

WARPLAY

A few notes on the relationship between war and digital games

The exhibition Play Safe, Battlefields in the Playground was partly directed towards uncovering the deeply rooted relations between playful activities and the aggressive and violent states of being they are bound up with. The text you are about to read is based on a lecture that was presented in the course of the exhibition and it aims to address the curious and complex relationship between digital simulation games and notions of war and warfare. Throughout the global media landscape, questions related to violent and aggressive content dominate the current public debates about video and computer games. This discourse has intensified in the wake of high school shootings in the US, such as the infamous Columbine Massacre in 1999 and subsequent tragic incidents in numerous countries all around the world. Although these debates are important in order to attain a critical understanding of contemporary game culture, I will deliberately sidestep the often very polemic discussion about digital games as a trigger for real world violence based on the suggestion that there exists a much older and deeper rooted connection between violence and games. Game scholars such as Roger Caillois have pointed out that there exists a strong kinship between rituals or festivities extending into the realm of the playful and forms of rule based aggression between social formations, namely warfare. Ancient reliefs suggest that the ancient Mayan civilization maintained ritualized human sacrifice as part of a distinctive ball game thus channeling violence in order to guarantee the functioning of their social system in conjunction with the spiritual realm. However, beyond this specific example, it seems that the relationship between controlled aggression and game structures is present across cultural borders and throughout time.

Agonistic Principles

The competition of opponents is a crucial principle at the heart of numerous games and sports since ancient times and it can be found throughout a range of cultures. Roger Caillois has introduced the term agon to define it as one of the core characteristics of games and play. He writes that “in addition to games, the spirit of agon is found in other cultural phenomena conforming to the game code: in the duel, in the tournament, and in certain constant and noteworthy aspects of so-called courtly

war” (Caillois, 1961, p. 15). The crucial point here is that games are governed by rules that are binding for the players and that define the outer perimeters of the game universe. In other words only certain moves or functions are allowed while others are forbidden. Thus the parallels between games and war can only be upheld in idealized situations of warfare where the opponents adhere to strict rules of engagement, whether they are defined by a code of honor (such as the medieval chivalry or the samurai code) or by international law. Whenever the ends justify the means and a “total war” is declared any parallels between war and game break down immediately. Another important difference is the fact that games provide “as if” situations that usually do not have the possibly severe and often tragic consequences of actions in real world situations. Yet, if one considers the possible impact of games of chance on the economical situations of players this separation between fact and fiction can become questionable from the perspective of the players. Furthermore there exists another social institution in the vicinity of play and games, namely the festival that also maintains direct links with certain characteristics of warfare. As Manuel Delgado puts it, “we know that war implies that things which wouldn’t be acceptable under normal conditions – homicide, rape, pillage – turn out not only to be permitted but are obligatory even. Herein lies the first proof of direct kinship of war and festival, which reproduces this same generalized inversion of the values of everyday life, with one difference, that of degree” (Delgado, 2004, p. 46). In other words, we are confronted with an area of life that allows (and sometimes even demands) aggressive actions which are forbidden under any other circumstances. It is precisely the “as if” situation of the game that represents such an attractive proposition for the players because it allows for, and often demands, the symbolical transgression of everyday rules and laws.

The struggle between opposing forces lies at the heart of the Judeo Christian tradition, where it plays itself out as the manichaeic fight between light and darkness. This tradition is carried through to popular mythologies such as the Star Wars or Harry Potter Universes (as well as their manifestations as digital games). The narrative roots of classic strategy games such as chess or the ancient Asian game go is the state of war between two factions. Toy weapons have been used by children throughout the ages and tin soldiers that could be used to restage historic battles, range among the most popular toys since Napoleonic times. Strategic war games in tabletop form first

emerged in Prussia in the 18th century and they were immediately used as training devices for young officers in order to simulate troop movements, resource management and territorial aspects of warfare. It could be argued that games and simulations have always been an integral part of the preparation for warfare. To give just one example, the Japanese Navy played a Pearl Harbour based war game for 140 days at the Naval College in Tokyo before it attacked the US and entered the 2nd world war. Since the development of computers during the 2nd world war, Information Technology has become the single dominant factor for the simulation of situations in warfare and the military around the world has been playing and replaying “possible” events ever since. Finally, International sport events represent agonistic forms of conflict that maintain a strong kinship with situations of war. According to thinkers such as Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning such sportive activities emerged out of a need to peacefully re-enact and negotiate situations of conflict, within as well as in-between specific societies. If one considers that numerous digital games based on strategic warfare, such as for example the game War Craft, are played by professional gamers at international e-sports events the intertwined relationship between the forms is highlighted once more.

Seen from this perspective it remains to be asked whether anything new or different emerges with the current surge of digital games based on war or war like situations and if so what that could be? In the following I would like to trace a very brief history of video and computer games that maintain an obvious link with themes of war.

Electronic warfare and digital games

First of all it is important to realize that war is in some way quite literally imprinted in the material side of computers and digital technology simply because the theoretical and practical development of computer technology itself has been so deeply entangled with military research. As is well known, the need to decipher the German military's coded messages led to the British Colossus computer during WW II. Apart from Konrad Zuse's digital computers, which were built privately, almost all other computers were developed by or used in highly classified military projects. Outside of the military, computers were accessible only for scientific research and only from the 1970s onwards gradually to the general public. This is one of the reasons why the

foundations for digital games were laid by mathematicians and engineers working in or for the military. The engineer William Higginbotham, who has been credited with building the first prototype for the immensely successful *Pong* (Tennis for Two) video game in the 50s worked for the Brookhaven Institute, a government facility that was part of the military research complex. And the first truly digital computer game with the striking name *Space War* that was developed by a team around Steve Russell at the MIT in 1962 is also unthinkable without the military research funding that financed the AI Lab at MIT and its immense PDP1 computers. This marriage between military research and the development of digital entertainment has since developed into a veritable Military Entertainment Complex. At present the US Army is maintaining one of the most successful First Person Shooter online games entitled *Americas Army* that is currently branching out to mobile devices. The interesting aspect here is not only that this game is used as a PR and recruiting tool for the Army, but that the game is part of the real world outcome of research into digital combat simulators that are used in Army training programs.

At first I would like to briefly clarify the major types of games related to the representation and simulation of aspects of war. War has been a thematic backdrop since the earliest days of electronic gaming. A good example is the hugely successful 80s game by Ataris, entitled *Battlezone* which simulated a first person perspective from inside a tank. Another game from that time, *Missile Command* was thematically based on the defense against incoming missiles. Both of these games are so called action games or shooters and they represent one major lineage of war titles up until the present day. Shooters extend to games centered on vehicles such as flight - , U-boat- and tank simulators. Since the emergence of the so called first person shooter with ID software's *Castle Wolfenstein*, this genre that has spawned a large number of titles, among them, *Doom*, *Quake*, *Unreal*, *Soldiers of Fortune*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield 1942*, *Halo*, *Gears of War*, *Counter Strike* and innumerable others.

The other major game principle, that can be regarded as a descendant of tabletop games is the, either round based or real-time, strategy game. Here the goal is usually to develop and manage resources and strategically fight battles against computer or human opponents. Famous titles here are the *Command and Conquer* series, Blizzard's *Starcraft* or lately *World of Warcraft* series, *Age of Empires*, as well as *Sid Meier's Civilization*. In recent years both gameplay-types have additionally moved to the internet and are playable as online games. The online game *World of*

Warcraft has just recently announced that it broke the barrier of 9 million subscribers while the number of accounts in *America's Army* seems to range at around 4 million accounts. Although not all of these people are simultaneously present in the game space it is quite obvious that these war games have reached an astounding level of popularity.

Action Realism

The narrative frameworks for many of the above mentioned titles are historical battles (on land, sea and air) and, although the second world war seems to dominate the market at present, one can find the Vietnam conflict next to famous sea battles reaching back to the Greeks and Alexander the great. Additionally, fantasy environments, either geared towards science fiction settings and space war or mythological universes often heavily derivative of the Tolkien universe are immensely popular.

Since these narrative frameworks can be separated along the lines of the historical and the fictitious it seems sensible to briefly address the question of realism in digital games. This is not to suggest that the demand for realism grows more important with historical settings as opposed to fantasy ones and in many cases these borders are blurred. It is rather the kind of realism itself that has to be seen in a different light in the context of simulations and digital games. It is a kind of realism that differs from that of other media such as Painting, Film or Photography in one crucial point: it is based on the possible actions of the players in the game environment and the feedback to those actions. In other words, while there is a lot of talk about the quality of graphics and sound the most important aspect is which meaningful actions the players are allowed to perform and whether they have reactions from the game system that remain consistent with the presented environment. Thus it might be sensible to think of this as a kind of "behavioral" realism. This is a very important point if one wants to understand the overwhelming impact of digital games on its audiences in relation to other media systems.

These thoughts lead directly to Alexander Galloway's argument, who is convinced that realism in this context has to be regarded as a realism of action, rather than representation. If we follow this line of thought, games like *Counter Strike* or *America's Army* are highly unrealistic and fantastic for most people in the western

world because they will never come in contact with a real weapon in their lives. In opposition to that, the game *Under Siege* that simulates the perspective of Palestinians in the occupied territories is much more realistic, at least for somebody who lives there, because the in game actions such as hiding from Israeli troops or throwing stones are based on the possible real world actions of a large number of young Palestinians. Thus, if we want to discuss behavioral or action realism specifically in games based on war the question has to be whether the first hand experiences of players have any potential correlations with the actions performed in the game space rather than whether the weapons look and sound like their real world counterparts most people only know from other media systems. Galloway writes: “Games signal a third phase for realism. The first two phases were realism in narrative (literature) and realism in images (painting, photography, film). Now there is also realism in action. Whereas the visual arts compel viewers to engage in the act of looking, games compel players to perform acts. Any game that depicts the real world must grapple with this question of action. In this way, realism in gaming is a process of revisiting the material substrate of the medium and establishing correspondences with specific activities existent in the social reality of the gamer.” (Galloway, 2004, p.10)

This is a very important observation because it turns the classical relationship between represented and representational elements on its head. Although I have never shot a real weapon in my whole life I can do it in countless games and I can even do it in a setting that aims to add another layer of “realism” due to the fact that real world news events are employed as a narrative backdrop for the game. The game *Kuma Wars*, for example, provides exactly that. The company claims that players can “play” the news and thus attain a new level of realism in the gaming experience. If we examine this claim from the perspective of action realism we have to state that the opposite is true. Again, the tiniest percentage of players has ever been to a place like Iraq in their lives and all the information they have about it is derived from news events. Furthermore most players have never touched military hardware. Thus, for the majority of civil players it is precisely the (action-) unrealism or that they are doing something that they would never do in their real world environments that makes the games so compelling. This might seem like a banal observation but it is exactly this point that this is very often overlooked in the current discussions about aggression and games. This fact is different for the smaller minority of players who

use simulators (games) as training devices for actual battlefield situations. In these cases the simulation device achieves a level of action-realism, because it adds an additional layer to the real world training the soldiers are subjected to.

Apart from the issue of realism, it is also important to consider the fact that computer games are increasingly becoming a new arena for advertisement and propaganda. The highly successful online first person shooter *America's Army* for example is developed and maintained by the U.S. department of defense, as a mix between recruiting tool and propaganda arena. This becomes increasingly clear if one addresses the stereotypical "terrorist" or "insurgent" enemies that can be chosen in the game. Most levels are to some extent modeled on current international conflict territories, from Afghanistan over Iraq to Iran and mainly simulate desolate environments. One map is for example modeled on an oil refinery and the players have to either attack or defend the facility. As mentioned above, Palestinian programmers have entered the propaganda game with their own simulation of the situation under Israeli occupation with *Under Siege* and even Iran is currently planning a military game that is aimed at glorifying the Iranian army. In these cases it becomes very obvious that games as simulations are unique carriers for highly ideological content. After all, players are actively engaging with a game universe, they literally become part of an artificial world (with its own ideologically underpinned) rules.

Artistic Intervention

Throughout modernity one could witness artists picking media systems apart and rearranging them in ways that countered the dominant schemes of representation and function. This approach is even more important in relation to digital games since they do not readily give away how they are constructed. Thus it is very easy to neglect the fact that there exist no neutral simulation systems and that every simulated universe necessarily maintains sets of rules that are submerged in ideological foundations. In other words, simulations are produced according to basic assumptions and with specific goals that are in most cases not transparent for the player. To give an example, the decision of *Sim City's* designers to demand a certain amount of police stations in a given city in order to lead to a "healthy" urban environment is not up for

discussion and it is literally part of the fabric of the game's world. Every gameworld also projects a specific worldview. The recent discussion surrounding the use of first person shooter online games as propaganda vehicles highlights this issue very well. It is at this point that artists attempt to make the dynamic systems of games more transparent by following different strategies. Some rearrange the material according to different sets of rules which might even make a particular game unplayable in the process; others invent new sets of rules in order to trigger different behavior in existing games. What is at stake here is an important insight in the construction of the game universe itself. While aspects of production and the arrangement of the digital material according to the codes laid out in the game engine are important issues it also has to be mentioned that digital games are made by human beings for other human beings. Thus it seems sensible, from an artistic point of view, to engage with the designers and audiences of games in order to gain a critical perspective of contemporary developments related to gaming culture.

In this context I would like to advance two significant pieces by the American Artist Josef Delappe, entitled *War Poets and Dead in Iraq*. Both are performances in online games – the first one in the game *Medal of Honor* and the second piece in *America's Army*. In an interview Josef Delappe describes his work as follows, “from the start I was considering the poetry readings in the games as being a new kind of street theater. When I first started doing these performances online they were quite private. The idea of doing these before an audience came later. I was in my basement on my computer going into the star trek game doing the Howl piece. It was the same experience for doing the War Poets Online in the *Medal of Honor* Series where I recited typed the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfried Owen, the great British poets from WW1. These were quite individual encounters in an online server where there might be twenty other gamers who may or may not be paying attention to the fact that there was somebody typing these texts into the gamespace. The strategy was to exist as a neutral visitor – I did not engage in the gameplay – at least not in the prescribed manner. There was also something quite curious about performing poetry, only to be killed and reincarnated again, and again. Bringing the performative aspect into these hyperviolent spaces was, in a way, an intervention, a kind of aesthetic protest” (DeLappe, 2006). In a certain sense, Josef Delappe has chosen to engage with the gamer community on a microscopic level but has still managed simultaneously to trigger a wider discourse about issues such as morality in game universes and outside.

He has understood that players on the oddly semi-private online game universes can also be addressed as an audience for critical artistic work. Most importantly, people are indeed willing to enter a discussion because the artist comes directly to their “homes” rather than to stay in a defined art context. One can only hope that we will see more artists willing to engage with audiences who are increasingly withdrawing into separate fictional media islands that are not necessarily connected with each other. If art has any function in such a shattered media scape it must be to engage with people directly where they are. DeLappes work shows that this is possible.

Notes

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