Apocalypse the Spielberg Way: Representations of Death and Ethics in *Saving Private Ryan, Band of Brothers* and the Videogame *Medal of Honor: Frontline*

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ABSTRACT
"Authenticity" is an issue central to Steven Spielberg in his re-creations of World War II. But while the films are (hyper)realistic also in their representation of death, this is not the case in the videogames. Does this suggest anything about contemporary society's view of killing, dying and death? In my paper I study death and ethics in *Saving Private Ryan*, the TV series *Band of Brothers*, and the video game *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (2002), all sharing the same topic: the Allied invasion of Normandy during World War II. The differences indicate an ambiguity in the notion of authenticity as well as different strategies of handling ethical questions.
(Work in progress – please do not quote!)

KEYWORDS
Death, ethics, authenticity, remediation film-videogame

INTRODUCTION
Steven Spielberg has a reputation of not just making films but also creating a whole range of products related to them, including videogames (through his company DreamWorks Interactive). His interest in the events of the second World War (WWII) has accordingly not only resulted in films like *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as well as the TV series *Band of Brothers* (2001)[1], but also a series of WWII videogames under the title *Medal of Honor*. In an article on Spielberg and George Lucas in *Film International* John Lewis makes a quotation from film scholar Robert Kolker, who says that narrative closure in Spielberg's films is provided without having to reach any definite conclusions and that

> /…/it totally evades politics and history; it gives men an excuse for their behavior; and most obviously, it hails the redeemed character … without the audience having to act on anything but their ability to look at the screen. [1]

Having lately been involved in analysing a couple of games in the *Medal of Honor* series and out of curiosity sort of left-handedly comparing these to the films mentioned, I was quite intrigued by the beginning of this quotation – see for example Ehrenhaus and Hasian, Jr. for interesting analyses of ideological and historical issues in *Saving Private Ryan* [2]. What follows however seems quite familiar, as functions like that of giving ethical guidelines (which includes legitimising human behaviour) are common in popular fiction [3]. I would suggest that these functions are also to be found in digital games.

The topic of this paper is an issue central to the context of popular representations of World War II, including all the aspects mentioned in the quotation – politics and history as well as ethical guidance and redemption – namely *death*. As a number of researchers – for example Zygmunt Bauman – have pointed out: representations of death and dying and changes in these, as well as our conception of the human body and ways in which we conceive illness, dying and other issues on its destruction, offer important knowledge about cultural processes and self-understanding in contemporary society [4]. Considering the massive acclaim for Spielberg's "realistic" depiction of war in for example *Saving Private Ryan* [5] and his strive for authenticity in his World War II films and videogames [6] the issue of studying death in these works becomes even more intriguing. What do they suggest about contemporary society's view of killing, dying and death? How is the

[1] 10 episodes, HBO. Co-produced with Tom Hanks; based on the 1992 novel by Stephen Ambrose.

concept of death handled with in the process of remediation from film to interactive videogame, where there is no longer a passive spectator but instead an active player, who is being "responsible" for the act of killing himself?

A report on work in progress, this paper forms the second part of a pilot study on the issue of death in WWII videogames [7], beginning with what I have chosen to call "carnivalesque death" as opposed to "postmodern death", the issue to be dealt with here. The reason why I got interested in death in the first place was the fact that in many action videogames (not only those on WWII) the bodies of the enemy killed often vanish into thin air shortly after dying, while in some others the corpses remain. Comparing two types of narrative in WWII games, the spectacular fantasy *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001) and the pretendedly "realistic" *Medal of Honor: Underground (2000)* and *Frontline* (2002)[2], my spontaneous reflection was: why do the corpses remain in the overtly fantastic *RTCW* but disappear in the so-called "authentic" *Medal of Honor*?

Before I continue I must apologise to the reader of both papers for the theoretical parts being almost identical. The study would presumably gain advantage if put into one piece, but then it would have become far too long for a "normal" paper – being work in progress, there is much that might be speculative and after a closer scrutiny not fit in. I am grateful for all comments.

DEATH IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD

As those who are familiar with digital action games[3] know, death in this context differs quite a lot from the traditional idea. Death both is and is not the end: your enemies pass away, but your own death is rather a temporary absence.[4] Depending on the game's perspective, your death announces its presence either when your view suddenly is blurred or directed up into the sky/ceiling/whatever in an ominous angle, or your avatar[5] literally goes up in smoke. You die, but you either resurrect at once or after a short while (or, in worst case after having re-entered the level) – a process known among gamers as "respawning". This is a privilege normally not extended to your enemies – when they die, they die, and quite often their extinction is accentuated by the total disappearance of their bodies. A pool of blood might be the only thing that remains.[6] Or, the corpses might remain, adding to the atmosphere in the game but also functioning as practical tools for the gamer's orientation, telling that you have been in this place before.

As mentioned, WWII videogames contain two types of death that I suggest might be called postmodern and (borrowing from Bakhtin's famous study) carnivalesque. The term *carnivalesque* is an attempt to capture a notion of death where accentuation of the

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[2] In this paper I focus on *Frontline*, although what is said is generally also relevant for *Underground* and presumably also for the other games in the *Medal of Honor* series.

[3] Digital games are played on a number of different platforms, the TV console and the computer being the most closely related. In this paper I have chosen to use the common term *videogames* for both.

[4] I am here referring to most single-player adventure games, although in multiplayer games resurrection is a common feature.

[5] Avatar: the figure you "are" on the screen.

[6] I am here referring only to those games where all movement and fighting take place in the same scenery; in some platform games you meet your enemies in what you might call "a combat space" within the game.

corporeality of the event, highlighting the bloody, the gory and the grotesque, is crucial. This is represented in the still popular *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and the more recent *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001), where the corpses of the Nazi enemy (as well as other creatures) lay where they have fallen – whole or scattered into pieces – thus contributing to the aura of "Nazi-ness" in the game [8], but also turning it into an excessive carnival of slaughter. *Postmodern* death can – as will be seen shortly – be described as disappearance rather than extinction. This mode of death comes in its purest form in 2-D digital strategy games of the classic type, constructed like tabletop board games. These do not deal with death and dying other than in a remote and distanced way, since the main objectives are about military tactics. Death strikes not individual soldiers (and of course not civilians!) – since there are no individuals visible – but whole units at once. Casualties are the calculated outcome, not very different from the "death" of pawns in a game of chess. Dying is here a very clean and practical procedure: no blood, no corpses, no debris – just instant removal *en masse* from the battlefield.

Today, the demand for realism and "authentic" experiences[7] has resulted in more elaborated forms of strategy games, but I would still suggest that death here is of a different quality compared to the genre labelled First Person Shooters, FPS, where the immediate experience of death is more important. You are to shoot or otherwise exterminate the enemy by the use of more or less potent weapons – mainly more, since many games boast about the armoury available for the gamer to choose from. "Authentic weapons from WWII" seems to be an important issue in WWII FPS, which is occasionally even further elaborated into "fantastic weapons that were never taken into use".[8] Historical authenticity is also central in many WWII games and is also an issue that is highlighted for example in reviews. As mentioned, the *Medal of Honor* series boasts authenticity as its main characteristic; accordingly, the slogan for *Medal of Honor: Frontline* goes "You don't play – you volunteer" [9]. The official website even announces "The Medal of Honor team continues to deliver the most authentic WW2 experience on any gaming platform." [10] The film trailer for the game features scenes from the Omaha Beach event that are familiar both from *Saving Private Ryan* and from authentic documentary films, which enhances its "authenticity". The images, their sequence and the camera angles are the same to such an extension that if after recently having played the game you watch a documentary on D-day, the latter may seem almost as a replay of your own experience.

HYPERREALISTIC DEATH AND THE ENIGMA OF THE DISAPPEARING DEAD

The Omaha Beach scene in *Saving Private Ryan* is famous/reputed for its quite hyperrealistic depiction of death in the battlefield. People are slaughtered in masses, blood is gushing and intestines crawling out of mutilated human bodies [12]. The almost voyeuristic depiction of death returns several times during the film, perhaps most prominently in the long, intimate, almost obscene scene where Private Mellish of the rescue team is struggling with a German SS officer who finally slowly presses a bayonet into his chest [13]; time is so to say standing still during the process of passing from life to non-life, the liminal quality of the event thus enhanced. There is one scene in part five that is to become of central importance to Lieutenant (later Major) Winters, one of the

[7] Here, I use "authentic" meaning that which is *felt to be* real, which is not the same as that which actually *is* real – see Ryan and Bolter & Grusin [11]. The quotation marks (as also around for example "real") are meant to indicate this ontological difference.
[8] *Secret Weapons of World War 2*, expansion to *Battlefield 1942* (DICE/EA Games 2002). See http://www.eagames.com/official/battlefield1942/secretweapons/features.jsp

main characters, as well as to the whole series, and which is actually repeated a number of times, in slightly different versions. [9] The narrative consists of Winters leading his men in an assault on a group of Germans. Having reached the top of the road bank where he was heading, he sees a young German boy soldier in the field in front of him, slowly getting up from the ground. Taken by surprise, seemingly beginning to raise his hands (which results in almost a shuddering of his shoulders) and even smiling insecurely, the boy is standing defenceless in front of Winters. Time freezes for a moment – there are close-ups of both faces, the boy's expression turning into awe – and then Winters fires his already raised weapon, shooting the boy who falls the ground. This is the central part; the narrative then continues with Winters (and his men) successfully defeating a group of SS soldiers. In part 10, the last in the series, we learn that this in fact was the last occasion when (now) Major Winters had opened fire during the whole war.

This brings me back to the core of my investigation. While it could be said that death and dying obviously are central issues in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*, both stressing intimate voyeurism, emotional impact as well as personal ethical reflection on the subject, the *Medal of Honor* games show an entirely different picture. You aim, shoot, your protagonist is killed – and vanishes. From one aspect the disappearance of the dead protagonists in digital games is quite understandable, since their purpose is just being obstacles for you to defeat, and when this is accomplished they have no further significance. But I find it intriguing to investigate the question in the context of the *Medal of Honor* games since here you have an overt allegation of re-enacting history. I have asked a couple of programmers who affirmed that disappearance of corpses in videogames is (as might be guessed) mainly a product of "byte economy" and a way of making the job more easy – keeping the dead bodies with all that follows would consume a lot of memory and mean a lot of extra programming.[10] But, as *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (and some other games) shows, it can very well be done. So, I suggest that if keeping the corpses was considered important in *Medal of Honor*, those games would also

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[9] There are three different versions of the scene in part five, all built around the same basic film shots but positioning the experience differently. *The first*, which also is the opening scene, is getting into the qualities of Winter's own experience of the event, with shaky camera and fast, heavy breathing. The borders between screen and TV sofa as well as between Winters and us are blurred, which results in an intimacy which makes this first version qualitatively different from the second, being more traditional action where the event is depicted for an audience positioned as spectators.
The second is also placed into a narrative: while the first begins with the experience of hasty movement and ends in sudden blackness after the dead boy's falling to the ground, the second is part of a longer sequence with a beginning and an end. It uses fewer shots of the event, thus compressing time and focusing on action, not the experience, and it also shows us what happens next: Winters turns his weapon against the other Germans in the field (who were not visible in the first version) and continues shooting.
The third is Winters remembering the event, in a Paris Metro carriage. Here we are back to the emotional experience. There are actually yet another two closely related scenes in part five: one when Winters passes the dead boy's body and looks at it, the other when he is sitting, seemingly deep in thoughts, in front of the site of assault which now is scattered with dead Germans, and his friend and colleague Nixon comes up to talk about the result.
[10] This is of course especially important in online games, where it is important to have a fast connection.

be made that way – bullet holes and destroyed material artefacts such as tanks and demolished houses do, in fact, remain.[11]

SANITISED DEATH

So casualties in the games are not "existing" in the same way as material demolition. This is a scenario that is quite familiar from the idea of precision warfare as in for instance the both wars against Iraq – human lives are put in the background and the consequences of war are preferably only to be seen in a non-organic context. In his famous essay on the first Gulf war Baudrillard described it as a "clean" war, detached from reality and completely sanitised in its mediated form [14]. With the second armed conflict now fresh in memory, it is interesting to reflect on the fact that media representations of casualties – and the audience reactions – differed depending on which part in the conflict that was shown. Al-Jazeera broadcasting pictures of dead or wounded allied soldiers caused a moralistic uproar in major parts of the Western world, while Western media had no difficulties in showing equivalent Iraqis.

This is of course nothing new: the propagandistic effects of death are important during times of conflict [15]. Still, it seems like there is (and long has been) an underlying moral problem in exposing "our" death, while such restrictions are absent concerning "the Others". George Mosse's study of picture postcards during World War I [16] indicates significant similarities in the popular picture of war compared to today, especially within the domains of popular culture. The soldier as a fierce, heroic warrior fighting for the glory of the Nation and for what is Right and Just – what Mosse calls the Myth of the War Experience – is very much alive in films, comics and not least in videogames like *Medal of Honor*. The big difference is the disappearance of death. Has, then, death itself become such abhorrence that it is not desirable to be visually represented in *any way* – or, on the contrary, has it lost its dreadful quality of termination? [17] Or is it the dead body in itself that is an abomination? I will reflect on these questions by using theories on postmodernity by Bauman and Baudrillard, as well as Kristeva's writings on abjection and Douglas's on purity and danger.

DEATH, MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNITY.

As shown by scholars like Mary Douglas and Mircea Eliade [18], man as a social being is in his nature ritualistic. When it comes to basic concepts like survival and the organisation of society, rituals are of crucial significance even in an allegedly secularised culture. In modern Western society, beginning in the 19th century, traditional rituals connected to dying and the dead were transformed under the banners of hygiene, differentiation, science and technology. Modernity's idea of dying became that of a first and foremost medical procedure, which should take place in secluded spaces like hospitals. The dead body was taken care of in an efficient, modern way by specialists, again in specially selected locations (morgues, crematories, cemeteries) that were distant from the surrounding ordinary life, from normality [19]. From having been basically flesh, with all its connotations to nature (and therefore subject to disciplinary regulations grounded in religious ethics), including

[11] Since there can only be a certain amount of bullet holes, they start vanishing as well when the critical level is reached.

such qualities as decay, the human body was transformed into a secularised entity ideally more like a perfect machinery than God [20]. This Cartesian distancing made the liminal, and therefore dangerous, character of life's border zones (birth, death) even more troublesome than they had been before [21] and therefore had to be socially organised in a new way. Thus, the return of the civilised person's body to nature after death had to be ritualised by exclusionary practices: the dead being deconstructed by rituals indicating the transcendence back into a "natural" state [22]. The conceptions of death and the decomposing body became intimately connected to filth, impurity and contamination, and thus to feelings of shame, disgust and horror [23]. Accordingly, the propaganda for cremation among social reformers during the turn of the century 1900 built on the notion that our loved ones should not after a respectable and honourable life in the spirit of new, modern man be confined to nauseating decay after death. The corpse – now more comfortably renamed *ashes* (in Swedish *stoft*) –, with its inherent potentiality of impurity brought forward by death, should ideally be cremated, thus both symbolically and literally cleansed by fire (and simultaneously promoting hygiene in society since there would be no further problems with overcrowded cemeteries). All that remained would be a heap of white – the colour, in fact, seemed to be important – ashes [24].

Bauman, quoting Baudrillard, describes a *postmodern* conception of death, where its character of termination has changed into respite and transition, disappearance rather than extinction. The world where death is disappearance is, according to Bauman, a co-existence of people (compared to a formerly linear existence in a restricted space) where space has several levels: when people have to leave space on one level they just move to another. In this world, linear time has been replaced by cyclic time; here disappearance is in contrary to death not final, since you can never be sure that it lasts forever. Disappearance makes repetition, a fundamental quality of postmodern society and also poor man's way of immortality, possible [25]. The similarities with the hyperreal, multi-level virtual worlds of digital games are truly striking, and in the same time the changes in spatio-temporal conception that are suggested indicate a shift from the rational, differentiated, linear paradigm with roots in Protestantism and Enlightenment to a more romantic, undifferentiated, almost pagan worldview [26].

Today's emphasis on the body as a site of pleasure, desire, difference and playfulness is the result of a wider cultural process connected to the transformation of society from bourgeois industrial capitalism to a secularised hedonistic mass consumerism. But the body is today perhaps more than ever subject to regulation and discipline; as Turner puts it: "The new anti-Protestant ethic defines premature ageing, obesity and unfitness as sins of the flesh" [27]. To achieve the predominant ideal of the young, slim and healthy body (despite your actual age) there are numerous strategies, of which self-starvation and medical surgery belong to the most drastic but nevertheless culturally accepted. Thus the idea of the declining or otherwise deviant body as an anomaly is still very much (or even more?) present in postmodern culture. Also, consumer culture logic builds on the idea that when an object becomes old and outdated, it is disposed of in favour of a new, fresh model. Things do not "die" from being worn out anymore; fully functional they nevertheless "disappear" when a "better" version arrives [28]. In this context, the disappearance of the corpses in the games seems quite logic and the ultimate symbolism for a clean and efficient way of handling impurity as well as things that are "no longer useful" – by instant transcendence into nothingness. Parallels to the outstanding procedures in the Nazi extermination camps are close and chilling [29].

Postmodernity does not seem to have altered modernity's notion of death in itself as abomination, although in this context it seems to be considered less definite

(disappearance instead of death) and more of an omnipresent expression of anomaly which can be conjured and controlled by rituals [30]. But death and decay of the body in the postmodern is also something else, as contemporary popular culture contains elements of the pre-industrial carnivalesque tradition which it has transformed into media images [31], not least in digital games. I will not go further into this here, directing the interested reader to the first part of this study [32]. Mary Douglas's interpretation that a voluntarily partaking of symbols of mortality signifies a kind of protection against the effects of death, can give us clues also to the cultural strategies of postmodern society [31]. In that case, an abundance of morbid signifiers might serve as basically ritualistic attempts to ensure us of continued life as we know it. As there are no such symbols of mortality in *Medal of Honor*, one begins to wonder about the possible ritualistic meanings of this game.

RITUALS AND THE CONJURATION OF DEATH

The metaphor of symbolic conjuration becomes very visible when put into the context of digital games. Every time when death is imposed on an enemy your own status as living is enhanced (in some games both symbolically and literally when you get health points and/or extra lives) – and in the same time death itself is killed, since exterminating those threatening your life (such as those selected as carriers of disease) is a symbolic substitute for exterminating death itself [34]. This is a well-known strategy for societies dealing with what is considered to be deadly threats, with the Holocaust as one of the most extreme expressions. Symbolically killing death is, according to Bauman, a tribal rite, aiming at the preservation of the tribe's cultural security as well as cultural supremacy [35]. In this project, the main goal is not the enemy on the other side of the border but the far more dangerous *enemy within* – an insecure representative of death, who albeit being different does not come from the outside but has been nourishing itself from the inside all its life [36]. As Sartre expresses it: nothingness is perceived situated in the very core of being (au sein même de l'être), like a worm [37]. The deadly threat of the enemy within is visualised in the aforementioned WWI picture postcards, where the gruesome death of traitors was depicted with as much as fervour as that of the enemy [38].

But is there an enemy within in *Medal of Honor*? As I have shown in an earlier analysis of *Medal of Honor: Underground* [39], there is a very clear-cut division in the game between Good Guys and Bad Guys, us and them, which of course are the Americans and their friends ("you" in *Medal of Honor: Underground* are actually French, working for the US intelligence) and the Germans and their evil allies, such as for example Arabs (Mission 2, "Hunting the Desert Fox"). All of Us are a priori Good and all of Them are a priori Evil; there are not even such complications as good non-Nazi Germans or Allied traitors. The enemy within would be, I suggest, not as much an unpatriotic traitor joining forces with the Axis of Evil, but the threat of you yourself not proving to hold against the required standards. In the mission instructions it is not seldom stressed that you are alone on this secret and dangerous mission, there is no one to help you but the High Command have trust in you, and if you fail you are finished on your own accounts. Thus, the enemy within is not a trait of decadence (or even evil) within yourself that may lead you astray from the righteous; it is individual incompetence and failure in the service of the Nation. You in yourself are by nature one of the Good, accordingly you have all the possibilities of performing great deeds. If you fail you are worthless, and it is your own fault that you fall into oblivion.

In the other part of this study on death I found the concept of a fundamental lack or emptiness, a disturbance of totality at the core of being, fruitful in analysing the metaphor

of the enemy within. This fundamental lack, emptiness, disturbance of totality at the core of being, is central to philosophers like Sartre and Heidegger, who examine the existential anxiety that the discovery of it causes and our strategies for coping with it. But it is hard to see dimensions of existential anxiety in the quite trivial threat of personal failure, as well as imagining individual capacity in the service of the nation as anywhere near the realms of holiness. I must say, though, that not being an American I do not know if there really exists such an extremely potent combination of Christian values and patriotism (or liberalism) within US national identity that it would be able to fulfil a function such as the one hinted at by the theory on abjection – and that it would be so naturalised that it is reflected in games like *Medal of Honor* as something taken for granted [40]. At least to me it seems a bit too far-fetched – so I drop the case here, not having found a very good conclusion.

APOCALYPSE AND THE VICTORY OVER EVIL

In digital games on the whole there is something of a moral obligation of exterminating everything that is archetypal Evil, thus non-human and consequently a threat to mankind, just like for example monsters, mutants, zombies and Nazis. Now, if morality lies in performing one's duty against mankind (and in war games the nation, which needless to say usually is the US) but dubious morality should lie in displaying of the trophies – as in *Medal of Honor* –, one may wonder why this is so. The conclusion would be either that they are not considered "truly dead" (instead they are "removed"), that the disappearance is a metaphor for instant modernistic burial (in a secluded space, not visible for the rest of the society), or simply that if there is a ritualistic aspect of these games, it works in another way. Death is here present as an active force to be vanquished, not as passive icons. One possible, albeit banal, explanation might be, then, that games of this kind function on a mythic level is that of assuring confidence, since we are continuously shown that Evil and death can be defeated, and that I have the personal ability of accomplishing this. Fate is no longer solely in the hands of others – I as an individual can (and must) make a contribution.[12] Many adventure-type videogames follow the archetypal pattern of the hero quest, where the conquest of Evil and the victory of Good (including personal rewards for the hero) are fundamental [42]. In games of this type the reward basically consists of reaching a high final score (which can be compared against either oneself or others): all enemies killed, all treasures found, all secrets disclosed. In some games there are medals and glory in the gaming community to strive for. In *Medal of Honor* it is pretended that the "real" US Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award, might be "yours" [43].[13] Hence it might from this perspective not be a big thing if the visual signifiers of killed death are left or not, since it is the automatic summary and the reward in the end that really counts and the continuous action that is important. In this case, the virtual people killed might not even be symbolically connected to real people, they are just eliminated obstacles on your way to fame, which makes the operation somewhat more respectable.

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[12] Of course, there is also the more cynical view that interests in the political and economical elites encourage games of this kind purpously teach young people to fight and kill on command [41], a notion that might be more realistic than most first would think, considering the introduction of free, web-based and massively promoted war games like *America´s Army* (see http://www.americasarmy.com/).

[13] In the game leaflets the gamer is encouraged to learn more about the Congressional Medal of Honor and its recipients by studying the CMOHS web site, www.cmohs.org.

The notion of repetition is central: it should be noted that the struggle in fact has no real end. (Even after finishing a game you can always restart it.) Evil has to be defeated again and again, since the reward does not come until all spawns of impurity have been exterminated – and there are lots and lots of them. One characteristic of Evil in WWII FPS (as well as in other, similar games) is that there is an abundance of it. Like germs, flies, or why not the grasshoppers of the Old Testament (!), representatives of Evil swarm all over the virtual worlds. Here is an obvious connotation to the well-known metaphor of disease [44]. One is also tempted to see a connection to Dyer's notion of white man being symbolically threatened by the reproductive abilities of non-whites [45], as well as to other ideas of the masses being constitutive of special dangers. Further, there are interesting parallels to the German Freikorps literature as studied by Klaus Theweleit [46], where he analyses the Weimar republic "macho" male identity as built upon fear of everything that can be associated with femininity – the liquid, wet, dark, emotional, chaotic etc. – as well as with liminal regions of mixture (dirt, mud, swamps…) and connected to the dangers of metaphorical flood and waves. This fear was channelled into aggressive racism and anti-Communism, the foundations of the National Socialist ideology. Of course, the metaphor of the threat of the Other as swarming masses or as flood – of Communists, of Capitalists, of Muslims, whatever – is frequently being used in all sorts of societies and nothing special for Germany or even for that period of time [47].

On the subject of masses, and returning to the comparison between *Medal of Honor* and the films, a common feature is that there are a lot of Germans to be defeated, which is of course neither far from historical reality nor exclusive for these films or *Medal of Honor* – rather, it is a quality probably shared by all WWII videogames.[14] There are some quite important differences, though. Perhaps most prominent is the fact that there is an ambiguity in the films which is not represented in the games: all Americans are not good and all Germans are not evil [48]. The previously mentioned notion of a threat from inside might, then, in the films be seen not as ethnically based but as a deviation in the otherwise ethically and morally conscious, basically multi-ethnic, US national character. Ehrenhaus even sees *Saving Private Ryan* partly as an allegory of the Western democracies' inability of dealing effectively with the Holocaust during the war, and therefore suggests that by "suturing Holocaust memory into *Saving Private Ryan*", Spielberg confronts us with "the 'uncontrollable otherness' of our own historical past" [49]. This would, according to Ehrenhaus, partake in the formation of a new US national identity, seeking its moral roots before Vietnam and "constructing an ethically usable past in the present" [50].

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Now, if I shall try to make some conclusions out of this rather disperse material there are some major issues that I would like to underline.

First, the difference between the films and the games in questions on *ethics* as well as *ethnicity*. In the films, evil just as well as virtue might be situated in the heart of anyone, regardless of nationality, while in the games there are clear-cut, ethnically based distinctions between who is Good and who is Evil [51]. While in the films such issues as ethics and human rights are implicitly – or explicitly – foregrounded, this is not the case in the

[14] In other, more fantastic WWII FPS like those following the *Castle Wolfenstein* theme, there are not only Nazis all over the place but also other traditionally ghastly creatures like zombies and ghosts.

games. Here Evil is clearly located within the enemy, who therefore must be exterminated – very simple, easy and no need for reflection.

Second, the difference in the representation of *death* and *dying*. The films are to a large extent characterised by the hyperrealistic mode in their close visualisation of dead bodies and people dying, often in pain and agony, and also in their intense lingering on the liminality of the actual process of life ending. The games make up a striking contrast with their efficient, mechanical and one would say very modernistic way of instant disposal of the human debris – although in this there is an unmistakable trait of postmodern disappearance instead of termination.

What does this suggest about contemporary Western (or US) society's view on death, dying and the ethic issues of war? Are there any good answers at all? It may sound trivial, but I would propose that one key seems to lie in the notion of "authenticity" and postmodernity's often mentioned quest for heightened levels of experiences of the ultimately "real", often represented by the hyperreal. Especially through film and digital media it is possible to experience death and dying in an "authentic" but still non-threatening way, and as death may be seen as the ultimate real [52], it is not surprising that it makes a thrilling issue. Of course, man's fascination with death is not a new thing; what is new in this context is rather the improved "reality" of the experience through a high level of immersion [53]. This commodification of death fits very well in a postmodernist view of today's media and media consumption, although I don't think that it gives the whole picture – the differences between the films and the games suggest that there are more than one way of seeing it.

Another, more interesting clue might be found in the absence in the game of the liminal qualities of death and dying which are found in the films, most notably in *Band of Brothers*. Besides the obvious ideological qualities of basically hailing the US [54], there seems to be an interest in exploring the metaphysics of dying, which is not present in the game. Of course, if WWII FPS games would go into this, they would certainly lose their character of "shoot'em up", and possibly not be as attractive on the games market as now (although I would guess that there still would be an audience, albeit at least in part slightly different). While the films offer opportunities to think and reflect about war, about ethics and the fragility of human beings, basically in (I would say) a pacifistic way, the games build on the very opposite: do not think for yourself but follow orders, be a hero and kill all enemies. This is of course familiar from whenever (mainly) boys have been playing war games, so one might wonder where the new thing is (and some people would even ask where the problem would be). The ambiguity lies in the concept of authenticity and the strive for realism, which takes on different meanings in the films and the videogames. While both the films and the games claim to offer authentic experiences of WWII, authenticity does not mean the same thing in the different contexts. The films create not only "authenticity" by nostalgic representations of "the way it was", but, I would say, actual authenticity in an emotional sense by focusing on issues that include ethical decisions, inviting the audience to partake in this reflexive project. Authenticity would then partly lie in the audience being led to experience the same range of feelings as the characters on the screen – kicks of adrenaline in combat and danger as well as other of more philosophical character. In the games, on the other hand, I would say that "authenticity" lies only in the material representation, since the emotional experience is reduced to the thrills offered basically by your own performative skills. Without the complexity of human reason there cannot be such a thing as an authentic experience of anything.

The differences between the films and the *Medal of Honor* videogames generates questions that at first may seem trivial, but nevertheless (I believe) have something more to them. Does this, for example, mean that the film audience and the gamers (who, I would guess, quite often are the same) have different expectations of what an authentic experience is when they see the films as compared to playing the game(s)? How would a "humanist authenticity" like that in the films (that is, that includes a range of different emotions and ethical reflections) be if put into the context of the games? A guess is that they would, as just mentioned, still attract gamers – but those who are interested in the whole spectrum of war, not just the killing business and heroism. Presumably, there will always be people who want the simple explanations of human behaviour, right and wrong, good and evil, and who prefer not having to reflect on these issues. The legitimisation of behaviour by referring to abstract higher values like the People or the Nation is of course not only found in Spielberg's films and videogames but frequently also in real life. But there is also the possibility of reflecting in an ideologically preset way. In Hasian Jr.'s essay on the multiplicity of possible readings of *Saving Private Ryan*, one example of very diverse appreciation is the character of Corporal Upham. For many sceptics of war, Upham becomes "an iconic figure who represents the ambivalence of the generations who either could not or would not have recognised the moral certainties of the 'Good War.'" [55] For others, he is an example of "cowardice /…/ that 'undercuts' the 'patriotic message' of the movie" [56]. Hasian Jr. concludes his essay with the following, somewhat pessimistic lines:

> At least in the near future, it looks as though the vast majority of viewers will be content to celebrate the film as an example of American martial prowness, an illustration of how the aberrant memories of Vietnam are outweighed by the normality of the "Good War". /…/ Defending the movie against intellectual critics becomes a performative exercise that ritualistically displays one's patriotism. In this America, we have better not see any more Uphams.

From my European point of view, things look a bit brighter. An important part of my PhD thesis will be ethnographic work with gamers, including interviews, and I have already noticed that the level of ideological awareness among gamers is rather high. At least among those I have been in contact with, as well as in Swedish gaming magazines like *PC Gamer*, *Medal of Honor* is considered "a very American game" – which is not exactly meant as a compliment. So, it seems like the notion of authenticity has quite different meanings depending not only on who you are but also where you live. It will be interesting to follow up how gamers look on issues like those discussed here and how they apply them in the context of the games. That will, however, be a further exploration.

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