudry's cinema apparatus) "creates for the player a highly immersive media experience, in which a first-person point-of-view, player agency and the operations of interactivity combine to create a sense of primary identification greater than that of cinema" (p. 95). While Morris notes that this strong identification leads the gaming subject to be "strongly influenced by interpellation from the game text itself and social influences, both intraludic […] and extraludic […]", her focus on the technical aspects of the apparatus and on multiplayer modes of gaming as opposed to the more narrative single-player mode prevents her from identifying the ideological and interpellative processes found in the single-player FPS game. Like Morris, Andrew Kurtz (2002) identifies the player's interaction with hardware as an important part of the FPS apparatus, but supplements this with analyses of the FPS games' representational content as well as "the player's subjective response to that content as mediated *through his articulation with* hardware controls" (p. 108, author's emphasis). The connection between these two levels of analysis allows for a more sophisticated discussion of the ideological FPS apparatus.

Kurtz explains that in Althusser's original definition, the only role of ideology in the reproduction of hegemonic relations is to create subjects from individuals by "hailing" or "interpellating" those individuals through cultural representations (2003: 108). Put simply, this means that cultural representations are not ideologically neutral, but represent sets of beliefs, or ideologies. When an individual feels addressed by those beliefs, they accept and subject themselves to those ideologies. Ideologies thus spread when enough people feel addressed, or interpellated, by them, and culturally dominant ideologies are considered hegemonic. While extremely influential, this theory hinges on one-way influence, and leaves very little room for individual agency. Especially for video games, which require active manipulation to be effectively consumed, this is problematic. In fact, Kurtz argues that it is precisely in a player's agency, in the act of manipulating the game, that interpellation is most likely to occur, and most effectively so.

While Morris (2002) claims that the first-person perspective employed by FPS games ensures immersion, and therefore interpellation, Kurtz instead argues that this perspective has inherent limits that can in fact cause disidentification (2002: 117). While FPS games strive to be as realistic as possible in their use of the first-person perspective, they have not yet solved the problem of how to convey information about the avatar's status to the player in a way that doesn't draw attention to the artificiality of the first-person construct. Because the body is never seen outside of cut-scenes, information is presented as meta-data in a head-up display (HUD), breaking the illusion of actually "being" the game character, and thus diminishing the game's overall realism.[4] Another site of disidentification is found in the hardware necessary to manipulate the game (Kurtz 2002). Because there is no inherent link between the buttons pressed and the resulting action on the screen, Kurtz argues that navigating, or making sense of, both the representational content of the game and of the hardware necessary to manipulate it is a constant struggle.[5] As such, the agency available to a player is always circumscribed by both hardware and code. Yet it is exactly in this agency, in the act of making sense of the game and

manipulating technology to reconfigure the game, that the player subjects himself most to its ideology (Kurtz 2003).

What does this mean for players of FPS games? To what ideologies do they subject themselves simply by playing? According to Kurtz (2002), the main ideology inherent in the FPS is the player's domination of uncharted space. In reconfiguring the game data and acting on it through the use of hardware, "the player articulates with the very heart of liberal humanist ideology, the impulse to counter the irrational and the unforeseen with individual free will" (Kurtz 2002: 117). While this theme is certainly an important one in FPS games, the same is arguably true for all action games, and it obscures the unique ways in which the FPS genre frames this domination of space. Therefore, I would like to supplement this general ideology of domination with two additional, more genre specific ideologies: that of the modern grotesque, and that of the gun as ultimate technology. Rune Klevjer argues that while most current FPS games contain less excessive visual violence than their forebears, they still retain elements of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *grotesque realism*: "an attitude that turns the vulgarity of excrement, orifice and bodily dismemberment into a joyful affirmation of the materiality of the body" (Klevjer 2003). Mainly because of playability concerns, the player's own character is usually able to withstand inconceivable amounts of gunfire, rendering him near-invincible. The character's invincible frame thus stands in stark contrast to the fragility of his enemies, creating a very particular ideology of destructibility. This ideology plays out in close conjunction with the FPS genre's reverence of the gun. As mentioned above, by combining the gun with the camera, the gun becomes the central focus—or, indeed, the central *character* (Bittanti 2007)—of the FPS:

> The visual and auditory response from the weapon that occupies the central position of the game space is hyper-reactive, loud and graphically in-your-face, forcing an awareness of sheer power and destruction. Above all, 'first person' in the genre of the FPS means first person gun, a unique and rather extreme perceptual articulation of the broader attraction of 'gunplay' that exists in various forms in our culture […] As a cyborgian form of challenge and spectacle, the FPS holds up and celebrates the gun as the ultimate technology, a focus point as well as a paradigmatic substitute for a wide range of modern technologies (Klevjer 2003).

Put together, these three forms of ideology combine to create a theme of dominance of space and bodies through destruction and gunfire.

In spite of the realism pursued by *MoH* developer Danger Close, the game is strictly embedded in the FPS staples outlined above, which is clearly illustrated in a mission called "Friends from Afar". Here, the player assumes control over Deuce, a Delta Force sniper of Advanced Force Operations (AFO) Wolfpack. At the start of the mission, the player finds himself on a cliff overlooking a valley holding a high caliber sniper rifle. According to Klevjer (2003), the sniper rifle is the archetypical feature of today's FPS games. Representing both the technological supremacy of the player's gun over those of his enemies as well as the ultimate camera-gun, the sniper rifle "mimics the screen mediated kills of modern combat, while retaining the spectacle of up-front bodily destruction" (Klevjer 2003). Immobile for the duration of the sniper sequence, the player is asked by his teammate, Dusty, to take out several enemies on a distant hill top. Although nothing can be seen with the naked eye, Deuce's sniper rifle is equipped with variable zoom and a variety of heat filters, which means that the enemy soldiers are soon

squarely in the player's sights. As soon as this happens, the player is given permission to open fire. Due to the high caliber of the rifle, any direct hit results in a kill, realistic body recoil and all, as the player's teammate provides feedback on where exactly the player hit the enemy soldiers. If the player's aim is off, he is told to aim for the head next time. Every part of this section of the game is geared towards making the player feel like the ultimate warrior, able to kill enemies with a single bullet from a vast distance, emphasizing his power by showing the impact of the player's bullets on his targets, both of which culminate in the moment the player pulls of the coveted headshot. Interestingly, a direct head shot results in a little icon popping up in the bottom of the screen, informing the player of his aiming excellence. This happens every time the player makes a head shot, and cannot but be perceived as a direct violation of the pursued realism of the rest of the game (which I will return to later), as it calls attention to the game's simulational nature, foregrounding the game's evolutionary as well as its technical roots in a way that even a general HUD does not.

After picking off a number of targets in this fashion, an enemy trips a claymore placed nearby and Deuce automatically slings back his sniper rifle, switching to the player's standard weapon load-out. This set of weapons alone weighs in at well over 40 pounds, and the ease of movement the player character somehow retains contributes directly to the idea of being super-human. Using these weapons, the player has to take out the now rapidly approaching enemies. Only when all of the enemies have been killed is the player allowed (and instructed) to follow his teammate further up the mountain, stopping every now and then to take out a wave of enemies. After doing this once or twice, the player resumes long range sniping, followed once again by a sequence of running-and-gunning, before the mission ends. In a very literal way, this mission turns gameplay into repetition, asking no more of the player than to fire at anything that moves, while being pushed from one area to the next. With this in mind, Klevjer argues that the on-rails, repetitive and ritualistic experience of the FPS provide the player with a form of regressive pleasure.[6] Rephrasing the ideologies we identified so far, this mission neatly summarizes prototypical FPS experience, as it allows the player to "engage intensely with the grotesque and destructive dimensions of modernity, in a ritualistic dance of spectacle, power and powerlessness" (Klevjer 2006a). Combined with the attention drawn to the bodily destruction of the enemy and the role of the sniper rifle therein, this mission serves as a striking example of the simplistic genre ideologies found in this game.

While the example discussed above is far from rare in the FPS genre, it does an exceptionally bad job at reflecting the realism pursued by the game's developers. Far from simulating the experience of an actual soldier—let alone an elite operative—in prolonged military conflict, the player is given short bursts of regressive, childish pleasure in the form of visually spectacular destruction: kill everything in sight, move on, repeat. This simplistic framework is hardly conducive to the complex reality of war. Even at the most basic operational level, the military FPS already puts forward violent action as the most natural method of conflict resolution, providing no other way to interact with its purportedly realistically represented game world and thus undermining its own ability to accurately represent contemporary conflict. To accept the claim that it does in fact offer a realistic depiction of such conflict, we would have to accept that the role of a soldier is that of aggressor, never peacekeeper or rebuilder. Based solely on the type of interaction provided by FPS games then, we can already see how it would be difficult to represent any military conflict accurately. This becomes even clearer when we look at the framing of the military through the ideology of the military-entertainment complex, and their enemy, the Al-Qaeda, through the ideology of neo-Orientalism.

THE MILITARY-ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

A play on what Dwight Eisenhower in his farewell address called the "military-industrial complex", the military-entertainment complex refers to the way the military is uniquely entangled with the entertainment industry (Herz 1997).[7] Seen from this perspective, we end up with an entirely different history of the (military) FPS—one that focuses on the "revolving door" between military and entertainment industry through which people, concepts and technology have moved back and forth to give form to their current intricate relationship (Turse 2008). As it is impossible to review the military-entertainment complex here in its entirety, I will focus on the way the complex steers military representations in popular entertainment, as well as on the interplay between the military and video games, with special attention for the FPS genre.

While the military has been using computer-simulated war games since the late 1970's, their direct involvement with commercial video games only started in the 1990's with the creation of *Marine DOOM* (Stahl 2006, Stockwell and Muir 2003).[8] This modification of the popular early FPS game *Doom* (id Software 1993) was created by the military and subsequently used for training purposes. From this point on, technology did not just trickle down from the military into the commercial sphere, but traveled the other way as well. This intimate bond was formalized in 1999 with the founding of the US Army-funded Institute of Creative Technology (ICT) (Stockwell and Muir 2003). Here, professionals from all corners of the entertainment industry are enlisted to work on military projects, with the promise that any technological advances are allowed to flow back into the entertainment industry (Lenoir and Lowood 2002, Stahl 2006). These and other cooperative efforts have ensured a close relationship between video game developers and the military, where we find both military simulations being remade into commercial video games, as well as commercial video games being repurposed into military training simulators (Stahl 2006, Turse 2008).

In *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives*, Nick Turse (2008) explains the cost of having the military sit in on the development of video games and movies. While the military is able to provide priceless resources in the form of information, military hardware and personnel, this usually comes at the cost of them having a say in the representation of the military. This dynamic was made explicit in 2001, when key players of the entertainment and Hollywood industry met with Bush administration officials to discuss the ways the entertainment industry could support the "War on Terror". As Stockwell and Muir (2003) explain,

> The Beverley Hills summit was significant because it did formalise the relationships and expectations on which the propaganda facets of the military-entertainment complex rely. While industry and government both purport to disavow propaganda, the government is clear in its expectations of media (to define evil, to rally the populace behind the military and to create sympathetic narratives) and the industry is clear in its contributions (public service announcements, documentaries and the allegiance of its stars demonstrated via shows for the troops).

Combined with the tendency of self-censorship after 9/11, these dynamics have created in entertainment products a very specifically one-sided, sanitized and hegemonic view of the US military and the wars they fight (Stahl 2006, Stockwell and Muir 2003). This brings us back to war-themed video games, which have not only seen an enormous increase in popularity and variety since the 9/11 attacks, but almost all of which also, as Stahl notes,

"mobilize rhetorics consistent with the War on Terror", favoring direct military action over negotiation (Stahl 2006: 118).

All of these aspects are readily apparent in *Medal of Honor*, where the player is presented with a very particular, idolizing and sanitized perspective on the military. For example, although the player is the one doing the invading, he is constantly placed in situations where he is ambushed by large groups of enemy soldiers. In doing so, the game effectively conveys the feeling that it is not the player who is the aggressor, but the enemy—the player is simply defending his squad. Also, while in this process the player kills dozens, if not hundreds, of enemies, all of these are considered "bad guys". In fact, the *only* civilian character in the game, a sheep herder, is non-lethally incapacitated in a cut-scene, perhaps to give at least a semblance of balance and rationality to the narrative of destruction. Another way this destruction and its consequences are downplayed is found in the disappearance of enemy corpses. Almost immediately after an enemy soldier has been killed, his body disappears, leaving no trail of the massacre carried out by the player. Although it is possible that this decision is the result of visual processing power limitations, the result is a battlefield that is being "cleaned" of unwanted elements by the player, removing even the most basic consequence of any war—dead people. Through these and other dynamics, the game presents the player with a highly patriotic and sanitized view of the military and the invasion of Afghanistan, devoid of any critique or even consequence. This is further made tangible in a sub-plot that plays out during the cut-scenes, where the officer in direct command of the player's squad of operatives ignores orders so as to save "his men", highlighting the emotional undertone of righteous American soldiers having been sent into hostile territory. This theme finally culminates in the death of the player's main character at the end of the game, with his teammates commenting in a vindictive tone that "the war is far from over". While this may seem like a relatively innocent plot device to ensure the possibility of a sequel, at the same time it reiterates the rhetoric that order can only be restored through military rather than diplomatic action.

All of this is underscored by a constant stream of military lingo, lending the game an air of authority and realism. This realism has been the focal point of the game's marketing campaign since it was first announced. The game's official website contains multiple videos of interviews with the elite "Tier 1 operators" who served as advisors to the game developers. In these videos, the soldiers (their faces blurred for "safety reasons") explain how the developers employed their expertise to make the game as realistic as possible, and are keen to express their appreciation of the realism of the final product.[9] A similar effect is garnered by the (most likely) intentional modeling of one of the in-game characters, Dusty, after a real soldier (Wallis 2010). The presence of these soldiers on both sides of the screen serves as a link between the digital and the real military, confirming for the player that this is indeed a realistic portrayal of military action and the invasion of Afghanistan—that this is how it happened, or, at the very least, how it *could have happened (*Höglund 2008, Kurtz 2003). In every possible aspect, *MoH* is trying to convince the player of its authenticity as a representation of the invasion of Afghanistan.

There is no doubt that certain aspects of the military are portrayed realistically in *MoH*: most aspects of the military—weapons, vehicles and apparel—look and feel realistic, and the codified military language used in the game certainly sounds authentic enough. Yet, any aspect of war that might detract from the image of the U.S. military as heroic has been carefully removed. Maybe the resulting sanctifying view of the military is representative of actual military experience, but the removal of all objects and situations

that might make a soldier question that sanctity during actual conflict makes for a poor rendition of reality indeed, and the result serves only to strengthen the hegemonic idea of a faultless military and a righteous invasion.

THE OTHER: NEO-ORIENTALISM

In an ironic similarity to the ideological frameworks described above, I have so far paid very little attention to perhaps the most important character in any war, virtual or not: the enemy. I intend to correct that in this section, where I will discuss the framing of what Edward Said termed "the Other". In the seminal *Orientalism*, Said describes the titular Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 3) through the "distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts" (ibid: 12). What this means is that through the persistent dissemination of simplified accounts of the Orient and its inhabitants in the aforementioned areas, they are discursively reduced to a generic, totalized stereotype, a cultural Other. Today, the Middle East is subjectivized in a similar manner through what Melanie McAlister (2001) and others have termed *neo-Orientalism*. American neo-Orientalism, according to Johan Höglund (2008), "can perhaps best be described as a discourse that in military electronic entertainment is characterized most importantly by the construction of the Middle East as a frontier zone where a perpetual war between US interests and Islamic terrorism is enacted". In other words, through the discursive process of neo-Orientalism, the Middle East as it appears in video games is reduced to a unified culturo-political entity inhabited by turban-wearing terrorists, which can only be pacified through military violence.

As should already have become clear through the discussed examples, *MoH* is steeped in this ideological discourse. Most enemies are decked out in generic Middle Eastern garb, and while some Chechen mercenaries are mixed in for variety, the player is never expected or, indeed, *trusted*, to form an individual opinion on the enemy he is fighting. The region of Afghanistan modeled into the game appears to be populated by thousands of Taliban and Chechen fighters, and one lonely sheep herder, who is taken out of the player's consideration by having him taken care of by one of the player's team mates in a cut-scene. This contrast is felt throughout the entire game, as the player visits several villages without ever encountering a single civilian. In a mission called "Gunfighters", the player mans the gunner seat of an Apache helicopter, and is eventually asked to "go hot" on an entire village because it houses a large concentration of enemy troops. While it is highly unlikely that the player would not cross paths with at least a handful of civilians in these sorts of situations, that is exactly what the player is asked to accept, and accept as *real*. In this version of the invasion of Afghanistan, there is no such thing as collateral damage.

One element that could have given grounds for reflection received so much criticism that it was removed even before the final game was released. Like most contemporary shooters, *MoH* features a multiplayer component where players are pitted against each other in teams of 4 to 6 people. True to the setting of the single-player game, players were to be divided into teams of Allied troops and, yes, Taliban fighters. Public outcries over this design decision echo Stockwell and Muir's (2003) idea that by "toying with the point of view (POV), experience of the simulation can create new empathies". However, where Stockwell and Muir presented this strategy as one of the possible ways to escape the totalizing ideologies in FPS games, the fear here was that players might identify *too much* with the Taliban cause. The game was criticized by people as high up as UK Defense Secretary Dr. Liam Fox, stating that it is "shocking that someone would think it

acceptable to recreate the acts of the Taliban against British soldiers" (BBC News 2010). On the opposite side of this argument we find the rather pragmatic reasoning of EA's Senior PR manager, Amanda Taggart, who was quoted saying that "[m]ost of us have been doing this since we were 7—if someone's the cop, someone's gotta be the robber, someone's gotta be the pirate and someone's gotta be the alien [...] In 'Medal of Honor' multiplayer, someone's gotta be the Taliban" (Thier 2010). Eventually, the criticism led EA to rename the multiplayer Taliban to Opposing Forces, or OPFOR. This change can hardly even be called cosmetic, and does nothing to change the problematic nature of having players assume the role of soldiers of any creed, color or race fighting digital American or British soldiers, in a context that is claimed to be real. If anything, it only highlights the semiotic problems of representing both parties in an actual, ongoing conflict in the simplified environment of the FPS.

In short, the ideology of neo-Orientalism feeds off as well as into the ideologies of destruction and military might described above. In this version of the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan is a fundamentally hostile area populated solely by terrorists—there are no citizens to be concerned about, no women or children that could get in the line of fire. Order in this country can only be restored if the U.S. military manages to eradicate the terrorist threat completely. In trying to streamline the game's action-adventure narrative, the game paints an extremely one-dimensional and sanitized picture of both Afghanistan and its role in the conflict at hand, and Afghanistan itself, thereby reducing the complex reality of war to a simple "us versus them".

RATING: (IM)MATURE
Throughout this paper, I have argued that representing contemporary conflict in FPS games is problematic because of the ideologies constructs of the FPS genre itself, the military-entertainment complex, and neo-Orientalism. The FPS as an ideological apparatus works to provide the player with an environment in which the only mode of interaction is one of destruction. Layered on top of this are the ideologies of the military-entertainment complex and the cultural Other, which provide the player with perspectives that respectively represent military action as both heroic and necessary, and reduces the involved parties of a complex political conflict into heroes and terrorists, Us versus Them, Good versus Evil. It should now also be clear that these ideological constructs don't just exist next to each other—they reinforce each other. Following Kurtz's idea that interpellation is most likely to occur in interacting with a game, the player enacts and potentially subjects himself to these three ideologies with every pull of the trigger. As Höglund (2008) puts it, "[t]hrough reducing the Middle East to a perpetual frontier within this game space, war is effectively transformed from an extreme and unusual measure to a state of normality", and "[w]hile the narrative of the games encourages an understanding of the Middle East as a site for everlasting military carnage, it is the game experience as such which cements it". Seen through the action-oriented lens of the FPS, the already interlocked ideologies of American military supremacy and neo-Orientalism seem only too natural.

In 2002, media effects scholar Arthur Asa Berger wrote that "[g]ames aren't models of reality and don't claim to be; what they do is represent an emotional reality that generates the desired fantasies in the minds of players. Thus, criticizing games for not being real or realistic misses the point" (quoted in Stahl 2006: 126). Here and now, this critique is exactly the point. *MoH* claims to be both a realistic and authentic representation of a real conflict, a conflict that is still being fought by real soldiers. As Johan Höglund correctly remarks, however, there is a distinct difference between a game that claims to be

realistic, and one that claims to be *real*. The difference, according to Höglund (2006), is that a *realistic* game really just means that "the game environment and its physics appear authentic before the gamer's eyes", while in a *real* game "the narrative that the gamer becomes part of is historically and ideologically accurate".[10] Höglund argues that exactly because most military shooters claim to be both realistic *and* real, these two concepts should be carefully seperated when analysing them.

This tendency between realism and reality is problematic especially in *MoH* due to its continued insistence on its roots in reality, conflating a conflict that is still being fought today with a black-and-white teenage power fantasy. Rather than using the FPS as a vehicle to explore the problematic of the Afghani conflict, the war serves as a mere background to which the player performs the simplistic actions demanded by the genre's rote staples. Talking of FPS games in general, Kurtz (2003) explains that "[w]hile the game is attempting an accurate representation of a historical event, it is conceived, produced and consumed on another historical terrain altogether, one that is characterized by bell hooks as 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'".[11] This seems like an accurate enough statement, and it certainly applies to *MoH*. Does this mean, then, that the medium of video games, and the FPS genre in specific, is simply incapable of satisfactorily representing contemporary conflict? Is the action-adventure FPS by definition, as Klevjer (2006a) puts it, "too spectacular, too rigid, too grotesque and too industrial to be able to offer any significant degree of healthy, developing play"?

Not necessarily. If *MoH* represents the *Green Zone* (2010) of video games—aptly described by the movie's military advisor as a "Bourne-in-Baghdad adventure" (Gonzales 2010)—then there is room at least conceptually for an interactive *Generation Kill* (Simon et al. 2008) or *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow 2009) as well.[12] The difference between the two is that in one, contemporary conflict serves merely as a backdrop for mindless spectacle, while the other provides context for that conflict and shows its consequences on the parties involved. The ideological constructs of the contemporary FPS described in this paper ensure the removal of exactly such contexts. The major limitation to realism in military FPS games then, is not a technological one, but the reluctance of developers to let go of the ideological constructs that have become the genre's staples, and instead introducing more context (Barron 2003). Overcoming that reluctance and complementing destruction with context and consequence is a necessary step if we are to change video games from regressive, destructive fantasies to mature entertainment in the fullest sense of the word.

ENDNOTES

[1] Also see the various developer videos on the game's official website, <http://www.medalofhonor.com/game/medal-of-honor>.
[2] Bryce and Rutter (2002) acknowledge that *Wolfenstein 3D* is not in fact the first 3D FPS, reserving that honor instead for one of id's lesser known games *Catacomb 3D*. However, that game is still outdated by a year by Virgin Games' *Corporation*. Some aspects of these and later FPS games can be traced even further back, for instance to Steve Russel's 1980 game *Spacewar* (Bittanti 2007, Bryce and Rutter 2002), or, from the perspective of mediated gunplay, all the way to the chronophotograph, a gun-shaped camera developed in 1882 (Bittanti 2007). For more on the problem of genre in video games, and an analysis of the shooter genre, see Arsenault (2009).
[3] For a more extensive discussion of the evolution of the FPS genre and its elements, see Klevjer (2006b).
[4] See Fagerholt & Lorenzon (2009) for an in-depth analysis of HUD elements and their impact on game perception.

⁵ This point is also articulated by Klevjer (2003), who argues that because of the dimension of loss offsetting the far-reaching control the FPS is, in Roger Caillois' terms, "a vertiginious machine"
⁶ These elements are even more salient in the "Gunfighters" mission, where the player takes on the role of an Apache gunner. Here, gameplay resembles the on-rails, arcade action of old even more.
⁷ This is not the only public sector the military is involved with. In fact, Nick Turse (2008) points to numerous attempts to identify different military-X complexes, concluding that what we are really dealing with is a military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex, which he prefers to simply call "the Complex".
⁸ For an extensive overview of the technological developments and intricate relationships leading up to this moment, see e.g. Lenoir & Lowood (2002) and Turse (2008).
⁹ See the developer movies on <http://www.medalofhonor.com/game/medal-of-honor/>.
¹⁰ Alexander Galloway makes a similar distinction between "realism" and "realistic-ness" in "Social Realism in Gaming" (2004).
¹¹Alternatively, one could recognize in these interacting ideologies the more general ideological stream of neo-conservatism, summarized by Kyle Kontour (2009) as being founded on the ideas that (1) each civilization has essential cultural traits; (2) different civilizations have reached different levels of development, which in some renderings may have a moral quality; (3) each civilization must deal with non-state actors who threaten the security and integrity of the state system; (4) since all civilizations are vying for primacy, we must know who 'we' are and which values should prevail in this struggle (meaning liberal values).
¹² While these particular movies are set in Iraq instead of Afghanistan, my concern is with the different representations of contemporary war rather than any one war in specific. I have yet to find examples of popular entertainment dealing with the invasion of Afghanistan that present this contrast as strikingly.

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