

5-2009

## War and Video Games

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### Recommended Citation

Perry, Nicholas A., "War and Video Games" (2009). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 123.  
<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/123>

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War and Video Games: Portraying War in an Overlooked Medium  
HPR 401  
Advisor: Judith Swift  
April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Senior Honors thesis Project in Partial Fulfillment of the Honors Program Requirements.

“You too can become a military assault commando”.<sup>1</sup>

This quote references a Marine Corps modification for *Doom II* named *Marine Doom* that simulates tactical operations in a Marine fire team. In actuality, it contains several inaccuracies. The claim is linking an unrealistic game that was modified to be a training tool for the Marine Corps but could also be downloaded by civilians. The Marines modified *Doom II* for their purposes and this program was leaked onto the Internet. Civilians could download the program, but there was no official ban on downloading it and the Marines turned a blind eye to their training tool being used by civilians.<sup>2</sup> The flawed assumption is that since a civilian could download a training tool designed for the Marines, game players were also receiving realistic Marine Corps training. The phrase “...military assault commando,” is a contradiction in military terminology and demonstrates the author’s lack of information on military nomenclature and ultimate confusion of military simulators and computer games.

War has been a theme for practically every type of media from print media to newsreels, from on-line sites to movies. There has been deep analysis as to how these media affect the viewer, the ways they interact with that particular medium and – perhaps most importantly – how

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Lenior, “All but War is Simulation: The Military Entertainment Complex,” *Configurations* 8:3 (2000): 324. *Project MUSE*, www.muse.jhu.edu.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

they influence our views of war. Video games in general have been analyzed in a similar manner, particularly in terms of violence and different approaches to learning. What has not been attempted in any serious manner is an analysis of how realistically war is portrayed in video games.

There is a wide range of views in the academic world. On the one hand, there are people who are so caught up with military themes in games that they coined the phrase “The Military Entertainment Complex” and on the other are those who focus on how war video games facilitate different types of learning, e.g., audio learners or visual learners.<sup>3</sup> Both arguments miss the point because not enough attention is paid by either side to the actual costs of war and the technical details of combat in video games. Neither side separates simulators the military uses to train its personnel and video games that are released to the general public.

In truth, there is little motivation for the creators of video games to portray war accurately since it would encompass too much time. Players would have to focus on combat, strategic planning and supply as well as keeping track of economic implications. As a result, most war games intentionally narrow their focus to combat and in some instances, supply (bringing the necessary equipment and supplies to troops on the front lines), which is only handled tactically and the strategic planning needed to create supply lines is never realized. In order to decouple video games from military training simulators, video games need to be defined and categorized in technical terms so that they can be differentiated from actual simulators. Analysis also has to be given to gender studies in video games, particularly how boys and girls differ in the playing of such games. The difference between military simulators used to train our forces and

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<sup>3</sup> James Paul Gee, “Good Video Games, The Human Mind, and Good Learning,” in *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 29. There was a study in London where teachers had students play video games that taught resource management. The students were able to retain what they learned from the video game when the teacher re-enacted a similar situation in the classroom which suggest video games might access a part of the brain that helps in retaining information.

entertainment games that civilians play also needs to be established. The effects of violence also need to be analyzed in war games as well as video games as a whole.

The next discussion also has to revolve around the “Military Entertainment Complex” and what that specifically entails. The assumptions made by the proponents of this complex – a rather glib parallel to the Military Industrial Complex so defined by General (then President) Dwight D. Eisenhower - about video games that the general population purchases off the shelf and the military employs needs to be addressed in order to clarify misunderstandings. Some military simulators will be analyzed as well in order to clarify these differences. Another important aspect that needs to be addressed is the profit that video games and military simulators realize.

There will also be analysis of some commercial video games that simulate war. These titles include *Company of Heroes*, *Brothers in Arms*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps*, and *America’s Army*. While most of them portray World War II, there are many different issues that need attention in the nuances of each game. The factors that are going to be addressed are game play, genre, violence and gore, as well as technical accuracy. All of these aspects need to be analyzed individually as well as in total to understand what statement they are making about the role and perception of war in American society.

The definition of a video game is difficult to nail down with a fine degree of specificity. Video games are defined in large part because they are an interactive medium.<sup>4</sup> These games require an active participant in order to play rather than the passive viewer more suited to movies or television. Since the participant in video games is active, there are many psychological stimuli that are activated in the brain as well as subsequent consequences to engaging in

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<sup>4</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, *Children, Gender, Video Games: Towards a Relational Approach to Multimedia* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 12.

interactive media, but in general, engagement in the game elicits active emotional responses to what is being acted out on screen since the game world is manipulated by the person playing the video game.<sup>5</sup> Another aspect that is part of video games is the immediacy of what is created on screen and how the viewer interprets or transforms the information into a momentary reality.<sup>6</sup> While the interpretation depends on the particular game genre, it is important to establish that video games create a reality of their own that merges the real world and digital world. While the definition of video games is fluid, there are some definite aspects that can be defined as central to all. Video games are interactive and create a hybrid world that combines the real world and a digital world that is defined by programs and binary code. How the digital and real world is combined by the player is based in some part on the player's gender.

There is a difference in how boys and girls play video games. How much of it is based on the gender role kids observe and adopt prior to the time when they start playing video games or the games themselves is hard to determine. In reality, kids play video games based on societal expectations, which are embedded in gender constructs. Boys are expected to win and they play video games the same way – competitively and in a solitary mindset. Girls are expected to be more nurturing and help players who are having a hard time in a particular game. Through personal experience, I have never been too good at video games and remember feeling bad at how many times I was killed in most video games while my male friends took great pleasure in winning. What is undeniable is that the vast majority of games have masculine themes. These masculine messages range from the desire of boys and men alike to have (self-perceived) rational control. Masculinity is defined by taking action, and violence is an acceptable response in boys

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<sup>5</sup> Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 5-7.

<sup>6</sup> Eva Kingsepp, "Immersive Historicity in World War II Digital Games," *HUMAN IT* 8.2 (2006): 62. <http://etjanst.hb.se/bhs/ith//2-8/ek.pdf>.

and men.<sup>7</sup> Girls tend to be more helpful to others when they play games. If the game is a competitive one, girls will spend time to coach their opponent up to their level while boys will not help and continue to beat the weaker opponent.<sup>8</sup> While the study of how boys and girls play video games is relatively new, it is worth noting the impact of gender differences. Since most war games are centered on male protagonists, it is interesting to see how war games are focused on violence and ultimate victory at the conclusion of the story. These messages are processed by players of all ages at some level. Even though players observe the same acts of violence when playing a war game, their interpretations of the same event can be vastly different.

Some people believe that the video game industry is centered too much on war games and, in labeling the practice as the “Military Entertainment Complex,” have directly linked the military either to the use of video games as propaganda or as complacent about hyper-realistic portrayals of war because it is good for recruiting and training. The most popular example that is cited is *America’s Army*, a multi-player based game that centers on the Army. What is different about *America’s Army* compared to other military themed shooters available to civilians like *Call of Duty 4* is that it was developed by the US Army and produced by Ubisoft and the US Army. Critics have argued that the realistic training cycle and authentic looking weapons create competent soldiers and militarize society in a negative way.<sup>9</sup> While there are some legitimate concerns about the portrayal of war in an interactive medium, the critics of war games are voicing concerns about violence and military training that need to be considered in context. They also need to separate what the military uses as training simulators from what is considered a popular game.

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<sup>7</sup> Walkerdine, 31-32, 48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> David Leonard, “Unsettling the military entertainment complex: Video games and a pedagogy of peace,” *Simile* 4.4 (2004): 11, 14. *EBSCOhost*, www.ebscohost.com.

One of the largest problems with the critics is their incorrect usage of military terminology throughout their critiques, be they academic papers or gray literature. When a critic refers to a fire team as a squad, it shows that they did not even research basic organization within the military. If they do not know how the military works on a basic level, how can they criticize portrayals of the military? A concrete example of incorrect terminology is from David Leonard's article referencing what weapons the Army uses. In discussing *America's Army* and the realistically modeled weapons, he mentions that players could be armed with an Uzi.<sup>10</sup> The Uzi is not issued by any branch of the American military and can not realistically be used by players in the game. The critical articles also refer to weapons mostly as guns which is incorrect. People in the military refer to their weapons as specifically as they can. For example, a Marine is issued the M-16A4 assault rifle. A Marine would refer to their M-16 as a rifle or weapon. A gun means an artillery piece or mortar. A howitzer is an example of a gun since it is an artillery piece. The point is that if there is going to be serious criticism of the "Military Entertainment Complex," researchers need to demonstrate a command of basic facts and terminology about the military and the video games they want to criticize.

Even though the people who claim there is a "Military Entertainment Complex" use incorrect terminology, they do voice legitimate concerns about portrayals of war through digital media. Their claims fall into a similar vein that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned about when he noted the "Military Industrial Complex" as a standing military could dominate the American economy. Where the critics and I part company is over their assertion that military simulations created for training are nothing like the war games that are released to civilians. In order to contrast simulators and games, *America's Army* and the Marine Corps' use of combat simulators like ISMT (Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Trainer) need to be taken into account.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14.

Combat simulators have been part of the military since the 1960s with the creation of DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) in order to simulate outcomes of nuclear war.<sup>11</sup> Micro-technology has developed incredibly quickly since the end of the Cold War. The nature of war has changed as well. The technology that the military used to create training simulators during the Cold War was enough to portray massed armored warfare. When technology could reliably create 3-dimensional simulations in the 1990s, the Army and Marine Corps still liked to simulate armored warfare. That best example is the recreation of the Battle of 73 Easting into the Army's SIMNET. The Battle of 73 Easting took place in Desert Storm in 1991 where American M-1 Abrams (heavy tanks) and their crews used their superior technology and training to annihilate Iraqi armor.<sup>12</sup> The main problem with the older generation simulators is that they could not model complex human behaviors that are seen in counterinsurgency warfare.

In modern military thought, there are two types of warfare, high intensity and low intensity warfare. High intensity warfare is a big word for conventional warfare based around armored formations similar to World War II. Low intensity warfare is the polar opposite and resembles counterinsurgency and "police" actions as opposed to full fledged battle. Since 2001, the face of war perceptibly shifted to "low intensity" conflict rather than "high intensity" armored warfare. The problem with military simulators was that they were out of date in the face of the new threat Al-Qaeda poised and the complications of operating with local populations. The Marine Corps has met this challenge by utilizing computer technology and physical effects to train Marines in personal ability and situational awareness. The ISMT (Indoor Simulated Marksmanship Training) training that the Marines use simulates small arms

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<sup>11</sup> Lenoir, 291.

<sup>12</sup> J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames ate our Quarters, won our hearts, and rewired our minds* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 197.



like the M-249 SAW, M-16, M-9, shotguns, and MP-5. There is a digital [rifle](#) range, which is controlled by a computer, that Marines can employ to practice marksmanship for testing and

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battlefield conditions. Marines use modified weapons that operate like their real world models, but are connected to an air system that simulates recoil and react as they would in real life.<sup>13</sup>

New programs from Tactical Language & Culture, a private company contracted by the Department of Defense (DoD) including *Tactical Iraqi*, *Tactical Pashto*, and *Tactical Dari*, are used by the DoD to train men and women who are deployed overseas in basic language and cultural nuances through computer technology.<sup>14</sup> The point of both these programs is to reinforce weapons training as well as situational awareness to avoid Marines having to operate at high intensity all the time. The value of these training programs is that they help Marines in two ways: 1) to become accustomed to not being aggressive all the time and, 2) to be proficient with their weapons when they operate in urban environments with high populations of civilians.

These actual simulators are significantly different than *America's Army* because the Army's game is supposed to be enjoyable while the simulators are supposed to train personnel in the military. *America's Army* is simply a game that was created by the Army. While the game was not expressly a recruitment tool, it was designed to generate potential players into Army recruits. Since its release in 2002, the game has not met its intended objectives, but it still continues to be modified by the Army, which sees definite potential in using video games to stimulate players into joining their branch. However, they have not perfected their approach. In many ways, real Army life is not as exciting as games make it out to be. In video games, players want to go it on their own and do not like being punished for breaking any rules.<sup>15</sup> This is not

<sup>13</sup> Lance Cpl. Chris Dobbs, " 'Train as you fight': New ISMT provides Marines chance to hone weapons skills," <http://www.marines.mil/units/hqmc/barracks/Pages/ISMTTraining.aspx>.

<sup>14</sup> Tactical Language & Culture Training System by Alelo Inc., <http://www.tacticallanguage.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> Gee, "Good Video Games, The Human Mind, and Good Learning," 36.

military reality. *America's Army* is a multiplayer based game where players are assigned roles within a squad. It is not a particularly realistic game, but there is a lot that is accurate about the portrayal of equipment. For example, players can not play online until they complete basic training. Training includes qualifying with the M-16 on a virtual range and completing a shoot house scenario to teach fire discipline.<sup>16</sup> The game is often criticized as propaganda and not showing the true realities of war in terms of wounded soldiers because the game utilizes simple rag dolls that die instantly when hit.<sup>17</sup> The world between injury and casualty is ignored. There have also been concerns about the game being used as virtual recruiting. So far the game has received mixed critical and popular acclaim.

When *America's Army* was released in 2002, it was seen as a generally good game, but not revolutionary in any real way. The average Metacritic rating for *America's Army* was 82, which means that it received generally favorable reviews.<sup>18</sup> That opinion seems to hold to this day even though *America's Army* has seen several updates and new content added to it, there does not seem to be a large group of loyal players. The game is free for download from the home page (<http://www.americasarmy.com/>), which generates lots of interest, but most players do not play for very long. On the official Web site, there are statistics disclosed about users and they tell an interesting story. As of March 2009, there have been 9.9 million registered users who downloaded the game. Of those users, only 5.3 million have completed Basic Training which means around half of the users who downloaded the game never liked it enough to even

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Rossignol, *This Gaming Life: Travels in Three Cities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus Power, "Digitized Virtuosity: Video War Games and Post 9/11 Cyber Deterrence," *Security Dialogue* 38 (2007): 281. *Sage Journals Online*, [www.sagepub.com](http://www.sagepub.com).

<sup>18</sup> Metacritic, "America's Army: Operations,"

<http://www.metacritic.com/games/platforms/pc/americasarmyoperations?q=America's%20Army>. Metacritic is a website that has information on reviews for electronics and compiles a database of various product reviews from several critical and user reviews and is a good guideline on how a product or game is received.

try to get play online.<sup>19</sup> Or the would be players did not want the bother of training prior to use.

One feature of *America's Army* is an "honor" system that tracks a player's performance in the game and increases based on how much the game is played. The ranks range from 0-80 and are separated into four groups (0-20, 21-40, and so on). Based on the game site's statistics on honor levels, most people do not play the game in any dedicated fashion. The vast majority of users are in the first honor bracket (0-20) at 93.98%. The second bracket (31-40) consists of 3.8% of users. The next bracket (41-60) is 1.22% of total users while the last bracket (61-80) is only .61% of all users.<sup>20</sup> The distribution of honor levels suggests that most people download *America's Army* because it is free, but they do not find any entertainment value from the game or shun the basic training aspect. Considering that the game was released in 2002, there does not seem to be a large group of people who enjoy the game. To prove this point, the Army has constructed the Army Experience Center (AEC) in Philadelphia that is filled with interactive displays and video games portraying military life. Games that are on display are *America's Army* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Most of the people that came into the AEC played *Call of Duty 4* over *America's Army*. *Call of Duty 4* was produced by Activision and developed by Infinity Ward.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to see that the Army is utilizing a civilian game that is much more popular than its own game and that is more accurate with regard to practices in the Army.

In the end, military simulators are used to create and enhance skills for trained military personnel like ISMT training and *Tactical Iraqi* while video games are meant for the general public and sensationalize war themes and leaving out the boring details because games are meant to entertain rather than train like *Brothers in Arms* or *Company of Heroes*.

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<sup>19</sup> America's Army: The Official Army Game, "User Stats," <http://www.americasarmy.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sima Kotecha, "Cyber army base attracts recruits," *BBC.com*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/hi/technology/newsid\\_7871000/7871438.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/hi/technology/newsid_7871000/7871438.stm).

Now that the difference between games and simulators has been established, it is important to analyze the images of war that games present to the player. While the main concern that war games train young men and women for military service is vastly overstated and simply not true, viewing violence is a concern. The psychology of violence is interesting to analyze, but it is a very complex and somewhat subjective issue that is hard to make generalizations about. Violence in war video games is worrisome because there is a fear that gamers will be accustomed to violence and immune to its outcomes. There is also the concern about historical memory and how it is portrayed in video games. Games can be very selective in their memory when it comes to portraying historical events which present a warped view of history for those who do not have a deeper knowledge. The last concern about war in video games is how combat is portrayed and if players make an emotional connection to the violence on screen. In order to analyze the games, they first need to be summarized.

In order to analyze violence, history, and emotional connection, a wide range of games have been chosen to study. They are *Company of Heroes*, the *Brothers in Arms* series, the *Call of Duty* series, and *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps*. These selections include a wide variety of game genres and have different ratings. Most of them are set in World War II except for *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* which departs World War II for a fictional conflict that is set in the Middle East as well as an Ultra-nationalist uprising in the former USSR. The games vary in degree of violence and portray many aspects of the military experience, but taken as a group, they portray, for the most part, a positive popular memory and message for wars in America's past.

*Company of Heroes* is a real-time strategy game (RTS) that focuses on tactical combat during the Normandy campaign in the summer of 1944. Players assume the role of an American

commander who leads an infantry, armored, or airborne company and capturing resource points to help build and protect a home base. When the game was released in 2006, it was a huge critical success. The average score of 55 reviews gave the game a 93 which is incredibly high. The lowest score was a 75, but the majority of reviews rated the game at 90 or above, so there is general consistency across the board.<sup>22</sup> The game is a fairly stylized representation of World War II with the first mission looking eerily familiar to the Omaha Beach scene from *Saving Private Ryan*. There is nothing really controversial about how the war was portrayed; the real controversy is over the amount of violence. The game is rather shocking to see at first, but gradually the player stops caring about how many ways an enemy is wounded or killed and wants to complete the mission. The bodies of dead soldiers do not persist on screen however, but that could be due to software limitation on a demanding game, or an intentional call by the developer. In the end, *Company of Heroes* is more of a collective memory of Normandy as a “good” fight that than any of the historical complexities that went into the actual operation.<sup>23</sup>

The *Brothers in Arms* series is a radical departure from most games because it emphasizes tactical combat on the squad level. Tactical shooters differ from first person shooters (FPS) because players are forced to lead groups of men and the game is inherently more difficult since it is supposed to be “realistic.” Players assume the role of a squad leader who must control two or three teams under his command and use them to find and destroy the Germans. The three games have been set on the Western Front of World War II. The first two games had players assume the role of squad leaders in the Normandy Campaign while the most recent game has players fight in Holland during Operation Market Garden. *Brothers in Arms* takes pride in itself for being an authentic representation of squad combat by meticulously

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<sup>22</sup> Metacritic, “Company of Heroes,” <http://www.metacritic.com/games/platforms/pc/companyofheroes?q=company%20of%20heroes>.

<sup>23</sup> Kinsepp, 61.

recreating equipment and battlefields combined with difficult squad based game play. Even though these games are quite ambitious, they do fall short of their promises. When the first game (*Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30*) was released in 2005, players assumed the role of Matt Baker, a member of the 502<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment in the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division and their fight during the opening stages of the Normandy Campaign. It received generally favorable reviews (Metacritic Average based on Platform, PC: 87, XBOX: 88, Playstation 2: 82) and developer Gearbox software was praised for bringing a tactical shooter in a market that was over crowded with run-and-gun style game play.<sup>24</sup>

Within six months of *Road to Hill 30*'s release, publisher Ubisoft and developer Gearbox released a sequel entitled *Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood* where players assume the role of Red Hartstock. Hartstock was a character in the first game, but his story expands the scope of the Normandy Campaign with the assault and capture of the Cotentin Peninsula and the capture of Cherbourg. The game did receive generally favorable reviews from the Metacritic averages (PC: 84, XBOX: 85, Playstation 2: 71), but many complained that there was not enough new content to justify paying full price for a game that was essentially the same as *The Road to Hill 30*.<sup>25</sup>

Both *Road to Hill 30* and *Earned in Blood* revolve around tactical combat with teams of soldiers to command. These games were intended for mature audiences with adult language and graphic violence. The most notable cases of violence occur when an enemy soldier can be dismembered by a grenade, but there is no portrayal of wounded Americans or Germans. The corpses do not linger for more than 30 seconds on-screen. While there is the initial violence that

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<sup>24</sup> Metacritic, "Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30,"

<http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=brothers+in+arms%3A+road+to+hill+30&ty=3>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., "Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood,"

<http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=brothers+in+arms%3A+earned+in+blood&ty=3>.

the players witness, they do not see the lingering effects of dead corpses on the battlefield, which is important because corpses are one visual many veterans describe in their memories of war. For all of the visual defaults, the game does attempt to be deeper than most shooters by trying (unsuccessfully) to create characters and realistic game play. Unfortunately, combat is more a series of set cover points to suppress the enemy from one direction and flank him from obvious routes. The games could have been so much more, but they fell short because of game play and visual shortcomings; however, they were still good gaming experiences.

Gearbox and Ubisoft took a break with the *Brothers in Arms* series in order to develop a new game for the new generation of consoles and computer hardware. The new game would be set during Operation Market Garden, the Allied plan to cross the Rhine in September of 1944 that ultimately failed. Players take the role of Matt Baker again as he tries to deal with his memories of Normandy and more disturbing elements of the decisions he has made in past battles. The new graphics and “darker” story promised a much deeper game that would be something different. Unfortunately, the final product just had more graphic violence and felt more like an action game than a tactical shooter. *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* received the lowest Metacritic ratings out of the whole series (PC: 81, XBOX 360: 76, Playstation 3: 76).<sup>26</sup> The largest complaint about the game was that the controls were too much like a twitch shooter rather than firing real weapons. The technology appeared to be poorly implemented as a gimmicky feature rather than adding to the game-play. Overall, the experience was poor and felt like an arcade game rather than a tactical shooter for which the series is known.

The *Call of Duty* series is one of the most popular First Person Shooter series (FPS) that is primarily set in World War II with players fighting huge set piece battles. While there have

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., “Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway,” <http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=brothers+in+arms%3A+earned+in+blood&ty=3>.

been several games focused on a similar theme, the most popular have been *Call of Duty*, *Call of Duty 2*, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, and *Call of Duty: World At War*. When *Call of Duty* was released in 2003, players could play as a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne, a British commando, and a Russian soldier fighting on the Eastern Front. Critics and players had never played anything like it before and the game had “cinematic” intensity and pretty accurate weaponry. The Metacritic average was high at 91.<sup>27</sup> Even though the single player game was given almost universal acclaim, the multiplayer spawned a new fad in gaming culture.

Multiplayer online games were becoming possible because of the technology and *Call of Duty* made multiplayer matches accessible to many gamers. Multi-player is playing games like capture the flag and other objective based games online with other people in teams. The sequel, *Call of Duty 2*, was released in 2005 was basically the first game, but with better graphics. It received good reviews (PC: 86, XBOX 360: 89), but lost points for originality.<sup>28</sup> Both games were rated T for teen because of the violence. The “T” rating is equivalent to a PG rating on a movie and there is nothing overtly violent about the games other than shooting Germans and corpses that linger on screen. There are no wounded and civilians in the battle space.

Over the next couple of years, there were more games developed for the series that were set in World War II, but they were never very popular. In 2007, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* was released and departed World War II for a more current time setting in a fictional conflict. The single player game was short and not the main focus of the game, but players could assume the role of a Marine and an SAS operative in order to stop nuclear war. The multiplayer component was developed extensively and exploded into a huge online community. The game was universally acclaimed by critics as well as players (PC: 92, XBOX 360: 94, Playstation 3:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., “Call of Duty,” <http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sort=relevance&termType=all&ts=call+of+duty&ty=3>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., “Call of Duty 2,” <http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=call+of+duty+2&ty=3>.



94).<sup>29</sup> The key to the multiplayer's popularity was the introduction of a "class" system where players could customize their character's abilities and weapons. There is level progression as well meaning that players score a certain number of points (by killing opponents, completing objectives, head shots, etc) and advance a level which unlocks new weapons, abilities, and equipment for weapons. The multiplayer is "deep", but in reality, people play it because they want to unlock more scopes for their rifles. Another departure for the series was that the game was the first one to be rated "M" for mature, which is similar to an R rating at in film. The only reason there is an M rating is because combatant's blood is animated on screen, but other than that, nothing is more violent than previous games.

Most recently, *Call of Duty: World at War* was released and brought players back to World War II as a Russian soldier on the drive to Berlin or a US Marine at Peleliu and Okinawa. This game was basically *Modern Warfare* set in World War II and critical ratings suffered as a result (PC: 83, Wii: 83, XBOX 360: 84, Playstation 3: 84).<sup>30</sup> Gamers still bought the game because the multiplayer was a virtual rehash of *Modern Warfare*, which made it instantly popular with fans of the previous games. *World at War* is also the most graphically violent *Call of Duty*, but it is done for the sake of violence and does not add to the experience of the game, just to the endgame of violence for violence's sake. There is dismemberment, some wounded soldiers who eventually die and burnt corpses. For a game that was attempting brutal realism, there is no Okinawan or Prussian civilians that cross paths with the players or their suffering is not taken into account. It is all about the combat and making it as "graphic" as possible, even though it is unrealistic.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., "Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare,"  
<http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=call+of+duty+4&ty=3>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., "Call of Duty: World at War,"  
<http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=call+of+duty+world+at+war&ty=3>.

The *Combat Mission* series is interesting because it is a deep tactical war game. It is a hybrid turn based/ real time game that do not fit into general conventions. Players fight at the battalion level on a 3-D battlefield and give orders to their units, then execute the turn for one minute in real time. What results is a very tense game where every minute of the battle is planned and the player's situation can drastically change one minute to the next. Detailed vehicles models, ballistics, and artillery system help make the *Combat Mission Series* one of the most realistic tactical games on the market. The first game, *Combat Mission: Beyond Overlord* put developer Battlefront on the map as a third party that released excellent games. A sequel was released in 2002, *Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin* pitted players on the Eastern Front of World War II and significantly enhanced all aspects of *Beyond Overlord*. Metacritic reviews for the game are high at 89 and this game is considered the best in the series.<sup>31</sup> In 2003, the last installment of the series set in World War II was released entitled *Combat Mission: Afrika Korps* in which players engaged in battles from North Africa, Sicily, and Italy. It was an enhanced version of the second game and not as revolutionary, but it received high averages on Metacritic with a score of 81.<sup>32</sup>

The scope of the *Combat Mission* games is very small with players never commanding anything larger than a battalion at any given time. Most engagements have players assume the command of two or three companies of men with artillery support. Players can fight as every nation involved in the European Theater of Operations in realistic and tense game play. To be explicit, a battalion is roughly 1000 men strong and consists of 2-4 rifle companies (150-300 men), 1 heavy weapons company (machine guns and mortars) and various other supporting units

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., "Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin," <http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=combat+mission%3A+barbarossa+to+berlin&ty=3>.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., "Combat Mission: Afrika Korps," <http://www.metacritic.com/search/process?sb=0&tfs=all&ts=combat+mission%3A+Afrika+Korps&ty=3>.

like transport, artillery observers, and armor. A rifle company is broken down into 3 rifle platoons that have 3 squads of 12 men. There is also a weapons platoon that is attached to every company that includes mortars and machine guns as well. Even though these games are some of the best presentations of World War II on the market, they are not very violent. Infantry is represented abstractly and there are no wounded on the battle field, just a few corpses to simulate some bodies. There are also no civilian casualties recorded even though many scenarios involved urban and village combat. To make up for this, the after action screen summarizes enemy and friendly casualties in a detailed manner with wounded and killed soldiers, how much equipment was destroyed and various other important statistics. Even though the visual representation of the cost of war is weak, the statistical representation is strong.

As far as violence is concerned, *Company of Heroes*, *Brothers in Arms*, and *Call of Duty 4* are the most graphic. Violence has always been a controversial subject in video games. It is important to remember that every new medium is said to cause violence. The best example is that The Hardy Boys series was considered to be morally unacceptable when first published, but they are considered far from offensive today.<sup>33</sup> If more modern entertainment like violence on TV and violence in video games were analyzed, many people like to point out that TV is passive interaction while video games are interactive. When real violence is compared to violence and video games, there is no correlation. It takes more than violent video games for people to become violent in general. It has been shown that people tend to identify with violence on an emotional level in any medium rather than act out the violence that is portrayed.<sup>34</sup> There are other factors as well, such as neglectful parenting, mental and social disorders, etc. that lead to violence. When video games are cited for creating violence, it seems to be a feeble attempt to

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<sup>33</sup> Gee, "Video Games, Violence, and Effects: Good and Bad," in *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 13.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

blame something rather than find the root of the problem. Violent game-play may satisfy a desire for engaging in violence but one might argue that it also plays a palliative role in marginalizing violence to the world of games versus reality. There is virtual dismemberment, blood, cries of wounded and persistent corpses that the player sees on screen.

**Deleted:** All of this being said, the games that were mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph are brutal for the most part.

*Company of Heroes* is a graphically violent game, but it manages not to be grotesque for the sake of violence. The first mission throws players onto Omaha Beach and the chaos of the landings. There are wounded soldiers that cry in pain when they are struck. In one instance, two soldiers are wading in the water and one is shot. The other one looks in horror at his friend and cries his name and is shot at the same time. The game does not linger on the violence, but it creates a violent world that creates a sense of chaos that real combat might have been like. The player is commanding soldiers, but never actually kills another character directly.

*Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* handles violence much differently. First off, the action is from the first person. That means the player is shooting the rifle and giving commands to their team members. There is graphic violence in the game because enemies can be dismembered in several different way while the American corpses never are dismembered or linger on screen for too long. In the end, the main criticism of the entire series, which holds especially true for *Hell's Highway*, is that the games fail to create true emotional attachment and rely on their "accurate" presentation of history as an emotional crutch.<sup>35</sup> Violence is more of a gimmick considering there are no wounded soldiers on screen and the corpses disappear in a relatively short time. In the end, *Hell's Highway* is nothing more than just violence which is irresponsible because it does nothing to further the understanding of the horror of Operation Market Garden.

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<sup>35</sup> Brian Rejak, "Toward a virtual reenactment of history: Video games and the recreation of the past," *Rethinking History* 11.3 (2007): 414. *EBSCOhost*, [www.ebscohost.com](http://www.ebscohost.com).

*Call of Duty 4* was the first game in the series to receive an “M” rating because it actually showed blood on screen. Other than blood, the violence of the *Call of Duty 4* was similar to the previous games in the series. The bodies do linger on screen and it is worthwhile at some points to stop the fighting and see how many virtual bodies are displayed on screen even though there are no wounded. Overall, the game could be considered irresponsible because it presents a simplified view of modern warfare. The mechanics of the game make it seem like a World War II shooter where there are no civilians caught in the cross fire and clear enemies. This is hardly the case in today’s conflicts around the world, especially in the Middle East. Those are problems with the single player component. Most people play the game because of the multiplayer which is mindless action. People want to compete against each other and earn points. The way that conflict is reduced in multiplayer to simply earning points against digital opponents does bring credence to the claim that war games do not present the realities of war.<sup>36</sup> *Call of Duty 4* seems to trivialize the costs of war to points.

How history is addressed in all of these titles is an important factor when analyzing war video games. Much like movies, historical accuracy in games does not always mean entertainment. When games are representing historical conflicts like the *Combat Mission* games, *Call of Duty* and the *Brothers in Arms Series*, there is a responsibility to attempt historical and technical accuracy part of the player’s experience. Since World War II is a well documented historical setting, it is interesting to see what liberties are taken to make the games more accessible to gamers and if it is worth the sacrifice of historical accuracy for a product that sells.

The *Combat Mission* series is one of the most historically and technically accurate games on the civilian market. The developers puts significant time and detail into modeling small arms as well as making accurate squad organization. The bulk of their effort went into reproducing

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<sup>36</sup> Power, 274.

the various vehicles found in World War II. Superficially, the tanks might look the same to an unpracticed eye, but the armor thickness, main gun, and hull design mirror reality and significantly affect game play. The attention to technical detail enhances the atmosphere in a way that is closer to the real historical war rather than the one that is popular in the collective memory.<sup>37</sup> When selective memory is considered, *Combat Mission* games do not fall into that category. In some ways they might since developers create certain scenarios for certain reasons, but any battle can be played from either side. The results of each battle are dynamic and never repeat themselves and it is possible for a player to lose as an American and continue a campaign. In most other games, the player can not lose the scenario ever or the game will end, that is not true with the *Combat Mission* series.

*Call of Duty* is an interesting case since the series has spanned most of the major fronts in World War II as well as a modern setting. As far as the World War II games go, they focus mainly on the major battles. When players are fighting as the British or the American in the first two games, their campaigns revolve mostly around Operation Overlord in the summer of 1944. When the player is Russian, most of the battles revolve around Stalingrad and the drive to Berlin. The selective memory is interesting because the player participates in battles that are all victories and defeat is only referenced because a different sector of the battle was lost. There is no real selective memory for *Call of Duty 4* because of the modern setting, but it is interesting to see how the game operates like its World War II predecessors but applied to a post 9/11 world. There is some validity to this series as a way to show digital “revenge” on past and present American conflicts, but that might be too extreme an argument to make.<sup>38</sup> There have been some comparisons to the “War on Terror” linking it to the American struggle in World War II. It is

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<sup>37</sup> Kingsepp, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Powers, 285.

my opinion that many Americans would love a chance – at least theoretically - to have Osama bin-Laden to themselves for what happened in 9/11 and in some ways *Call of Duty 4* fulfills the need to have an enemy to shoot at when in reality, the “enemy” is hard to define and not monolithic like the Nazis or Imperial Japan.

The technical accuracy of the games is generally good. The first *Call of Duty* had very accurate weapons models and reload animations. The next game kept the accurate weapons models as well, but the recoil was significantly reduced. Once *Modern Warfare* was released, the technical inaccuracies become somewhat apparent to players who have practiced eyes, such as a Colt 1911 being double action in the game when it is really single action in real life. Technical accuracy is emphasized because it demonstrates that the developer took time to make the game accurate as possible. It is not just “nit-picking” but it shows that developers took enough time to care about the actual equipment that real live people’s lives depended on. By the time *World at War* was released, the setting returned to World War II and the player can actually fire a machine that is mounted from a tripod from their hip which turns the game into an action game rather than a war game. There were cases of desperate Marines firing this type of weapon from the hip, but it burnt their hands terribly since the weapon was air cooled with most of the heat from firing escaping onto the hands of the Marine firing the weapon. The player in the game suffers no such injury.

*Brothers in Arms: Hell’s Highway* has the largest case of selective memory and technical inaccuracies. In the first place, the game is set during Operation Market Garden, which was a colossal failure that attempted to get the allies across the Rhine River into the heart of Germany’s war industry. There is not a single point in the game where the player loses a battle. It is never really made clear in the game itself why the player is advancing from one battle to the next.

There is “bonus” content that the player can unlock that provides historical background, but it is interesting that the historical content is not inserted in the game itself.<sup>39</sup> It is important to see the losses America has suffered as well as the victories, but *Hell's Highway* does not do the job adequately. The player is never really told why Market Garden failed and it is confusing because I won every battle in the game, but had to retreat in the end. On another level, the technical accuracy of the series has degraded over time. In *Road to Hill 30*, there was realistic recoil and generally accurate weapons and reload animations. By the time *Hell's Highway* was released, there is practically no recoil on a rifle that shot a very large round. The reloading animations are handled poorly as well. At certain points of the game, players are issued a weapon that was not standard issue, which made this game very inaccurate. For a game that has a devoted historical director, these are discrepancies that are not acceptable.

The scope of war and video games is an incredibly broad topic to handle. There are so many cultural, psychological, historical, and gender-based questions to analyze and any one paper is too narrow in focus to do justice to the topic. What has been firmly established is that there is a definite difference between the military simulators that are used as training tools and video games that are released to the general public. A few games have also been analyzed on their historical and technical merit, but it is important to look at the broad role the video game industry has on the American economy.

Video games are an incredibly popular business that shows record growth as an industry. In the 2007 fiscal year, games and hardware made \$17.94 billion, a 43% increase since 2006.<sup>40</sup> By any economic standard, video games show significant growth rate. Because there is such popularity in video games, it is a market that reaches a wide variety of people. It is especially

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<sup>39</sup> Rejak, 418.

<sup>40</sup> BBC, “US video games sales hit record,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7195511.stm>.



important considering that *Call of Duty 4* was picked as the industry's best game in 2007 as best action game and outstanding achievement in online play.<sup>41</sup> Considering how many people still play this game, it is important to realize players are repeatedly absorbing and interpreting these images of violence and a certain visual portrayal of a fictional conflict. On the other hand, it is important to realize players are doing the same thing in games set during World War II, which might skew their view of actual historical events. In fact, the gaming portrayals might serve to replace more accurate and scholarly accounts.

While individual games can be broken down and analyzed, there are still larger issues that need to be addressed. Every player has a highly subjective experience with games they play and it is challenging to generalize as to why players do certain things. It seems at this point in time, games are meant to be more fun than anything rather than telling a deep story. There are games in different genres that are effective at telling stories like *Bioshock*, but there has yet to be a serious war game that analyzes the nature and cost of war in any real way. *Call of Duty* for all of its strengths is nothing more than an action movie that is set in World War II and does not advance any more understanding about the human condition in war. *Brothers in Arms* is more of a melodramatic retelling through a fictional character, but the game suffers from too many typical war clichés for players to care about what is happening on-screen. *Company of Heroes* is more thoughtful than most games of its type, but there are serious technical accuracies that hamper the game from being a successful retelling of what the war was like. *Combat Mission* is a sober recounting of the war in as abstract terms most players encounter. There is no personalization with troops under the player's command until the after action report that lists casualties.

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<sup>41</sup> Seth Schiesel, "Video Game Industry Picks a War Game as Its Best," [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/09/arts/television/09awar.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/09/arts/television/09awar.html?_r=3).

In truth, no game that has been released so far has even come close to portraying war in a realistic way. Perhaps it is impossible since the mental fatigue, physical pains, and constant fear can not be accurately retold to those who have not experienced war. On the other hand, developers can create more thoughtful games that clue the general public into what war might be like.

The technology revolution in the 1990s has created a more networked world and more technologically advanced weapons.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the aim of these weapons is to dehumanize fighting and create stand off killing. It is important not to let this happen in every day life. While long range laser guided weapons have a definite value, it is all too easy to think that war can be made cleaner with technology. War has always been a messy affair since people decided to fight each other. There is still fighting today and it is not the stand off killing of laser guided bombs, but soldiers, Marines, and airmen on the ground killing other fighters. No matter the cause of the war or how just, people are still killing people. With the powerful technology that is available today for 3-D representations of war, it is important for the game developer community to create more honest representations of war. It is an unfortunate truth, but war has horrible wounds, civilians are killed, and there are many accidents, “friendly fire” casualties. If more people are made aware of the costs of war, there could be better decisions regarding the use of armed force only when it is necessary.

War is anything but a game. There are no points for headshots like some games award. There are no do-overs. People die and do not come home. While it is inaccurate to say gamers believe war is sanitary because of the games they play, inaccurate or “scrubbed” games do

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Bracken and Martin Shubik, “War Gaming in the Information Age: Theory and Purpose,” *Naval War College Review* 54.2 (2001): 47.  
<https://portal.nwc.navy.mil/press/Naval%20War%20College%20Review/2001/Article%20by%20Bracken%20and%20Shubik%20Spring%202001.pdf>.

contribute to a general ignorance of the cost of war. It is so important to be aware of the consequences of war and what it might mean to actually fight in a battle that developers should use their creative talents for more than just entertainment.

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