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War, Masculinity and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex: A Case Study of Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Kyle Kontour

University of Colorado at Boulder, kyle.kontour@colorado.edu

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WAR, MASCULINITY, AND GAMING IN THE MILITARY ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX:
A CASE STUDY OF *CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE*

by
KYLE KONTOUR

B.A.; University of Denver, 2000

M.A.; University of Otago, 2002

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War, Masculinity and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex: A Case Study of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*
written by Kyle Kontour
has been approved for the School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Stewart Hoover, Committee Chair

Michele Jackson, Committee Member

Polly McLean, Committee Member

Janice Peck, Committee Member

Lynn Schofield-Clark, Committee Member

Date

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

ABSTRACT

Kontour, Kyle (Ph.D., Communication, School of Journalism and Mass Communication)

War, Masculinity, and Gaming in the Military Entertainment Complex: A Case Study of *Call of*

Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Dissertation directed by Professor Stewart Hoover

Over the last decade, critical scholars have pointed to the acceleration of the cultural, aesthetic, technological and political economic ties between the military and entertainment industries, noting both its synergistic nature and the purported effects of militarism on an already masculinized, technophilic culture of gaming. This may have deleterious effects on society, where videogame players may be trained to think like soldiers—both in terms of combat performance and hegemonic military masculinity. Utilizing game studies methods of textual analysis and cyberethnography, and drawing on critical work concerning war and masculinity, this dissertation argues that while it is true that games such as these are imbued with problematic ideological content, the “training” that players receive is not primarily on these terms. Rather, players are disciplined to adhere to gamic norms of performance—efficiency, proficiency, and masculine performativity—which are inculcated by ludic structures and largely understood on terms which originate within the social ecology of gaming, transcending local social realities. This dissertation concludes that the performance required of players challenges traditional notions of the requirements of military masculinity, and that a critical challenge of the military entertainment complex is not that society becomes more militaristic, but rather that warfare, and performances within it, become more game-like.

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Introduction

It may come as no surprise to the reader, but war was a signature feature of my play while I was growing up. From as far back as I can remember, any elongated object—and handles and sticks especially—became either a sword or gun. From the time I was seven until the end of high school, I built plastic models of various war machines (introduced to me by father, who is a Vietnam veteran, amateur historian and all around gun nut). The vast majority of my toys—such as He-Man, G.I. Joe, Star Wars, and myriad other “action figure” lines—featured either war or weapon-centric conflict as the basis of all narrative action, both within the diegetic universe of the toys as well as in my imagination. For months after seeing *Top Gun* (1986), my brother and I engaged in aerial dogfights inside the “cockpit” that was underneath the basement stairs, coating the visors of various snowmobile helmets with spittle as a result of our enthusiastic sound effects. I can recall spending countless hours sketching battle scenes, depicting everything from medieval forays in the mud to futuristic clashes in space. Most excursions into the woods or even into some overgrown backlot were in aid of going “on patrol” or taking part in some pitched battle, surrounded by enemies. Pertaining to the subject matter at hand, I also spent countless hours playing the game which launched a genre, *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), gunning down Nazis in a labyrinthine castle.

Although of course I “played war” quite often by myself, it was also a very common activity whenever I would get together with my friends. As a child war seemed endlessly fascinating, full of sublime pyrotechnics, the chance for glory and valor, and imbued with the poignant and profound as only the struggle over life and death can be. But I recall that what resonated the most for my friends and I wasn’t a particular hatred directed at an enemy (they

were not only imaginary but to some extent unimagined—merely faceless and largely featureless masses of “bad guys”, surely influenced by media portrayals, but lacking in any grounded understanding of the referents of these representations). Rather it was more “noble” pursuits that formed the core of our play: self-sacrifice, the derring-do of superior tactics and abilities, being wounded and/or evacuating the wounded, and so on. We often found ourselves in a “tight spot” and called each other “Bud” as a catch-all, “adult” nickname—which in retrospect appears rich in its connotations of homosocial manliness. In fact, being surrounded, shot down, or otherwise prevented from dominating the battlespace (even if ultimate victory was always assured, and we always gave better than we got) is something I recall quite clearly as being the most common feature of our various war games. It was about grit, determination, and valiantly carrying on, *particularly* when things went bad. It was also about escaping the mundane for great adventure and an existence where every action carried weight and meaning. It was a world in which all of us were potent, assured, and (when we were a bit older) attracting the affections of girls who were impressed by our actions. Although I cannot accurately recall where we got these ideas, I remember distinctly that we had them, and that these were the central features of our war play. They are also, at their essence, articulations of a particular (and particularly) masculine performance.

My recollections of my own childhood may or may not be particularly representative, but they are unlikely to be unique in an American context. These recollections illustrate something about the relationship between war and masculinity, and how these things come to be understood through the socializing norms of play and the process of interpreting and making meaning of mediated messages about war. My recollections also point to some of the dynamics between the material culture of war-oriented playthings and the masculine values infused in them, and the

complexities involved in this process. Sometimes war was the means through which “cool stuff” happened: the aesthetics of the sublime. Sometimes, war itself was merely a platform for projecting onto a particularly vivid canvass what it was we thought epitomized the ultimate fantasy of manhood—or perhaps, the ultimate man. In all of these actions, I was simulating combat—according to my own means and affordances, toward various ends, though in ways which rarely adhered to anything we would call “interactive” or “realistic” according to contemporary standards. And yet while combat was the central feature or grammar of my own imaginative play as well as that of interactions with my peers, the training I underwent was probably less about war per se than it was about masculinity.

Linking war play and war media with masculinity is of course nothing new, and as I will illustrate later, there is a rich scholarship on the interplay between these things. Yet ironically many of these links appear so trans-historical, so normative, as to be beyond detailed scrutiny—that is to say, *of course* war and masculinity “go together,” it is only a matter of discerning in what way. Furthermore, some of the earliest games in human history have featured war (whether overtly or metaphorically), and to this end games and play have always made war a part of leisure and conferred meaning upon both war writ large as well as the actions undertaken in it—an integral component of every day life (see Halter, 2006). One might say, therefore, that one major aspect of becoming a “man”, at least for most men, is war play, and that it is through games that we have come to understand, in part, the meaning of performance in war.

That said, over time the gap between the players of war and the participants of war has widened. With the rise of nation states and industrialization comes the concomitant rise of war as spectacle, as entertainment unto itself, via mass media such as literature, graphic novels/comic

books, toys, board games, television shows, cinema, and now videogames. As we move into the digital age, where war-oriented videogames provide both simulation and spectacle, where fictional wars and real simulations coexist (perhaps even intermingle), new questions are being raised about the relationship between war and masculinity, and what it may mean for contemporary society.

These issues have come to the fore in the context of various problematic—and from the standpoint of the critical scholar, alarming—trends which came together around the dawn of the new millennium, particularly in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. As the United States military ramped up its activities and profile in waging the so-called Global War on Terror (GWOT) against predominately Middle Eastern others, so too was there a ramping up in the cultural and political economic aspects of militarism: an atmosphere in which soldiers and their “mission” are revered, where ostentatious displays and discourses of military power and masculine resolve figure prominently, and where formulations of “our” nation are set against “them”, the enemy—all against a backdrop of tremendous amounts of public resources being sunk (or “invested”) in war-related enterprises. Even more troublingly, this is the context in which we see the rise of the so-called “military entertainment complex” (MEC), a term which, building on the concept of the military industrial complex, attempts to describe the dramatic and extensive integration of the political economies of the military and a slew of private sector entertainment companies. Although there is a long history of entertainment commodities reflecting and reinforcing the sentiments of military-infused notions of nationalism and masculinity, there has been increasingly closely developing ties between the military and entertainment industries, in particular in the cases of cinema, television news and especially videogames.

That said, there is no hard and fast definition for what, specifically, the military entertainment complex *is*. There has been substantive work on the specific ways in which the political economy of the military and entertainment industries have become entwined and in some cases mutually dependent (cf. Lenoir, 2000, 2002; Der Derian, 2009; Stahl, 2010). There has also been quite a lot of recent work about the extent to which the cultural capital of the military has been positively propagated via games (cf. Nieborg 2006, 2009; Bogust, 2007), a phenomenon which has been described as an element of the military entertainment complex, but which may or may not include the political economic framework in which this occurs. In short, the literature published so far on the military entertainment complex does not specifically state this as a coercive project that utilizes an established political economy in order to explicitly articulate/inculcate a comprehensive point of view. It is unclear whether the military entertainment complex as a concept is a fully rendered entity through which a set of wholly consciously conceived notions are articulated, or whether it is merely a political economy that takes advantage of available cultural capital in order to meet more mundane goals—namely amassing capital and recruits—or indeed whether there is a truly meaningful difference between these two conceptions. For the purposes of this study, I therefore use the term in a general sense to refer to both the political economy and the cultural nexus of entertainment media that would appear to raise the cultural capital of the military, or absent that, of the military man—whether in terms of military service unto itself or of particular applications of martial power. The term “military entertainment complex” therefore signifies not merely parallel agendas on the part of the military and entertainment companies, but the build-up and integration of capital and technology to their mutual benefit, producing products which have both market and military applications.

None of these applications epitomizes the complexities and salient features of the MEC more so than videogames. As this project will make clear, videogames are central to the very existence of the MEC, in that it is through the military's funding and utilization of simulation technologies, mainly for training but also for representational interfaces depicting remote events, that videogames came into being. Videogames were conceived in the military, nurtured in the wilds of commercial arcades, matured in the commercial PC market, and rose to predominance in the era of the console and online gaming—ultimately to come back into the fold of the military establishment, the technology and infrastructure becoming an essential part of the way in which war is now prepared for and waged. Unlike other entertainment media, the military is using such simulations for training, not only at the individuated or small unit level (flight simulators and special forces squad simulations), but also to conduct full scale war games.

There are a number of different genres of combat-oriented videogames on the market, including flight simulators and real time strategy games among others, but of particular interest are first person shooters. As the name indicates, the interface is such that all action appears on screen from a first person perspective, as if the player is looking on the scene directly, the hands and weapon of his avatar mimicking the placement of his own with respect to this point of view. The first person shooter (hereafter, FPS) is important not only in its dominance and influence in the market, but because this interface is extremely similar to that utilized by virtual reality (VR) and other types of interfaces for combat simulators used for military training. It is this genre that both epitomizes the political economy of the MEC and stands at the representational and phenomenological nexus of war play.

Of chief concern here, of course, are the implications for masculinity (particularly notions of military masculinity). Videogames are rapidly becoming, if they are not already, the preferred entertainment/activity of males. According to the Electronic Software Association's 2010 survey, 68% of American households play videogames, and 60% of players were men. A recent Pew study found that roughly 97% of Americans aged 12 to 17 played videogames (99% of boys), and more than half of boys listed games rated "M" for mature or "AO" for adults only as their favorite—indicating, in all probability, games with violent content (Lenhart, et al, 2008). With the caveat that cultural and market differences may be slightly different in the U.S., a recent study found that 72% of British men would prefer to play a new game release than have sex with their partner (PS3PriceCompare, 2009) (a study which, while telling in its normative assumptions, also indicates something about both the social meaning of videogames and their relative importance in men's lives). Although it is difficult to pinpoint the use of specific games, even within genres (mainly since so many players' interests and activities include a breadth of titles and genres), FPS consistently land in the top ten sellers lists (ESA, 2010). In short, videogames are widely played, and among the most popular videogames are FPS which simulate combat.

If we are to consider that these are "games" that are "played," then they must also be looked at as a means of gender socialization (cf. Erikson, 1977; Ketchum, 1981; Huizinga, 1955), particularly in light of the fact that the military uses similar simulations in order to train their personnel. We might therefore infer that males who play these games are not merely learning to be "men," they are performing a particular kind of masculinity, inscribed with the signifiers of a "soldier" as this has been constructed in a Western and (almost always) American context; or, perhaps they are being trained to kill in ways that are not wholly unlike the official

training soldiers receive (and of course both of these could be true). Military masculinity, therefore, may be something that can be performed whether or not one is an actual enlisted soldier—indeed, given the relative anonymity of playing online, whether or not one is an actual male. What is at stake for critics of the MEC is whether and to what extent these games are imperialistic, racist, and likely to be training young men (it is widely assumed) to view the military positively, while there is also a broad, yet largely unexamined, observation that there is something unseemly about today's youth playing games which are very similar to the simulators that the military uses to train its troops. As a corollary, then, one could surmise that manhood itself is increasingly associated—in certain spheres, capacities, and incarnations—with the masculinity that is depicted and/or performed in militaristic FPS.

This case is certainly a compelling one, although aspects of it—chiefly, the influence of particular content and the auspices under which this is taken on/engaged by the player—does not readily jibe with findings in the field of Game Studies. Recent scholarship on games and gaming emphasizes the iterative and polysemic aspects of gaming. This includes the variations between games of narrative and aesthetics, gamic mechanics, and the rhythm and flow of its immersive qualities. It also includes the complex workings of the context in which games are played—from broad categories like the socio-cultural milieu to more discrete categories like the performative spaces of specific gaming cafes and LAN parties. That is to say, ethnographically-oriented studies of games have demonstrated the richness of local or subcultural understandings of the meaning and meaning-making of interactive videogames, and the huge array of variables that go into understanding how gamers come to understand themselves and the games they play.

This indicates that there is some disconnect, a bit of slippage between academicians wishing to understand certain ramifications of the military entertainment complex on the one hand, with game scholars observing the meaning and meaning-making of games and gaming as made manifest in the lives of gamers. That the political economies of videogames and the military are intimately intertwined is well known, and there is undoubtedly an impact made by games in which the cultural signifiers of military masculinity can be performed in immersive and interactive environments rather than merely depicted in fiction or mimicked on the playground. What is not well known is what this intertwining looks like at a grounded level: a close analysis of every aspect of these games' interface as well as the every day practices and readings through which the meaning of these games is rendered, made particularly complex in that the interpretations and actions of the player/audience cannot only in many cases be seen in real time, these actions themselves impact the delivery of the content. In short, game studies theories and methods raise issues of *process*: not so much whether particular content is present or how affective it is, but rather *how* it is articulated/instantiated/inculcated in the act of gameplay, and by extension how this jibes with player affordances (whether socio-cultural or ludic/phenomenological).

At stake in delineating this process is the relationship between the power of media, social contexts, and the work of the every day or “lived” performance of individuals. What this brings to the fore is the complications involved in establishing the process, ultimately, of masculinity—how it is constructed, articulated, formulated, deployed, and ultimately how it “makes” men. Therefore I want to take some time here to explain more fully what I mean when I say “masculinity” or “masculinities”— how masculinity “works” and the assumptions I am bringing to the table about its operations.

Defining Masculinity, Delineating Masculinities, and Masculinity as Governmentality

Although generally speaking masculinity is something pertaining to men, my use of this term and its operations is in keeping with the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, in that gender is discursive and performative—it is worked into being at the individual level through a constant stream of utterances and personal behaviors, which are themselves both a function of and contributing to the social construction of gender. Or as R.W. Connell (1995: 84) puts it, masculinity is “a configuration of practice within a system of gender relations.” Furthermore, there is not any one masculinity which all men are expected to possess, but rather multiple masculinities, with different resonances and valences depending on the social situation—yet at the same time some masculinities are more “useful” or normative than others, meaning that there are also masculinities which are deviant. Therefore masculinities exist within a hierarchy, with divisions not only along race and class lines, but according to taste cultures and other aspects of one’s social position.

That said, masculinity can still be attained/maintained in spheres which are not traditionally “manly” as such. Many domestic, “feminine” qualities or behaviors cease to be feminine and become masculine (or at least, under the dominant purview of men) when they are at their highest echelons, like for instance cooking. Even today it is relatively rare for men to be able (or accepted as able) to be the “every day” cook in the domestic sphere, particularly if he is the cook for a nuclear family in which there is an adult female (especially a spouse). However, to be a *chef* is an altogether different enterprise—an area in which if anything there remains astoundingly high levels of gender discrimination against women. I would therefore suggest that in this area, as well as nearly any activity or sphere where more common, dominant modes of

masculinity do not regularly venture, it is high level expertise and creativity—virtuosity—which legitimizes male participation and ultimately dominance.

However, to be able to be a man in an otherwise traditionally feminine sphere is not the same as attaining *manhood* or being *manly*. These are the more exclusive domains of men who have proven themselves to have all of the “best” qualities of masculinity which do not require virtuosity as such in any one sphere (unstated: as if virtuosity in the kitchen is making up for something). Therefore it is because of these hierarchies, Kimmel (1998) argues, that many men have feelings of powerlessness, despite that they are living within a system which privileges men. Similarly, Hanke (1998:186) argues that this very hierarchical system serves to maintain an “ideal” masculine subjectivity which comprises “white, middle-class, heterosexual, professional-managerial men.” Ideologically, it is a dominant, *idealized* masculinity which orders our understanding of who men are, what they must do, and which men (or rather, which masculinity) tends to be linked with something as vital as the defense of the nation.

It is with this in mind that the bulk of this dissertation concerns dominant notions of military masculinity, which takes many of its traits from hegemonic masculinity—a term used by Connell (1995) to describe a host of traits attributed to idealized manhood as a dominant feature of masculine ideology. In deploying this term, Connell was building on earlier work by David & Brannon (1976) who identified “four norms of traditional masculinity:” 1) “no sissy stuff,” [avoid the feminine] 2) “the big wheel” [strive for success and achievement] 3) “the sturdy oak” [don’t show weakness] and 4) “give ‘em hell” [men should seek adventure, even if violence is necessary]. Levant & Richmond (2007), for their part, articulate seven dimensions of traditional masculinity: avoidance of femininity; fear and hatred of homosexuals; self-reliance;

aggression; achievement/status; non-relational attitudes toward sex; and restrictive emotionality.

While there are variations in the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is taken up or deployed by men, *in general* these are well known, normative traits to which most men are expected to largely adhere.

Perhaps most crucially to military masculinity, hegemonic masculinity tends to be indelibly linked to violence; as Kimmel (1998: 236) notes: “Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight.” In fact, discourses surrounding violence—its victims, perpetrators, and effects—tell us a great deal about normative notions of gender:

Women's violence is often, in short, gender deviant as it tends to negate traditional notions of femininity. Of course what also negates femininity, and indeed often relies on its negation, is masculinity per se and if violence is one means of negating femininity then there is clearly a connection between violence with masculinity...whereas *perpetuating* violence remains 'masculine', *suffering* violence tends to have a 'feminising' or emasculating effect. What is curiously still lacking here, however, is an interrogation of the violations of masculinity per se. Thus, what is not called into question is the sense that some forms of practices of masculinity at least may constitute violence in themselves (Edwards, 2006: 61, original emphasis).

Violence is at the core of (often unstated) aspects of masculinity, such as having a “manly” physique with which to enact violence or feats of strength if ever called upon to do so—in contemporary society, being well-muscled is rarely necessary for most kinds of work, but nonetheless is a vital aspiration of attaining (or projecting) sufficient manhood.

Indeed it is telling that a meme circulating during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, abetted by no less than the *Wall Street Journal*, was that Democratic candidate Barack Obama

was “too thin” to be president (Chozik, 2008)—rhetoric which suggests not only an entrenched view of how masculine the nation’s leader must be, but which also carries subtle racial coding (Noah, 2008). Although any president needs no more muscle than to shake hands, wave, or push a pen, he must not be seen to be a wimp or otherwise appear too feminine—lessons provided in sharp contrast by the magenta windsurfing shorts of 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry versus the shirtless, chiseled physique of Russia’s Vladimir Putin, or even the cowboy swagger (and notorious fitness regimen) of George W. Bush. Indeed Jeffords (1994) argues that President Ronald Reagan both symbolized and galvanized the link between the perceived crisis of national esteem and a crisis in masculinity. Similarly, Braudy (2003) notes the way in which the rhetoric of both American leaders and Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders are inflected with resonant understandings of masculinity. As he describes it:

. . . fantasy has a deep role in war preparations, and nowhere is it more significant than in the twentieth century, when it is merged with the explicit image of a masculinized and virile state, or, in the case of the bombings of the World Trade Center in 1993 and 2001, when the attack is made in the name of an exclusionary masculine culture against what it considers to be, as did the fascists, an emasculated mercantile culture (Braudy, 2003: 464).

On such terms, this was a conflict rife with gendered, racialized, classed discourses through which people attempted to make sense of (as well as obfuscate) a complicated and terrifying new world (see Brittain, 2008; Rygiel, 2008; Sharma, 2008). Thus it is not merely that violence is an aspect of manliness, or that men must be perceived to be willing *and able* to carry it out, it is also that such understandings of masculinity translate to the national body.

This brings up the issue of the relation between the military man and the state, not so much in terms of how soldiers are utilized, but rather what the relationship is between manhood and

the state (including, perhaps, citizenship). It is important to note here that the state's sanctioning of military masculinity must serve the dual purpose of legitimizing the use of force and instilling excitement and support for the military—to compel young men to want to serve and, if asked to do so, die for their country. As Hopton (2003: 115) argues:

If the reciprocal relationship between masculinity and militarism is weakened, so too is the power of the state to manipulate public support for its right to use violence to pursue its policies at home and abroad, as well as to encourage young men to join the armed forces. Thus, the state has a vested interest in maintaining strong ideological links between militarism and masculinity.

In other words, if there is a *symbolic* dimension to masculinity and the state, then military masculinity is an integral component of maintaining the legitimacy of the state's ability to make war. Where the soldier represents the nation in conflict, ideologically (and particularly for domestic purposes of whipping up nationalist sentiment) the soldier is also intended to be representative of the nation. The soldier is placed on a pedestal of honor, heroism and sacrifice, and he must carry this out not only because it is expected of him in terms of martial and (as I have been arguing here) masculine discipline; he is also in many respects the nation's symbolic avatar, fighting not only for the nation per se, but whatever it is the nation stands for. By extension, challenges to the professional conduct of the soldiers (whether they are fit to fight, whether they commit alleged atrocities) reflect on both the status of the soldiers' masculinity as well as the actions and legitimate authority of the state.

Crucially, such notions are also circulated in media, where they are “...made to seem natural and inevitable, therefore becoming ideological and seeming ‘trans-historical’” (Consalvo, 2003: 29). In general, studies on men in media tend to find that these media tend to both reflect and (presumably) influence notions of “how to be a man”, particularly in advertising (Barthel, 1992; Katz, 1995; Strate, 1992) and sports (Beal, 1996; Miller, 1998; Sabo & Jansen, 1992; Trujillo, 1991; Welch, 1997). In this way, masculinity necessarily draws from as well as informs representations of men in popular culture, particularly visual media. Briefly, media studies analyses of gender representation have moved from seeing visual culture primarily in Mulvey's (1975) terms of a male-oriented gaze of scopophilia and narcissism, toward understanding representations of males and masculinity as drawing attention to its performed, constructed nature (see Cohan & Hark, 1997; MacKinnon, 1997; Tasker, 1993). Other scholars such as Roger Horrocks (1995) note the way in which specific media genres (westerns, horror, pornography, rock and pop music) adhere to and perpetuate notions of masculine behavior that are integral to hegemonic masculinity as defined above. Specifically concerning the war film, Donald (1992) describes the genre as requiring rites of passage through which the hero affirms his manhood and is stripped of his femininity, women are undermined or sidelined, and homosexuality is repressed and rejected; war films valorize a world in which "toughness, sufferance and standing up for ideals become essential signifiers of manliness" (Edwards, 2006). Scholars such as Susan Jeffords (1989) take this mode of argument farther, insisting that whole epochs of popular entertainment can be understood in this way, when she argues that the public discourse and popular culture of the Reagan Eighties can be read as a society-wide attempt at “remasculinizing” America in atonement for the Vietnam War.

However some recent scholarship has advocated for a view of masculinity in media in which it is not so much that representations delineate masculine performance so much as they are generative. Of particular note in this regard is David Gauntlett's (2008) examination of men's "lifestyle" magazines, which ostensibly depict not only "what men want" (usually attractive and available women, butch cars, gadgets, stories of glory and horror, and particular kinds of apparel—which is to say, appealing to what men are *supposed* to want), but also the contemporary ethos of leveraging irony to negotiate the seemingly treacherous waters posed by feminism and the so-called crisis in masculinity. Thus notions of masculinity that are "out there" in the culture are not wholly determinative, but rather points at which masculine notions are "affixed", and which leave some room for interpretation and deviance to take place.

In short, masculinity is a social construction which requires constant performative and discursive maintenance. Although there are multiple masculinities, there is a dominant or hegemonic form which serves as the (often implicit) "gold standard" of how a man is expected to comport himself and condition his body. These notions are maintained not only through individual behaviors as well as social norms, they are reflected in and influenced by media. As I hope to demonstrate below, there is a close relationship between hegemonic masculinity at an individual locus with a national masculinity, particularly with respect to militarism and war. That is to say, it is not only concerned with the gender performance of men in service to/of the nation, but also that the nation itself has a masculinity which is under constant threat and which requires constant maintenance (and in the case of the United States' imperial or quasi-imperial history, application). Hegemonic, national masculinity is arguably most visible, and becomes most important, when the nation is under threat, most acutely in times of war.

Since the ability and quality of both the citizen soldier and the nation are entwined, and since masculinity undergirds both (practically and symbolically), this in turn works back on the construction of individual masculinities. As Braudy (2003: 375) puts it: "An insult to my country is an insult to me; my country's weakness undermines my masculinity; beyond what is needed or prudent, my masculinity requires a strong military face in the world to be whole." In other words the cultural logic that links masculinity with military service also serves to link masculinity with the martial power of the nation, and this is both a mentality of managing the affairs of state as well as a mentality enacted at the site of the citizen-soldier's body. In fact, it is an example of *governmentality* in action—a term developed by Michel Foucault “to analyse the connections between what he called technologies of the self and technologies of domination, the constitution of the subject and the formation of the state” (Lemke, 2000: 2). It is worth taking some time here to define this term and how it relates to military masculinity as it is made manifest for both the individual and the state, where I use this term as a theoretical tool to draw connections between the state apparatus and soldierly discipline.

In detailing the transition from largely feudal, agrarian societies to largely capitalistic, industrial societies—that is, from the sovereign principality to the modern nation state—Foucault points out that it became in the interest of the state to be concerned with the population within its territory so as to better understand how to successfully govern that territory. This required both the collection of statistics and the institution of new techniques of governing in maximizing the productive capacity of the territory and managing its affairs: “the process, or rather, the result of the process by which the state of justice of the Middle Ages became the administrative state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was gradually ‘governmentalized’” (Foucault, 2007: 109). It was through this process that governmentality came into being, which is “the ensemble

formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument” (*ibid*: 108-109). It operates at both micro and macro levels, explained this way by Lemke (2000: 2):

In addition to the management by the state or the administration, "government" also signified [circa the 18th century] problems of self-control, guidance for the family and for children, management of the household, directing the soul, etc. For this reason, Foucault defines government as conduct, or, more precisely, as "the conduct of conduct" and thus as a term which ranges from "governing the self" to "governing others.”

In this respect perhaps it is easiest to think of governmentality as that which encompasses an array of process at the micro and macro level which work together toward the “successful” continuance of the state—administrative policies, productive processes, and disciplinary actions—applied through information and surveillance.

It is important to point out that statistics become a means not only of keeping track of the workings of the state in order to better manage its affairs (in his example, of determining whether grain production or importation is sufficient to feed people and keep prices at a desirable level); it is also a means of surveilling the populace in terms of production as well as (ultimately) suggestive of the applications of “micropower” that are needed to produce the “desired” results. By “apparatuses of security” what Foucault is referring to is not merely the violent capabilities of the state, but also (or moreso) the means of coercion (chiefly surveillance) through which one constructs or modifies the self in accordance with that which benefits the state: “governing the forms of self-government, structuring and shaping the field of possible action of

subjects” (Lemke, 2000: 3). In other words it is through discipline, which is instilled at both macro and micro levels.

As Foucault (1984: 188) says, “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.” The way in which this discipline is achieved is not overwhelming, but instead subtle: “It does this not by crushing them or lecturing them, but by ‘humble’ procedures of training and distribution. It operates through a combination of hierarchical observation, and normalizing judgment” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983: 156). Governmentality is not discipline itself, but rather a collection of disciplinary tactics. Like discipline, it “constructs (not merely ‘manipulates’) its objects, but unlike discipline, it constructs them as objects that should not be unduly manipulated” (Hannah, 2008: 23). This builds on Foucault’s earlier work in which he contended that discipline creates “docile bodies” which are ideal for the modern, industrial world, produced not through force but coercion via constant observation, analysis and description—not only from the state per se, but also (or rather, especially) through social sciences which attempt to analyze and categorize the human condition. Such “disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate” (Foucault, 1984: 212). It is in this era where particular behaviors become “deviant”, and which therefore require “correction,” where the ideals of the state body and the attributes of the “ideal body” are conflated.

Historically, this arises in the United States (and elsewhere) in the latter half of the 19th century amidst the rapid rise of the sciences, industrialization, imperialism, capitalism and the modern nation state. In the specific instance of the United States, the rise of governmentality did

not occur merely as an integral aspect of such elements' common threads, but arose directly from aspects of governmentality as they were instituted in the military, and had a distinctly masculine character. The Civil War made an entire generation of boys into men (as it was seen then), and from military positions of both leadership and secretary arose the "economist-bureaucrat . . . who emerged from the war with a strong belief in the capacity of social science and active government to effect social change" (Keller, 1977: 123-124). These were men who, in the context of a rising ambivalence about violence and the increasing esteem afforded to military life, drew from their military experiences to apply principles of generalship toward societal reform (Hannah, 2003: 96-97). Matthew G. Hannah, focusing in particular on the life and career of the influential Francis A. Walker (Civil War hero, director of the 1870 and 1880 U.S. censuses, commissioner of Indian affairs and a prominent political economist and educator), notes that personal notions of the qualities and obligations of manhood were hugely influential on the way in which men such as Walker approached their modernizing work. As Hannah (2008: 3) puts it:

Whether he was discussing the workings of the American economy, the threat of immigration or the proper goals of education in an industrializing society, [Walker's] rhetoric repeatedly betrayed an almost desperate urge to defend American manhood against the disruptions of the Gilded Age. Walker had strong opinions (as many of his contemporaries did) on other dimensions of social order, particularly race and immigration, but even there, a fear for besieged masculinity shaped his view.

In this respect, tactics both implemented and advocated were shot through with a highly gendered rendering of the world. This was particularly evident in applying social policy, where "the purpose of the four strategies [of sexual regulation of the hysterical woman, masturbating child, Malthusian couple and perverse adult] was to bolster the patriarchal nuclear family as the lynchpin of social order and health. Given this set of circumstances, a general ideological

‘masculinization’ of key aspects of social regulation is not difficult to imagine” (*ibid*, 20). In short, men who made their name and learned their craft in war, faced with a crisis in masculinity, worked to modernize society on their terms.

In short, tactics of governmentality in the name of “modernization” (including in some instances policies on the reform of social bodies, both in terms of character and physique) were overtly and intentionally implemented by formerly military men as a positive means of reforming the population and improving society (see Hannah, 2008). Although gender is not as central to Foucault’s discussion of governmentality as in his other work, it is certainly an important component, and a number of scholars nonetheless demonstrate that a form of American national manhood was integral to governmentality in the United States (cf. Hannah, 2008; Kimmel, 1996; Nelson, 1998; Rotundo, 1993), and that masculine norms, the use of statistical information, techniques of rationalization, and the utility and tactics of discipline were largely derived from or utilized by the military, then applied to American society as a whole.

Furthermore, there is a dialectical relationship between masculine performativity at the site of the individual and the military-infused rationality which was applied to forging American society at the end of the 19th and into the early 20th centuries: the organized practices (mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) through which subjects are governed are shaped at the top but ultimately must be worked/manifested by the individual. Crucially, however, it is because it operates in this way (coercion through surveillance, rather than imposed by force) that these practices are not necessarily applied *evenly* throughout society even if they are more or less *universal* in their spread—that is, there is space for bodies to “misperform.” It is in this way that governmentality demonstrates its usefulness as a theoretical and analytical tool for understanding

the connections between micro-level and macro-level iterations of masculinity, and how these iterations are intimately intertwined with the national state (in both meanings of the word “state”).

Stating the Problem, Introducing the Research Project

Applying this conceptualization of masculinity and its operations to critiques of the MEC and its purported relationship to and/or effect on hegemonic (military) masculinity, we can clarify what is at stake in the proliferation of military-oriented videogames. The political economy of the MEC ties together (perhaps in direct ways) the broad based ideological tenets of masculinity and the state with specific articulations and iterations of military masculinity in media. At the same time, these notions may be worked into being at the site of gameplay: a process which, game studies scholars tell us, combines aspects of mediation, phenomenology, and social interaction—that is, whatever the *specific* depiction or performance of masculinity (or masculinities), we might expect that as a process this is more integrated and presumably formative than the “mere” implementation of social norms or disciplinary policy.

So, if it is a given that war media and war playthings have a hand in “militarizing” society—consumed overwhelmingly by males—then males are learning through their onto-formative, consumptive practices to appreciate military-infused understandings of masculinity and/or to venerate militarism in its various forms and displays. Could this be accelerated, made more resonant, when the simulative aspects of war I describe above can take place in immersive, interactive environments—in “realistic” combat videogames? Is the military entertainment complex just more of the same in a very long history of entertainment technologies which transmit ultimately pro-war ideology? Is this something new and far more sophisticated, which

combines ideology with applicable training? Ultimately, the question driving this research is this: Are videogames like this venerating a particular form of hegemonic military masculinity—learning to think like a soldier in terms of both martial capacities as well as a particular set of dispositions concerning manhood—and if so, is this hegemonic form inculcated through gameplay?

In this project I will be perusing this issue, tracing the means through which the practice of making war is indelibly intertwined with the process of making men. For that matter, I will also be asking whether such combat-oriented videogames and related simulations may have a hand in changing the nature of modern warfare—how it is waged, how it is conceptualized, what expectations both combatants and war planners may bring to the battlefield when they have spent their youth playing combat simulators in their homes, then train for war (and occasionally conduct it) with similar combat simulators on the battlefield. These are questions posed not only from a perusal of the literature on the MEC and war and masculinity, but also by examining the mechanics and aesthetics of games and gaming, including the (gendered) social context in which these games are played—an attempt at challenging and bringing together scholarship on war and masculinity, the MEC, and games and gaming through which I hope to illuminate what is happening in this nexus, and what the ramifications are of this.

I do this by conducting a case study of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, one of the most popular first person shooters of the last three years. I chose this particular title because (1) of its enormous popularity, in terms of both volume of sales and hours players log in playing it online; (2) as the title indicates, it depicts “modern warfare”, and does so in a context which sets American and British forces against forces from Russia and the Middle East, making it a relevant

subject for investigating depictions of race, nation, and international politics vis-a-vis a contemporary understanding of the American soldier as a masculine figure. In this case study I conduct a close analysis of the ostensibly “textual” aspects of the game in terms of both its representational, gamic and narrative elements. I also examine the performances of players: their gameplay and discursive performances in gamespace, paratextual media such as forum discussions, walkthroughs and machinima, and finally a grounded assessment of the way players in a particular gaming cybercafe speak and conduct themselves while playing. In so doing, I wish to put to the test assumptions about what form(s) of masculinity abound(s) here, concerning both the diegetic world of the game as well as the performative sphere of the gamers, and in what ways these interact—most especially, whether and in what way a predominating mode of masculine performativity is inculcated and perpetuated in the process. This combination of scope and detailed analysis is what makes this study unique, and it is this approach that enables me to speak of this nexus with authority and precision.

The first part of this dissertation consists of a literature review through which I try to establish the context of the central concerns of the project. Chapter one examines the nature of the MEC, beginning with a history of the technological, logistical, financial and institutional developments which formulate its nebulous parameters, including a brief literature review of theories regarding the ramifications of the MEC, particularly pertaining to its effect on society—in short, what we expect the cultural impact of the MEC to be. Chapter two reviews theories and methods of game studies, wherein I also describe my own methods and propose a new model for understanding the differentiated “resonances” for players on three levels: (1) *social fidelity*, or the ideological or social aspects of the game as they pertain to a player’s broader social context; (2) *gamic fidelity*, which is the representational and ludic aspects of the game; and (3) *gamer*

fidelity, or the particular understandings brought to bear by gamer subculture. It is this model which forms the analytical framework of this dissertation.

The second part of the dissertation features my own unique research findings on this case study. In chapter three I examine the social fidelity of the game by painting a picture of the broader discourses of war and masculinity as they have been historically rendered in the United States, which then leads into a specific analysis of how the game either replicates or undermines these broader understandings. The chapter argues that the game's narrative, representational and thematic content serves to perpetuate two kinds of hegemonic norms: hegemonic (military) masculinity, and pro-American, pro-military agendas such as exceptionalism, imperialism, and jingoism.

Chapter four discusses the gamic fidelity of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. This includes an analysis of the explicit or implicit meaning of particular ludic functions (gameplay, mission objectives, the behavior of the artificial intelligence agents in the game, etc.), a close reading of the game's elements, and an examination of certain aspects of its narrative as this corresponds to gameplay—ultimately, what kind of play is required in order to progress in or do well at the game. This chapter argues that although several of these features articulate many of the same themes as discussed in the previous chapter, there are crucial ways in which specific elements inculcate or encourage performances which deviate from many aspects of traditionalist military masculinity, in particular a fixation on a form of proficiency at odds with values such as heroism and sacrifice.

Chapter five is an examination of the world of the players of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. I begin the chapter by establishing common or expected discourses and performances

of the first person shooter genre (both in-game and in players' embodied contexts), and therein examine the masculine attributes of gaming in this sphere: a space that contains hypermasculine content and is overwhelmingly populated by males, yet which also exudes gender insecurity and flexibility. In the rest of the chapter I examine the meanings embedded in player performances (gamic and discursive), and peruse paratextual media such as walkthroughs and FAQs, forum discussions, and various forms of machinima. I end the chapter by including an ethnographic case study of a gaming cybercafe in Dunedin, New Zealand, couching my findings according to that which is emblematic of universal norms, versus those which may have more localized influences, and argue that the specific tasks and "gamer" understandings of gameplay outweigh the didactic or diegetic elements of the game's content (yet such content influences these understandings in subtle ways).

The final chapter, the conclusion, bundles together the complicated threads of this story, and I consider whether critics of the MEC are generally correct about its potentially militarizing effects, or whether, instead, there is something both more banal, yet insidious afoot regarding war and masculinity in the MEC: where informational verisimilitude and a gamer emphasis on efficiency, proficiency, and a particular form of (ambiguous) masculine performance work in tandem as a new form of disciplinary technology—where all combatants must perform in a surveilled battlefield and soldiers become players, not the other way around.

CHAPTER 1

The Military Entertainment Complex

Military-oriented entertainment has long been an integral part of both military training and the culture at large. So long as there have been wars, games have been associated with this, and means of simulating war—whether as a tool for more effective combat or as a means of avoiding sending people to their deaths—have roots as far back as the various military-oriented strategy games which were played by Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and others (Halter, 2006). War stories and war games have long gone hand in hand, and they have played roles in both fostering support for or ideas about war, and assisting in the training of actual soldiers—whether instilling in them notions of pride, responsibility, nobility, or performing the more applied task of attenuating their cognitive and/or phenomenological skills to war’s conduct.

However with the rise of industrialization and nation-states, and particularly with the rise of mass media, both the scale and nature of military-oriented entertainment appeared to undergo significant changes. With the development of national, professional armies, war gaming for both officer training and amusement came to be seen as integral to maintaining martial vigilance, which more often than not conflated warcraft and service with idealized masculinity. The values associated with war were often transmitted via the playthings of war: "The same era that brought the development of professional war gaming also saw the spread of toy soldiers, which soon became a staple of young boys from the more privileged classes of European and American society" (*ibid*: 47-48). Adding to this, historian Barbara Ehrenreich (1997) argues that the public ecstasy, fanfare and bloodlust that greeted the beginning of World War I can be explained in part

by the rapid increase in the production and consumption of toy soldiers and other war-themed toys. It is during this era that war-oriented media (including material culture) began to have a mass impact on society's relationship to war: through photography and cinema, war could be represented "realistically" and with immanence (cf. Klingsporn, 2006; Rentfrow, 2008); through material culture such as figurines, action figures, and their concomitant media, war could be framed to fit nationalistic discourses, imbued with moral qualities and expected to both require and forge particular kinds of masculinity (cf. Clarkson, 2008; Ehrenreich, 1997; Hall, 2003; Halter, 2006). In short, in congruence with the needs of industrialized, inter-state warfare, a cohesive system of knowledge, expectations and purpose could be conjured and maintained throughout the broader culture by both the military-industrial establishment and the culture industry.

There has been ample, decades-long criticism of the role and nature of war-oriented media, but the rise of the so-called military entertainment complex (hereafter, MEC)—the integration of the political economies of the military industrial complex and various aspects of the entertainment industry, particularly videogames and other simulation technologies—has seemingly heightened both awareness of and alarm at the potential power of such media, particularly in terms of inculcating an ostensibly pro-war sentiment throughout society. What sets the contemporary era apart is the rapid move from cooperation, to synergy, to more or less full on integration in some areas: the development of technological and (intended or otherwise) ideological components for mutual benefit. For many critics, the combination of opacity, mutually beneficial development, high profits, synergistic cachet, and enthusiastic technophilia is cause for great concern. Furthermore, as briefly explained in the introduction, critics of the MEC are concerned that given the overlap between simulation technologies used for combat training

and those used for gaming, there may be not only ideological ramifications, but also psychological or phenomenological ones. In short, war's representation, meaning, function, and relationship with notions of masculinity may have entered a new, troubling, more synergistic stage. Understanding how the MEC works—what its features are, and what the implications of such operations might be—is therefore highly important not only in dealing with its impact on foreign policy, the economy, and the conduct of modern warfare, but also its impact on American culture, in particular the culture of manhood.

In order to assess the merit of these claims, it is necessary to unpack what the MEC ostensibly is, how videogames became central to this process, and what its purported effects and affects are. It is my contention that a full understanding of this complex takes into account not only the history of shared technologies and ultimately political economy; it must also take into account the ways in which consumers of military entertainment have had a stake in and have influenced the creation and production of these products. While military-oriented videogames are not the only media which fall under this category or have had a hand in shaping this history, videogames play a central role in this story.

In this chapter I demarcate the parameters of the MEC and describe the critiques leveled against it—this is the story of the MEC, which provides the cultural, politico-economic, and scholarly context for my empirical analysis. In order to illustrate these operations, and what it is about them that marks a shift in the political economy and culture of war, I provide here a brief history of how the process has occurred over roughly a century, expanded with the dawn of the Cold War, and accelerated shortly before the turn of the millennium. I end the chapter by suggesting that there are several crucial aspects of the MEC which appear to be vastly

oversimplified and even misunderstood—in particular what male gamers get out of their engagement with military-oriented games/gaming, as well as the nature of the relationship between the militaristic content and the masculine performances which are inculcated in this sphere. This problematizes much of the established literature on the MEC and sets the stage for my analysis in the following chapters.

Simulating War

We begin with an apt anecdote: the first proto-motion picture camera was Etienne-Jules Marey's chronophotographic rifle, made in 1882. This was a camera mounted on an actual rifle stock through which one pulled a trigger and turned a hand crank—both of which were directly descended from Colt revolvers and cylindrical guns like the gatling gun (Virilio, 1998: 95). Therefore it is no coincidence that filming is referred to as “shooting.” This is perhaps emblematic of the ways in which war and entertainment have long gone hand in hand, not only in terms of certain kinds of shared visual grammar, but also in terms of shared technology. Cinema has been crucial for providing an ideological vehicle about war's meaning and aesthetics, as well as serving as an industry in which collaboration between filmmakers and military personnel has been extensive. At the same time, many videogames themselves have been heavily influenced by and infused with cinematic tropes and aesthetics on at least their representational and narrative level. It is these features of military-oriented entertainment—the nature of their content—which begins this discussion of the ramifications of the MEC.

A number of critics contend that photography, and later motion pictures, proved to be vital for formulating the way in which Americans came to “see” war, by which I mean not only are capable of seeing its effects (battlefield footage) but also understanding the grammar of its representation. In the United States, this phenomenon can be traced to the Civil War, which featured the first mass media images of war photography. Geoffrey Klingsporn (2006) points out that the legacy of war photography's popularity is not only the way it was utilized by as well as exacerbated nationalistic passions which were best whipped up via visual media, it also conferred authenticity upon the visual representation of war as being more "true" than war as represented by historians—an especially problematic notion since most photographs were staged, in one way or another.

With the advent of motion pictures, such staging was more elaborate, which by World War I required “re-enactments” of battles and charges. But even done with the best of intentions and with an eye toward the highest degree of accuracy, such films inevitably convey to the audience a perception that such these depictions are accurate representations: “That what war looked like was in fact *fake* meant as little to the viewer as did the rearrangements of corpses on the battlefield in war photography. The *reality effect* of the war film was to transform re-enactment into 'the real thing'” (Rentfrow, 2008: 89, original emphasis). Furthermore, it framed the terms under which actions in war were intended to be understood, such that films which used “real” footage “represented what the Army was *doing* while defining what the war *meant* and what it *looked like*” (*ibid*: 90, original emphasis). Thus from the earliest days, war films frame war, conferring salience on only select aspects of its conduct.

War films are also heavily infused with thematic content that lend themselves to this purpose and reading. Of course it is not merely techniques of staging, nor even overt claims to authenticity that make films of this nature so powerful. As visual media they also utilize myth (Barthes, 1957), and in the case of most Hollywood films, convey in extreme shorthand sometimes very complex ideas through the use of formal techniques such as color, lighting, mise en scene, camera movement and angles, and editing (particularly the “invisible” style of film editing) (cf. Bordwell & Thompson, 2003). In sum, war’s representation in photography and film tend toward the mythic, iconic, and constructions which aim toward “realism” at the level of both war’s sublime affects (explosions, death, etc.) as well as the depiction of its participants and what this should mean.

The representation of war operates in similar ways in videogames, and to this end there is really nothing particularly new about its operations here. What has garnered the attention of critics, however, is that videogames have the additional qualities of being simulations which require considerable time and constant input in order to play—that is, they are not merely watched but *brought into being* and *participated in*. Along these lines, perhaps the most common refrain among critics of the MEC centers around the (mainly narrative) content of military-oriented FPS. The vast majority of such games are made from an American point of view. This is not particularly surprising, of course, and scarcely anyone would argue that such games should take up a counter-narrative of being from the point of view of, say, a member of the Taliban. However, an “American point of view” is a specific sort of constructed viewpoint in these games. First of all, player’s avatars, at least in the single-player missions which form the core of the “narrative” element in the game (which may also include a non-narrative multiplayer mode), are nearly always American or occasionally British (and because this is the narrative

portion of the game, avatars are typically *characters*). This includes World War II videogames, which, as previously mentioned, preceded the introduction of “modern warfare” (i.e. contemporary) scenarios. Because these games are oriented toward martial action, the player’s character is usually a member of some elite team or unit, usually among a special operations force. Because these are special operations missions, the player is often placed in the middle of some kind of crisis, and the very nature of the tasks special operations forces are asked to do provides the opportunity to interdict in crises worldwide. This scenario allows the player to be involved in constant action, usually against difficult or overwhelming odds, in an interesting variety of locales, while the stakes are high.

Obviously there is a politics to making an interesting and engaging game along these lines. It tacitly accepts as a matter of course that the U.S. (and sometimes U.K.) have both the capacity and right to deploy such forces at any place or time, and furthermore that because gamic success is measured by mission success, this tacitly supports the use of force toward whatever outcome is favored by the U.S. government and its allies. Stahl (2010: 98) notes that a common thread among these games is their general preference for force over diplomacy, not only in terms of requiring compelling action, but also overtly favoring the use of force to achieve goals, and valorizing the men who carry this out (often in a way which suggests that “the politicians” are worthy only of our collective contempt). What these games therefore do is make U.S. military intervention normative. King and Leonard (2010: 102) argue that “in a post-9/11 America, video games have become a crucial space of articulating American empire . . . where U.S. efforts to secure power is [sic] normalized and justified.” Furthermore, these games tend to represent Western governments, their interests and their troops as essentially being the “good guys,” while their enemies are therefore the “bad guys.” This kind of game, in particular *America’s Army*,

“encourages players to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular global political truth as a desirable worldview” (Bogust, 2007: 79). Needless to say, this “singular global political truth” largely adheres to nationalistic myths of intervention according to only the noblest intentions and most moral and professional conduct.

Such depictions of war zones may also have peripheral aspects which are problematic:

War video games construct and imagine places like Iraq and Afghanistan as barren wastelands devoid of civilians and infrastructure in need of saving and U.S. intervention. Alongside their erasure of the consequences of war, the absence of 'civilization' justifies intervention, control, and mastery of unused space within both virtual and real projects of colonization (King & Leonard, 2010: 91).

It is this “civilizing” element mixed with the depiction of an enemy other which leads a number of critics to argue that these games are also racist in a manner which is consistent with Said’s (1978) description of Orientalism. Nina B. Huntemann (2010) suggests that it has become a consensus view that these sorts of games depict a world in which conflict is natural and inevitable, that enemies are evil, and that these games sanitize the violence of such conflicts.

Another, somewhat more complicated critique is that these games sanitize war while making it seem fun, which concerns an analysis not of content per se but its *lack*. As FPS aspire to increasing “realism” in both graphical quality and the physical, tactical, and operational terms of combat scenarios, certainly many of war’s ugly aspects are increasingly present: war’s toll on infrastructure, a fair amount of gore, and so on. However for a complicated set of reasons having to do with access, ideology and the simple fact that ESRB ratings standards come down very heavily on graphic displays of violence (i.e. blood and gore—explosions and so on are perfectly

acceptable), war games do not show the full effects of war on human bodies. While in many respects this could be considered a desirable outcome, critics assert that excluding things such as human “collateral damage,” refugees, and various other side effects of actual warfare is extremely problematic (Der Derian, 2009; King & Leonard, 2009; Stallabrass, 1996; Wark, 2007). Moreover, the abilities and use of particular weapons allow these games to act “as virtual enactments and endorsements for developing military technologies, whose actual performance records are much more ambiguous” (Smicker, 2010: 107). While critics do not seek to traumatize gamers, many recognize the politics of such decisions, whereby war is made to seem as if there are few if any consequences beyond the toll taken on empty buildings and enlisted soldiers (who in the case of the Americans, at least, are heroic volunteers). Höglund (2008) sums up the general thrust and effect of such games thus:

Ultimately, then, the Military Entertainment Complex functions to commodify the notion of perpetual war. From this perspective, the Military Entertainment Complex allows both the American and the global citizen to consume and, through this consumption, purchase a military identity while at the same time presenting a sanitized, bi-polar and fundamentally Orientalist image of military violence conducted in the Middle East.

Seen in this way, such games are both tools of perpetuating this violence as well a means of inoculating gamers against the knowledge or experience of collateral damage.

However, other critics note that even games which aspire to more realism are not necessarily solving this political problem. Stahl (2010) and Halter (2006) note that while some game designers wanted to recreate these conflicts in terms of "war is hell," even here the marketing materials amp up the excitement and fun of this. There is an element here that seems

to go beyond the ideological strains of pro-war sentiment; what may also be playing a part in the enjoyment of simulated "hell" is merely an attraction to the atavistic or sublime, which can be safely experienced (indeed, repeatedly simulated) from the comfort of one's own home. In this vein, such games inevitably come under fire for trivializing war and its victims when they are played "for fun." To be fair, this is not necessarily consistent among all game designers. As Losh (2010: 162) points out, "In fact, many military game developers have used their skills in digital rhetoric to create games, simulations, and other media experiences that spur users to interrogate jingoistic, xenophobic, and repressively uncritical ideologies of patriotism, nationalism, and exceptionalism." In other words, this is still about putting out entertainment, which, while adhering to a certain degree of authenticity, may or may endorse all aspects of the dominant discourse that is alleged to operate in most of these games—in some cases, the intent is surely the opposite. However along these lines players may still have the capacity to delight in atavistic fantasy play, and such games may be open to the same critique that is often laid at allegedly anti-war cinema: when representing the terrible and sublime aspects of combat, it is impossible to make war anything but exciting.

Given the extent to which gaming culture is dominated by males, where there are masculine norms which valorize acumen and proficiency, if these critics are right, then these games exacerbate already troubling trends within gaming culture while the military establishment also capitalizes on this for its own ends. And if we take it that as objects which are played, which are highly engaging, immersive, interactive texts, played mostly by males, then the content of these games impacts notions of masculinity. If contemporary masculinity is heavily influenced by military masculinity, and this form of military masculinity includes such troubling features as jingoism, racism, xenophobia, desensitization to or even sublime delight in

war's destruction, then what sort of men will emerge? What effect might this have on the body politic?

These critiques of the content of these games, paired in some occasions with an assessment of the gaming culture in which such games are played, ultimately paints a picture of a sphere in which an incestuous political economy inculcates and ultimately exploits a gaming culture that is a growing segment of society. This has consequences for the way in which, it is often suggested, the lines between propaganda and recruitment become blurred, where even those who do not actually enlist nonetheless are complicit in real wars by virtue of consuming and playing virtual ones. Driving the point home, Losh (2010: 161) says, "Among media theorists, the phrase 'military-entertainment-complex' has been used to make a deadly serious point: that, when war becomes a game, it becomes more difficult to combat dangerous cultural imaginaries about the conquest and occupation of others that are promulgated by just war doctrines." Therefore it is not merely the problematic content which troubles critics of military-oriented videogames, it is that the scope of the MEC, combined with the increasing popularity of its affects among the public, would seem to aid in accelerating the march toward a militarized (read: authoritarian, violent) society. It is not merely the representational aspects which trouble critics, but also the political economy of this nexus and how it has come about—a subject to which we now turn.

Synergizing War

As alluded to above, a central concern of critics of the MEC is not merely the way in which a militaristic ideology is transmitted in media, but also the troubling integration of the

institutions, funding mechanisms, research and development, and ultimately goals (not least, profit) that is the hallmark of the contemporary MEC. This is a process that has been ongoing for several decades, but has radically accelerated since the turn of the millennium.

Cinema provides the earliest and most obvious example from the standpoint of the way in which entertainment companies' ties to the military have increased. From early on, many filmmakers leveraged direct military cooperation in making war films—whether compelled to do so by military authorities for the war effort, or out of filmmakers' own desires to accurately portray what happens in war with a particular eye to what military personnel are trained to do. The most well known examples of the former include Frank Capra's World War II series *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) and the Army's First Motion Picture Unit, whose members included Jimmy Stewart, Clark Gable and Ronald Reagan—an overt use of Hollywood studios for the purposes of information dissemination and other forms of propaganda that largely dissolved with the end of the war. Regarding replicating authentic war, Hollywood studios continued to hire military technical advisors and personnel for commercial purposes on war films. Studios also frequently used footage from military archives to splice into both fiction and re-enactment films, filmed military personnel and installations themselves, as well as occasionally utilized military advisors and/or equipment for their live actors to use in various battle scenes (particularly in science fiction and disaster films which required a significant military presence).

This cooperation has continued today on both documentary-like films as well as in fiction, the chief difference being that actors are now often required to undergo “basic training” to ensure accuracy in terminology, body movement and weapons training in such blockbuster films as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and the much more critical *Three Kings*

(1999) (the latter film including a bit of self-parody when it states that the characters played by George Clooney and Ice Cube go on afterward to become military advisors to action films). In short: Hollywood films wished to utilize military equipment and expertise in order to ensure greater verisimilitude, and this was and is perceived to pay dividends at the box office.

By the 1980s, cooperation for ostensibly purely commercial purposes often included using military equipment and personnel directly, which often required making deals with the military about the terms of use. Films such as *Top Gun* (1986) and *Iron Eagle* (1986) actually paid military pilots to engage in various aerial maneuvers used directly in the films—that is, real-life military pilots effectively became stunt doubles who performed real-life maneuvers, the footage of which was used for these movies. *Top Gun* in particular helped kick off a growing synergy between Hollywood filmmakers and the military: the U.S. Navy was given script oversight (de Lauzirika, 2005), the Navy promoted the pilots who worked in the film at air shows and various recruiting events¹ as well set up recruiting booths in movie theaters (Campbell, 2001). The worldwide success of the film was seen as a clear win for the U.S. military in terms of showcasing its recently revamped equipment as well as endorsing its role in projecting power globally (namely in the film’s climax, during which the fighter school’s graduates are immediately deployed to an un-named “crisis” in the Middle East).

This sort of synergy has only increased over the years, and has included the U.S. military requesting script changes in exchange for logistical or advisory help on films (*ibid*). This is perhaps best epitomized by Michael Bay’s *Transformers* series (2007, 2009, upcoming release 2011). In making these films Bay has not only utilized military personnel to train actors and act

¹ For my ninth birthday I attended an air show at which this occurred, and I received an autographed poster from two of these pilots.

as proxy stunt doubles for various footage, but has also overtly sought Air Force cooperation to film on otherwise restricted air bases; in return, the U.S. military sought script supervision, and a number of exclusive private contractors paid for product placement in these films, including having a number of Transformers themselves be military vehicles/planes (“Andrew”, 2007; Axe, 2008). The global consumer product being sold is not only popcorn entertainment about alien robots, but also (and following in the footsteps of many war films since the Cold War) the nobility and capability of the U.S. military—concomitant with a huge array of movie tie-ins such as toys.

This is not to say that Hollywood produces only pro-military or “pro-American” films (notable exceptions to this, including mainstream financial backing of critical documentaries, and big budget, high profile films such as *Three Kings* and *Lord of War* (2005), among others). However the scale and scope of ostensibly pro-military projects is inarguably bigger, while some films which overtly criticize the military establishment have been known to be effectively “buried” through lack of financial or distributive support, such as *War, Inc.* (2007).

That said, although certainly studios can face political pressure for producing films which are anti-establishment, it is also telling that studios tend to view this disparity primarily as a business decision: as several scholars argue (cf. Boose, 2003; Jeffords, 1989; Rowe, 2007; Ryan & Kellner, 2006; Slocum, 2006), and as a rule of thumb which “everyone knows”, films in which the military is depicted in normative terms (deferential verging on celebratory) are more acceptable to mainstream audiences and therefore stand to make much more money. Indeed, in the post-9/11 moment it was war films for which audiences had an intense lust—although numerous film projects were delayed or pulled altogether due to their unseemly and uncanny

resemblance to the destruction wrought on the twin towers, it was not long before this trend reversed itself, and many war films were rushed into production/release (Stahl, 2010). This suggests that far from being a purely “top down” enterprise of ideological dissemination and synergy through mutual promotion, there is also a crucial heremonic component to this synergy: audience demand (or at least, acceptance) of films in which the U.S. military is depicted in normative terms.

The technological, politico-economic, and ideological congruencies which have occurred in cinema are both more manifest and complicated when it comes to videogames. To begin with, the U.S. military has long been at the forefront of using digitally rendered, representational, interactive interfaces of which it could be said that the real world appears as a game. The first incarnation of this was Project Whirlwind (1953), in which the SAGE computer rendered radar information to screens monitored by Air Force personnel, who used light guns to tell the computer which signals to track (Redmond & Smith, 2000). Another notable system was Operation Igloo White (1966-1972), where camouflaged sensors, capable of detecting sound, motion, and urine, were air-dropped onto a specific enemy supply route during the Vietnam War. When these sensors indicated enemy presence, this information was relayed to technicians in Thailand who saw the enemy as electronic “worms” on their grid map displays, and who were even capable of remotely controlling ordinance drops on these targets, while the pilots merely watched (Halter, 2006). These early systems provided the basis for the military’s use of real-time, remote simulations in combat, and provided the impetus behind funding for technologies which would expand on this.

However, the military did not commission the creation of applicable combat simulations directly. The origins of the computers, information networks and simulation software which

served as the incubator of both videogames and the MEC as we know it today were developed in major research universities which received significant funding from the Department of Defense, including UC-Berkeley, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Illinois, and the University of Utah, among others. The first videogame is largely credited as being *Spacewar!*, developed in 1961 at MIT—a two-player game in which each player controlled a space ship which orbited around a star, the goal of the game being to shoot down the other player (Kent, 2001). Several other games in this vein were created, taken to the next level with *Spasim* (an abbreviation of “space simulation”, but also clearly a pun referring to the jerking and twitching required for gameplay), developed at the University of Illinois via the PLATO network (*ibid*). Though the graphics were quite crude by today’s standards, *Spasim* not only established a platform for interactive 3D simulations from which the FPS would develop, but also served as a precursor to MMO’s, since it was played over a multiplayer network. As was the case with all computer games of the era, the hardware and networks over which *Spasim* developed were funded by the military and the National Science Foundation, ensconced in university enclaves populated by the original hackers (Halter, 2006; Kent, 2001).

Shortly after *Spasim* came the tank simulators *Panther PLATO* and *Panzer PLATO* (it is unclear which came first), from which it is generally believed that Atari developed *Battlezone*, in which tank “drivers” roamed a 3D landscape to do battle with other simulated tanks, and which featured somewhat realistic ballistics (Halter, 2006; Kent, 2001). The military establishment was impressed with *Battlezone*, and wished to utilize this technology. As Halter (2006: 129-130) describes it:

In 1980, representatives from the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (or TRADOC) approached Atari, expressing interest in having the company produce a modified, more realistic version of Battlezone

that could be used as a trainer for the Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle...But at Atari, where many still held to the countercultural hacker ethic of the sixties and seventies, the prospect caused rifts between programmers and management.

Ed Rotberg, the brain behind *Battlezone*, ultimately decided to do the project under the provision that he would not be contacted to do anything for the military in the future, and roughly four months later, *Military Battlezone* was the result (Kent, 2001). It is unclear whether this prototype simulator was ever used for training purposes. What is clear is that Atari developed other games using this software and the specially designed controller for the Bradley simulator, in particular Atari's popular Star Wars arcade game, the result being that arcade players had "their hands wrapped around a carefully constructed replica of a Bradley Infantry Vehicle's steering wheel" (Halter, 2006: 133-134).

These origins are important to highlight because it epitomizes the complicated relationship between videogames and the military, where games' interfaces can be adapted for use as training simulators. Lenoir (2000) notes that at the University of Utah in particular, there was considerable military funding behind virtual reality research, undertaken by an "impressive list" of researchers at the top of the field. Utah alumni went on to found such well known companies as Atari and Pixar, as well as make major contributions at NASA, Lucasfilm, and various other commercial, governmental, and university research facilities (*ibid*). Therefore, "while computer games were not created directly for military purposes, they nevertheless arose out of an intellectual environment whose existence was entirely predicated on defense research" (Halter, 2006: 82-83). With substantial funding and backing, these men (they were all men) were often left to their own devices, spending long hours hacking, and in the process coming up with "time-wasting" programs like *Spasim*. There is of course a bit of irony in military-funded,

countercultural hackers “screwing around” and in the process inventing software which would later be developed and adapted for military simulators. However this is also definitive of both the technology and the culture surrounding videogames: the apparent normative impulse among even allegedly countercultural, anti-establishment hackers was to create competitive games which simulate combat—and the military, for its part, was rarely proactively seeking such simulations, and in this era at least only dabbled halfheartedly in capitalizing on them. To recap: hackers whose research was underwritten by the military created war-themed games in their spare time; upon leaving university research labs, some of them formed their own company and produced a military simulator; then they were asked by the military to modify this proprietary software for training purposes and did so (albeit with some degree of trepidation, in some cases); finally they cannibalized this project for other commercial titles which were also war-themed.

Also telling is how receptive the public was to commercial titles which featured these militaristic themes, which was a part of the ethos of the men and boys (it was nearly all males) who became the “gamer” demographic. As Deterding (2010: 36) notes: “Highly educated, technophile young men, rich in free time, constituted the shared target group of both paper and video wargames . . . So when board wargame developers brought their boardgame mechanics and genres into the fledgling video game industry, board wargame fans created the necessary market to firmly establish these conventions.” Therefore wargaming “grognards” established all the conventions of such games still in evidence today—a particularly insidious development, Deterding argues, because the transference of board game rules also transfers the ideological aspects of those rules (what is or isn't part of the game), but obfuscates the fact that these are mere game rules, because the rules are hidden by the fidelity of the game's interface so that it seems “realistic” (2010: 34-35).

Meanwhile, this phenomenon was certainly not lost on military officials, who saw the potential of what the videogame industry had unlocked. Military personnel began cruising arcades, both assessing the types of games that were being played as well as in some cases actively recruiting among gamers' ranks. TRADOC (Army Training and Doctrine Command) reported back to the Army that their research in arcades revealed that a number of arcade games might have "features that would be useful for training purposes," which included not only flight and tank simulators, but games like *Missile Command*, which "has controls very similar to the Army's forward-area alerting radar (FAAR), the warning set for low-altitude defense systems" (Halter, 2006: 139). In other words, the commercial videogame industry was producing content which the military saw as being beneficial in terms of both recruitment and acclimation to existing as well as up and coming weapons and surveillance systems—the prodigal son turned out to be better at simulating war than the father.

Where the technology and financing of military and commercial computing were intimately intertwined for most of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, the U.S. commercial gaming industry found its own way for at least the next decade, in part due to the rapid rise of the scope and scale of commercial games, as well as competition in this new medium from other private companies, particularly out of Japan. At the same time, however, the military began to see significant advantages to developing more sophisticated simulation technology for training, war games, and improving interfaces for various monitoring and weapons systems. Military simulators started off being used for systems in which the relationship between the operator and the outside world was already mediated (e.g. submarines), although this started to spread to other technical areas (including repair and maintenance), and the cost of these sims were occasionally more expensive than the weapons systems they were simulating.

With the end of the Cold War, however, the Pentagon began to see the development of in-house simulators as far too expensive, and so such investments were heavily scaled back starting in the mid-1990s. Interestingly, it was not the military that radically improved the quality and capacities of simulation technologies, but the commercial sector. In 1992, id Software released *Wolfenstein 3D*, often hailed as the original first person shooter: a game in which the player sees in the first person, moves in three dimensional space, and shoots (in this case) tougher and more numerous waves of Nazis inside of a labyrinthine castle. The game, distributed mainly through shareware, proved to be a global smash hit, crossing over in some form to nearly every platform.

Building on the success of *Wolfenstein 3D*, id Software released *Doom* in 1993. *Doom* was revolutionary for a number of reasons. In terms of gameplay, it was overtly gory in a way few videogames to this point had ever been, whereby the player dispatched enemies using any means necessary (including not merely “regular” guns, but also cleavers, chainsaws, and a BFG, which was taken to be an acronym for “Big Fucking Gun”). The demonic monsters which the player’s space marine avatar fought did not merely die or disappear, they were mutilated, with animated blood flying everywhere. The game was also atmospheric in a way that was unique: eerie music, very dark lighting, blind corners, nasty surprises, etc. *Doom* also innovated networked multiplayer play, which has since become a mainstay of nearly all FPS: the ability to gather together with other people and shoot each other in virtual space. Perhaps *Doom*’s greatest legacy, however, was that it was a major crossover hit with adults, a market that had heretofore been largely untapped. This marks a shift away from videogames as entertainment for kids, and toward titles specifically marketed to adults (or more cynically, overtly marketed to all players as containing “adult” content).

The next several years were dominated by FPS titles that copied the same successful formula, with increasing graphical intensity in all aspects of the gaming experience (much to the dismay of social critics who were alarmed at the increasing levels of violence, realism, and interactivity) and cementing a number of genre elements that are effectively canon today, particularly landmark titles like *Quake* (id Software, 1996) and *Half-Life* (Valve, 1999), the latter adding the innovative element of scripted sequences. The genre's popularity proved the viability of an adult market for videogames—clearly there was ample demand for a videogame that featured violent, intense combat (even if this pitted the “space marine” against hell’s denizens on Mars).

Doom is also important in that it caught the interest of the U.S. military for use as a cheap means of expanding simulations to include squad-based troop combat. In 1996 Marine Corps Commandant General Charles C. Krulak directed the corps to utilize off the shelf commercial games to improve modern tactics and techniques (Lister, 2003). A small team of Marine Corps simulations experts got to task creating a mod from *Doom*'s .wad files. The Marine Corps version, which came to be known as *Marine Doom*, featured a four-person team, facing various missions which focused on mutual fire support, attack sequencing, and other tactics of modern warfare (Halter, 2006; Kent, 2001). The Marine Corps' initial forays were also focused on getting Marines to think critically about warfare and decision-making. This is reflected in this genre of games: those who are best at being inventive with their use of the terrain and material available to them are the most successful at the game. The game itself was apparently extraordinarily difficult and although it was never used in an official capacity, it proved the viability of using off-the-shelf commercial software for training simulators as well as opening up possibilities for more direct cooperation between videogame companies and the military.

Meanwhile, it is during the 1990s that the videogame industry began to really take off, due in no small measure to their increasing use among adults as spurred in part by *Doom's* breakthrough success (Kent, 2001). It was at this time that major corporate players got into the game, so to speak, with Sony's Playstation and Microsoft's Xbox—forcing console giant Nintendo to radically adapt, and ultimately helping push former number two Sega out of the market altogether (*ibid*). In short, the videogame industry was no longer a relatively minor player on the entertainment scene: it had attracted the attention and investment of the world's richest and most powerful corporate and military entities.

It was also around this time that the ties between the commercial industry and the military began to move from haphazard and opportunistic to purposefully integrated with some degree of centralized planning and control:

In December 1996 the National Academy of Sciences hosted a workshop on modeling and simulation aimed at exploring mutual ground for organized cooperation between the entertainment industries and defense. The report stimulated the Army in August 1999 to give \$45 million to the University of Southern California over the next five years to create a research center to develop advanced military simulations. The research center will enlist film studios and video game designers in the effort, with the promise that any technological advances can also be applied to creating more compelling video games and theme park rides. The idea for the new center, called the Institute for Creative Technologies, reflects the fact that although Hollywood and the Pentagon may differ markedly in culture, they now overlap in technology. Moreover, as we have seen, military technology, which once trickled down to civilian use, now often lags behind what is available in games, rides, and movie special effects (Lenoir, 2000: 328).

The Institute for Creative Technologies, or ICT, would prove to be the intellectual and technological cornerstone of the military entertainment complex. It is here—located within the University of Southern California, and only a short drive away from major software companies such as Electronic Arts—that game studio technicians, software wunderkinds and special effects visionaries work together to create ever-improving means of simulating combat or in some cases developing applicable battlefield technologies. The ICT provided a formal apparatus through which companies and interests in the MEC could work together.

But the ICT’s mission does not end there. As Stahl (2003: 120) notes, “Part of the mission of[the ICT] was to institutionalize a symbiosis between the weapons manufacturers and commercial toys. Such cooperation allowed toy manufacturers access to precise specifications for commercial toys.” This synergy has moved beyond the mere ability of toy makers to reproduce accurate renditions of military materiel while weapons contractors received what amounted to free advertising for their own products. Such is the level of cooperation now, that toy makers work with military consultants to create such items as playing cards which commemorate 9/11 and condone U.S. actions in Afghanistan, to play sets which seemingly normalize bombed out and pockmarked civilian houses as being “Military Forward Command Posts” (a real toy which was put on the market in 2003 by EverSparkle) (Stahl, 2010: 118-123).

The U.S. military now enlists not only extremely sophisticated simulation technology to stage war games, but also utilizes the expertise of Disney’s “imagineers” to integrate physical effects into the simulations, and hires Hollywood special effects teams for pyrotechnics and simulated carnage—even going so far as to hire actors to play the part of insurgents, refugees,

and/or victims of collateral damage². Corporate investments in the ICT and other collaborative ventures have been substantial, in the hopes that they will benefit from software improvements and the “up-to-the-minute weapons systems that the public is hungry to test drive” (*ibid*: 97). Hollywood writers were called upon to brainstorm and script scenarios which would provide the basis for military war games—both commercial, military-oriented games as well as scenarios which the military would play out in their own war games training exercises (Halter, 2006). Meanwhile, both Hollywood studios and game companies hire real-life military figures to advise on project development—part of a multi-pronged approach in which “authenticity” is the goal, which includes not only tactics, ballistics, etc., but also, in the case of videogames, the cachet of playing missions that could actually take place. Under these conditions, it is not merely that war has become entertainment, it is that entertainment facilitates war, or at least it helps maintain the U.S. military’s technological edge in preparing for and implementing it.

What this integration reveals is the extent to which research into new and exciting entertainments facilitates military goals, and vice versa. In this environment, and under the auspices of ostensibly opaque developments, actors and interests, the line between marketing and propaganda, between corporate and national security secrets, is increasingly blurred. However it also reveals the extent to which both agendas are affected by market demands—built-in expectations that consumers have about what sort of content they like or want to see more of. Indeed, the production of such content is not the exclusive purview of what we might see as the empowered establishment (game companies, military interests and advisors, etc.). Starting in the late 1990s, FPS gradually moved away from the science fiction and horror genres toward

² Der Derian (2009) describes a scene from the war game “Battle of San Francisco” where veteran soldiers who had lost limbs in battle were called upon to pretend that they had just suffered serious battlefield trauma, replete with gory, oozing legs which had been prepped by Hollywood make-up artists. So realistic were the wounds that soldiers participating in war games thought that these injuries were the result of “fake” pyrotechnics having gone wrong.

featuring increasingly “realistic” scenarios of combat—World War II, Vietnam, the 1991 Gulf War, and particularly conflict surrounding terrorism. Here it is worth reiterating that this trend predates any overt military developments in producing videogames. While undoubtedly the military establishment was all too happy to capitalize on such developments (and the industry all too happy to accommodate player interest in such “realistic” scenarios), the praxis and enjoyment of playing military-oriented FPS was well established among gamers prior to the development of other overt war-themed games by either major corporations or the official military establishment.

Perhaps the most famous example of this is the *Half-Life* mod *Counter-Strike* (1999), which was among the first to feature team play in which the teams were divided into terrorists and counter-terrorists. Although there were no racial or ethnic markers on avatars, initial levels often took place in ostensibly subaltern locales, particularly the Middle East. *Counter-Strike* was created not by a gaming company, but by player/fans Minh "Gooseman" Le and Jess "Cliffe" Cliffe, and was only subsequently developed into a commercial title after the game exploded in popularity (remaining to this day one of the most popular FPS on the market). The basic format of gameplay and context of action cemented generic elements and player understandings which remain in place today, built upon by first tier, blockbuster releases like the *Call of Duty* series. That is, in many crucial respects players themselves were creating the content that they wanted to play, with the industry in the position of either reacting to such developments or utilizing these networks for beta testing new products to figure out what players responded to. In short, players took the mechanics, action and engines of (typically) science fiction scenarios and adapted them for contemporary combat, indicating an interest in playing scenarios which had more immediacy. Curiously, the powerful institutions and interests of the MEC were in some instances playing

catch-up, wishing to capitalize on and ultimately *manage* these trends. It is this issue—leverage in the market—to which we now turn.

Marketing War

Although the integration of various politico-economic elements has offered tremendous synergistic possibilities (i.e. technical aspects of simulation technologies, as well as game companies capitalizing on military expertise and cachet in order to produce successful titles while the military capitalizes on titles which ostensibly increase its cultural capital), from the standpoint of the U.S. military this has also served to create possible problems in terms of issues such as message control and managing the expectations of everyone from recruits to politicians. Shortly after the creation of the ICT, and particularly amped up after the events of September 11, 2001, there were more prominent efforts to exercise more direct intervention in the entertainment market. This included more direct oversight on toy lines and a special edition series of 12-inch dolls modeled on real combat soldiers—replete with descriptions of their exploits and language which bolstered the effort to “defend freedom” in what became the GWOT (see Stahl, 2010).

Perhaps the most notorious development of all occurred within the U.S. Army: the creation of their first in-house FPS, intended for recruitment and education—*America’s Army*. *America’s Army* is the brainchild of Army Col. Casey Wardynski, who came up with the idea circa 2000 after learning about the videogames his sons and their friends were playing. As he describes it, this was a market and interest segment of an important part of the population which

held both great promise and potential drawbacks in terms of what he believed was “bad” information about the Army:

I was just amazed to discover that about 60 percent of the games available involved something that looked like an army. That told me that there's native demand for entertainment that looks like the Army, that's what clinched it . . . The Army game was designed . . . to counter what we think are market failures that increased the national cost of manning the Army with quality soldiers. With game technology we can make something very vivid. We can deliver it into pop culture; we can structure it in a way that was designed for teens 13 and above. So now we're not going to get there last [because of the legal limit on recruiting at age 17], we'll get there about the same time as other ideas for what to do with your life (quoted by Huntemann, 2010: 179).

This quote is revealing in that Col. Wardynski clearly identifies the videogame industry as on the one hand providing products which promote the military in a general sense, but which is on the other hand likely to have or create “market failures”—which I interpret to mean a combination of inaccurate information about the Army’s role and Army training and life, as well as producing or inculcating mindsets which may be incommensurate with what he defines as “Soldiers”, which is clearly a value-laden term. Furthermore, Wardynski worries about “get[ting] there last,” meaning that this is a way of circumventing the legal restrictions on recruitment by competing with other media—media which in Wardynski’s view might either turn potential recruits away or ruin their potential for being “quality soldiers.” Wardynski sought to rectify this, and went to work on accumulating the necessary funding and personnel to develop an Army game in-house. Meanwhile, world events would both radically accelerate his own goals as well as provide impetus among both game developers and gamers for creating many more military-oriented games: the events of September 11, 2001.

Just as Wardynski recognized the need to get the Army brand “out there” and competing with other possible careers in the lives of young men (in theory, “and women,” but in practice clearly this was not a priority), there was a recognition among many within the Pentagon that the events of September 11, 2001 presented an opportunity, as well as a potential problem. The popularity of FPS rapidly soared shortly after 9/11 (Kilgannon, 2002). Quoted in the *New York Times*, Greg Spyridis, editor in chief of Game Monkeys Magazine (www.gamemonkeys.com) said, "We're seeing a massive increase in the desire to play anything antiterrorist, anti-evil-empire. [...] People always write in asking which game to buy, and since Sept. 11 it's been nothing but 'Which game will let me hunt some terrorists?'" (*ibid*). But it was not the commercial gaming industry that ushered in a plethora of FPS titles on the back of this zeitgeist—it was gamers themselves. Therefore this boon was initially confined to the extensive modding communities and related small time developers. As Lowood (2008: 80) notes, "Because mainstream games require 18 to 24 months of intensive development, the game industry could only respond to 9/11 negatively, by delaying games or eliminating content. Players and independent programmers had other options" by immediately creating mods, skins, and other kinds of game content, which also "provided a perception of accuracy through representational verisimilitude." Rushing into the breach, modders quickly created various FPS mods that allowed players to hunt down and kill terrorists (in the creation of games or maps set in places like Afghanistan), or skins for avatars which included Osama bin Laden and even George W. Bush, such that hundreds of such mods were available for free to download and share within only a matter of days after the attacks (Kilgannon, 2002). Evidence suggests that although initially only hardcore FPS players maintained (in fact, intensified) their playing of

these kinds of games, interest among the broader community rapidly accelerated after an initial cooling off period of a handful of weeks in reaction to the events of September 11 (*ibid*).

From the standpoint of the U.S. Army (particularly in terms of recruitment) this was a groundswell on which they had to capitalize. Yet this was an area in which the Army had no meaningful presence, at least in an official capacity, and more importantly it lacked the flexibility to either influence or take advantage of the complicated social ecology of online games and their relationship to software companies, through which user-driven innovation was a crucial aspect of software design (see Hertz, 1999). This is something that Wardynski's team wished to replicate in an "approved" way for *America's Army*.

Finally on July 4, 2002, *America's Army* was released, replete with a comic book series, special edition action figures and other dolls, and an interactive website with links directly to the Army recruitment center, stories of "real heroes" from the battlefield, technical support, and various other media and information. It quickly proved to be among the most popular online FPS games in the world, a popularity which continued to rise with a second version put out in November, 2003. By March 2007 the Army reported that the game had over "8 million registered users, from 60 countries, who have logged over 3 billion player rounds" (U.S. Army, 2007). Undoubtedly some of the success can be attributed to the fact that this was a top-tier FPS available for free download. However the game proved to have a fairly consistent, loyal following and almost certainly helped boost recruitment numbers: according to one estimate, roughly 20 percent of students entering West Point and up to 40 percent of new Army recruits reported having played *America's Army* (Jean, 2006). As Roger Stahl (2010: 109) puts it: "In this new war gaming environment, recruitment has taken on a logic that is entirely harmonious

with the brand, a kind of brand loyalty. *America's Army*, far from being a cultural anomaly, has become one brand among many, where the rhetoric of recruitment has spilled into the broader consumer economy.” In this respect the game was clearly a success for Wardynski and his team. As some critics see it, *America's Army* is a highly successful demonstration of American soft power (Mead, 2004; Nieborg, 2009), and epitomizes the potentially alarming trend where war is holistically consumed in an environment in which patriotism is (further) militarized, while also blasphemously reconfigured as “mere” brand loyalty.

Somewhere in the gray area between purely commercial titles on the one hand and purely Pentagon-developed titles on the other hand lies the controversial game *Kuma\War*, first produced in 2004. This game is produced by Kuma Reality Games, a private company established by former military personnel and which works in close cooperation with the U.S. military. Its main attraction is in recreating missions and battles “ripped from today’s headlines” in a matter of days or weeks, famously recreating the siege on Uday and Qusay Hussein, among many such scenarios, in ways that allow players to simultaneously experience the “reality” of contemporary combat while getting the opportunity to make ludic interventions in counterfactual history. Indeed, Nina B. Huntemann (2010) claims that among the gamers she interviewed, many suggested that the *Kuma\War* games recreated the truth of “how things went down” and how they could have turned out. Halter (2006) notes that *Kuma\War* gives free subscriptions to anyone at a .mil address, that actual soldiers play the game, and that Kuma has featured their comments and stories in its promotional material. Although *Kuma\War* is far less popular than several other commercial titles, it demonstrates both the cross-pollination between the military and commercial videogame industry, as well as the extent to which (ostensibly pro-) military content, ideals and ideology is ensconced in gaming culture. Furthermore, it illustrates the likely

future of games in this genre: increasingly in “real time”, produced as quickly as possible after real events with an eye toward verisimilitude which will make these games exceedingly difficult to discern from the “real thing” (see Stahl, 2010). The obvious issue at hand here is how gameric verisimilitude may obscure (or alternatively, serve to bolster) truth claims about such events.

Furthermore, it is not merely that the market has become militarized, but the rhetoric of recruitment has itself become integral to advertising these games—purchasing and playing a commercial war game becomes, according to its promotional material, an act of volunteering one’s service. The truly strange thing is that while this is a cynical attempt to capitalize on nationalistic and militaristic feelings in the culture, it is also not that far from the truth if one is thereafter compelled to enlist in the military and be trained on simulators which are not entirely dissimilar. It seems the Army is itself quite aware of the synergistic possibilities that are therefore possible, such that, for example, in 2007 and 2008 the Army sponsored an online tournament for Microsoft’s flagship title, *Halo 3* (a science-fiction FPS set on a futuristic world featuring combat between humans and aliens), while also offering “Basic Combat Training” sessions hosted on Xbox Live (Stahl, 2010: 142-143). Clearly the intent of *America’s Army* is to raise the cultural capital of the Army foremost, with recruiting being of nearly equal importance (which is, after all, in some part predicated on the former). Meanwhile similar commercial games may also accomplish this in an incidental way, by trying to capitalize on the high market demand for increasingly “realistic” combat-oriented first person shooters. Seen this way, war and its participants are reduced to consumable items, simulated and represented as “brands” in a churning, competitive market. War is the broader commodity genre or field, where particular titles and/or playing typologies become market niches.

Conclusion: Problematizing Conceptualizations of the MEC

The MEC's integration of technology, funding, personnel, etc. blur the line between warfare and its representation, between its participants and spectators (or perhaps, players), and in some ways between its victims and its perpetrators. It represents not merely a sphere from which for instance both videogames and military simulators are produced. It is also representative of (and facilitates) a process through which citizens' engagement with and experience of war is increasingly "realistic" yet virtualized, where war itself is increasingly mediated, where media are increasingly military weapons. Furthermore, critics allege that the MEC leverages as well as inculcates attributes such as imperialism, xenophobia, jingoism, aestheticized violence, and rewiring the citizenry to accept or even revel in militarism. Based on the popularity of such entertainments, this certainly seems the case.

What is implied in this sort of critique (although in some cases this is suggested outright—cf. Stallabrass, 1996), is that the MEC operates in the manner of Adorno & Horkheimer's (1944) description of the culture industry: empowered interests working together to train a consumer base to appreciate a particular kind of product which transmits the dominant ideology. While there is no denying that this is true as far as it goes, this reading of the MEC downplays the extent to which crucial innovations and understandings were gestated from "below", in the womb of gaming ecologies, evident in such things as the modding cultures surrounding *Quake* and *Counterstrike*, and the explosion of gamer-created games and content and demand put to gaming companies for such content, following 9/11. Furthermore, many important, early innovations were not commissioned or heavily invested in, but rather devised by people who, while nonetheless supported by defense industry funding and occupying a masculinized,

technophilic and techno-phallic intellectual environment, fancied themselves countercultural hackers who merely wanted to fool around and push ahead with computer technology. This suggests, at most, the effects of a militaristic culture industry which precedes the integration and synergy that are the hallmarks of the MEC. To this end, the MEC can be seen as a fundamentally hegemonic realm, where a number of its chief characteristics originate not within the secretive, ruthless corridors of military installations or corporate facilities, but rather the sweaty, messy arcades and (virtual) alleyways of gaming ecologies—all of which inhabit more or less the same ideological swamp.

By itself, this is not a particularly stunning or ameliorating conclusion. We should in fact expect to find that, if indeed there is any such thing as ideology or hegemony, there is an ample market, a willing audience for such entertainments. If it is true that this market, these commodities, are a mainstay of gaming culture and that an overwhelming majority of men play these types of games, then this raises a troubling question: what is the effect on men if an important component of masculinity is having access to and/or being a capable player of combat-oriented FPS? What happens when this militaristic hegemony is literally played out in entertainments which are thought to be much more affective than more traditional forms of media? If these critics are correct in their assessments of the ramifications of the MEC, then some of these ramifications must be that a large portion of the population is increasingly accepting of the military-industrial (entertainment) complex's place in contemporary (consumer) culture, is increasingly accepting of the seemingly problematic content contained in such games, and is increasingly influenced by a worldview which champions perpetual war and conflates military masculinity (i.e. that of the soldier) with masculinity in general.

Troubling as this may be, it nonetheless strikes me as a fairly significant oversimplification of the situation. First of all, we must ask whether and in what way the values described in these games are really present or transmitted. Videogames are far too complex for us to talk merely of content as if it is merely watched—games are apparatuses, and gaming is a process, that is incredibly complex and variegated, as I will clarify in the following chapter. To this end we must consider whether there are spaces for counter-hegemonic interpretations or performances, or by contrast whether these games are as didactic on both the ludic and representational levels as critics suggest. Moreover, if we accept that the effects of the MEC are reciprocal, this suggests that while the MEC gives oxygen to embers in the culture already aglow, at the same time we must also ask: in what ways have gamers/gaming influenced the corporate-military establishment? What gaming ecology sensibilities, aesthetics, ludic affects has the establishment embraced in part or whole? This is not merely about testing the claims of these critics, it is also about generating a fully specified account of the intricacies of this sphere. In short, what does this type of game actually look and play like at ground level? What will a close analysis of the game and its players tell us?

Furthermore, such characterizations of the MEC also overlook (or at least, downplay) what it is that motivates particular innovations here. For example, it seems clear that while the technical breakthroughs of the late 1990s and early 2000s certainly augment the simulative capabilities of combat-oriented videogames, it is also well established that these innovations were largely borne out of efforts to make gameplay more interactive—to make it more “fun” and engaging. While greater interactivity fosters greater verisimilitude that pays dividends for the purported immersive capacities (immanence) of combat simulators, it is by no means clear that

this was the intent, nor that the effect is militarized reflexes and sensibilities rather than some other set of affordances, given the context in which these innovations took place.

Moreover, it is not clear at the outset that enjoyment of these games translates into support for the MEC's establishment or the foreign policy and political economy that keeps it running. Although shortly after 9/11 there was a tremendous hunger for games which allowed players to shoot "terrorists," this may not translate into support for this mission in a direct way. As Huntemann (2010: 233) notes of her interviews with numerous players, they tended to be highly critical of simplistically rendered ideas about the GWOT and used the games primarily for cathartic purposes centered around concern for loved ones. This compels questions about the role nominally gamic affordances have in gameplay (i.e. the ability to perform certain tasks in gamespace which players find particularly enjoyable in ludic terms, or which confer upon them a kind of agency they do not have in "real life"), versus a critical fixation on militaristic acts and content or an ostensible pro-military or pro-American foreign policy viewpoint; and also, is there ultimately a meaningful difference between these two things? In short, this also must be a story about the affordances of gameplay—what players get out of the game, how they understand gamic content and actions, and how we can subsequently categorize different kinds of gamic content.

Also, what sort of masculinity is really being inculcated in these games? By and large the assumptions of many of these critiques move beyond the political dimension of males getting enjoyment out of simulated war which then translates into acceptance of the politico-economic status quo and gives cover to quasi-imperialistic foreign policy. What is also implied here is that there is a link between this enjoyment and the status conferred on soldiers and their job/mission,

that whether through phenomenological congruence or narrative/thematic wish fulfillment, Wardynski's "Soldier" stands in for the ultimate man. More to the point, military masculinity becomes the dominant mode of hegemonic masculinity.

But this overlooks two important qualifications. First, it remains unclear what is meant or implied by military masculinity. Is this the mad heroism of dashing into trenches and machine gun nests, or the stoic and murderous muscularity of characters played by the likes of Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger? Is it embodied in the noble, highly professional, patriotic, and empathetic soldier of the Army recruitment ads, or in the soldier who blithely takes out "bad guys" with ruthless efficiency behind the scope of a sniper rifle or the targeting interface of a Predator drone? Are these America's hero-patriots giving their all for their country, or the weary, but honorable working stiffs doing what they can to ensure the survival of themselves and their comrades? While the military itself is sure to contain elements of all, surely the videogames to which critics refer must suggest a coherent point of view in their content—at the very least, it is implied in the literature that this is so. Therefore this depiction is of central concern to what manner of military masculinity is valorized (if indeed it is valorized at all).

Secondly, gaming ecologies as subcultures are far too dynamic to dismissively categorize as "masculine enclaves" as if this were attached to a singular definition, understanding, or performance of masculinity. Leaving aside whether military masculinity itself is sufficiently monolithic, it is entirely unclear what sort of masculinities reside in the world of gaming. Is this sphere dominated by the technophilic nerd, the competitive virtuoso, the guy's guy, the war porn meathead? Are all of these vying for primacy? Can players take on these roles and discourses as

if trying on so many hats? In short, is there a predominating understanding of masculinity in operation here, and if so what are its features?

In the following chapters, I interrogate these problems. I ask, ultimately, whether and to what extent critics of the MEC have correctly understood military-oriented FPS as both artifacts of the MEC and with respect to the role they play in the lives of the males who play them, which ultimately affects how we understand the MEC itself. In the next chapter, I delve into the complicated process of researching games, detailing theories and methods concerning how to read their “textual” as well as structural elements, as well as how and why the researcher must take into account the social contexts of gaming ecologies.

CHAPTER 2

Game Studies: Theories, Methods and Models for the Study of Games, Gamers and Gaming

Although electronic simulators have been around since the early 1950s and commercial videogames have been around since the 1970s, formal academic inquiry into videogames as a medium and social phenomenon was haphazard and scant until nearly the dawn of the new millennium. That videogames were qualitatively different than other media was early on more or less a consensus view—the interactivity and variety of videogames signaled this from beginning. However considerable debate over how, or whether, to use tools developed in literature, film studies, semiotics, and so on to analyze the visual aspects of the medium (not to mention the psychological, phenomenological and social aspects, which necessarily involve theories and methods from other fields) was and remains central to debates about how we are to understand games and gaming.

The study of videogames is therefore multidisciplinary, but has no specialized “schools” of thought; it necessarily involves the deployment of an array of approaches, yet certain kinds of analyses are expected to draw on specific approaches. As Frans Mäyra (2008, 10) puts it, “...the reality of games and play does not fit in any narrow model. Games, players and their interactions are too complex and interesting in their diversity to allow for all-powerful simplifications.” In this chapter, I will provide a brief review of the intellectual history of game studies, the purpose of which is to provide a discursive and terminological background for the reader which hopefully explains and justifies the particular analytical and empirical approaches of this case study—

approaches which combine ludically-informed textual analysis, (micro)cyberethnography, and phenomenological considerations. I end the chapter by developing a theoretical model that I refer to as spheres of resonance, which maps the ways in which different games in different contexts have different levels of resonance for the players—i.e., different degrees of affective fidelity. It is this model that guides my methods, and which provides the analytical framing of the project.

Game Studies Methods: Delineating Game Text, Subjectivity, and Ecology

There are no hard and fast definitions for what a videogame is. It is almost certainly “digital” (not analog). It is a “game” (representational and governed by a set of rules that delimit actions within the field of play). Its features are that of a “simulation” (having components that represent or imitate the functioning of a place or process). It is “played” (a somewhat contested term, but which corresponds to a course of action in a “game”). To this end, the individual definitional components of videogames have been the objects of study for more than a century (longer, depending on how one “counts” such things).

Ethnographers and historians have been publishing work on games (concerning mainly definitions, uses, and possible cognitive and social outcomes) since the earliest years of the twentieth century (Mäyra, 2008: 6-7), anthropologists and educational scholars have been studying aspects of play with regard to learning and socialization for nearly as long (including theorizing its importance for society more generally [cf. Callois, 1961; Huizinga 1970/1938]), and simulations have been the subject of thoughtful treatments and scholarly attention for

centuries, particularly concerning games which were designed to simulate war for training purposes (Halter, 2006; Mäyra, 2008; Salen, 2008). Research on instructional technology, including on games, has been ongoing since at least the early 1970s (Akilli, 2007).

At the beginning of the 21st the century, the emergent field of game studies began to crystallize around the dueling, but ultimately integrated concepts of narratology (cf. Friedman, 1995; Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2001; Grodal, 2003) and ludology. (cf. Frasca, 1999; Eskelinen, 2001; Moulthrop, 2004; Juul, 2005). In general, narratologists feel that the tools developed in the process of theorizing narrative (via literature, film, and broader structuralist moves) are sufficient to the task. By contrast, ludologists feel that there are certain aspects of games that require analytical tools separate from those already available in the humanities, a claim rooted primarily in the notion that games are rule bound (an observation related to, although by no means derived from, education technology). Presently, game studies practitioners integrate both the structural analysis of ludology with the ostensibly textual or procedural analysis of narratology.

My point here is that the field of game studies comes out of and draws on such antecedents which go far beyond the merely representational and mediated, because at the core of studies on videogames is a concern with the dialectical processes of games, simulations, and play writ large—processes as old as humanity itself. These are processes through which societies come to articulate and understand themselves, through which people are ostensibly socialized. The game is the rule-bound universe; the simulation is the resonating elements to which the game is supposed to correspond; play is the human activity within which people negotiate the rules to affect outcomes to their liking—to win. Therefore studying videogames

necessarily involves much more than merely interpreting their mediated aspects—it means delving into structures, cultural and performative contexts, and the intetextual and inter-contextual meanings that are brought to bear. In the following sections, I briefly describe how the field of game studies deals with games’ representational objects (game text), the ways in which the player is imbricated in gameplay (gaming subjectivity), and the importance of the context(s) of gameplay (gaming ecologies). I wish to make clear that delineating as to which elements belong in which category is not always straightforward. What is instead crucial is *accounting for* such elements in one’s analysis and methods.

Game Text: Representational and Structural Elements

At first glance, describing a game’s text seems straightforward enough: the representational elements in the game. In this respect, at least, games are not typically analyzed differently than other media. However, the limitations of using media studies tools of analysis soon becomes apparent. First, there is the question of how to interpret the meaning of player-generated text and actions. Then there is the question of what to make of the representational differences from one game (or instance, or instant) to the next, based on different player decisions—that is, what to make of the structural boundaries placed on players which either allow greater agency or delimit it, and what to make of the differences. To this end, any consideration of game text must consider the parameters of action: the game rules. Game rules are definite, unambiguous parameters that cannot be easily overcome—trying to do so is how we derive enjoyment from them. Game rules typically consist of two basic ways in which structure and challenge are provided for players: “*emergence* (a number of simple rules combining to

form interesting variations) and...*progression* (separate challenges presented serially)” (Juul, 2005: 5, original emphasis), which can have different values or importance, depending on the game. Therefore accounting for game rules establishes grounds for analyzing both the auspices under which players make particular decisions as well as allowing for analysis of what game rules reveal about particular (ideological) assumptions brought to bear by both designers and players.

Another crucial ludological development was the insistence that the various components of games, and the differentiation of components between different games, requires careful attention; in other words, not all videogames are created equal, and analyzing the game *in toto* is a highly problematic exercise. Along these lines, Consalvo (2003a) insists that while games have “structured polysemy” to perhaps an even greater extent than most other media, the degree to which polysemic readings and performances are available in games is highly dependent on a game's emergent qualities (qua Juul, 2005). The implication here is that not only must one identify emergent features, but ask “how emergent are they?” with consideration to how the game wishes to structure play through its rules and other features of its mediated interface.

This also suggests different gamic elements impose a (possibly constantly shifting) array of signification to which the player is constantly adjusting, and generally speaking these elements are structured according to generic codes. Whether this is according to a “typology” of games whereby certain structural elements are common to all games (rules, verifiable outcomes, meaningful outcomes, etc.) (Jarvinen, 2003; Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnana, 2003), differentiations between types of interactions, mode, or milieu (horror, action, etc.) (King and Kryzwinska, 2002) or “genres of interactivity” which parses the ergodic differences between not

only different games, but different player experiences with the same game (Apperley, 2006), the common thread in these refinements is the attention that must be paid to different types of gamic elements which require different kinds of analytical frames. For example, while two games might both borrow their aesthetics from a cinematic genre such as the war film, there is a dramatic difference in gameplay (and its attendant affordances) between a first person shooter and a turn-based strategy game.

But these analytical formulations, despite their deft methodological sophistication, still have limitations. Although these tools allow the scholar to talk about what such games communicate at the symbolic level, this cannot account for phenomenological and contextual aspects: e.g. no two gaming sessions are alike, gaming contexts differ greatly, and the affective aspects of different videogames are thought to vary widely. What complicates things, in short, is the interactive, iterative qualities of videogames. While some scholars continued to refine ways to “read” the meaning of the gamic elements, others went to work on how certain kinds of elements and gamic structures resulted in certain kinds of practices and performances: what makes a game compelling, where the player directs his attention, and so on. Without understanding the playing as process, it didn’t make a lot of sense to talk about the symbolic elements in isolation. Shortly after this came the realization of the importance of context: not only the physical context in which one plays, but also the meanings and sensibilities brought to bear by gaming culture, or what has come to be known as the “situated” context. Therefore any analysis must also address two other poles of meaning and meaning-making when it comes to games and gaming as an activity: the elements that inculcate a particular kind of player subjectivity, and the social context in which the player “understands” the game and his actions in the gamespace. For our purposes here, I focus mainly on the literature that, while not limited in

its use to analyses of first person shooters, is most applicable to the visual and gamic mechanics of this genre.

Gaming Subjectivity: Immersion, Identification, Hooks, and Flow

Because games are interactive, they require a form of concentration and reaction to the information on the screen in a way that other media do not. The result is that any analysis must guard against relying solely on visual and narrative critiques which do not properly account for the rules-fiction ordering or the specificities of gameplay. Further (and largely without realizing it), contemporary practitioners of game studies echo earlier findings in the field of education technology that gaming is a special activity that invokes a cognitive state whereby certain of the signifying elements of the game recede into the background in terms of semiotic interpretation (cf. Armory, Naicker & Vincent, 1999). That is, a gaming element that might read as a mushroom, say, ceases to be a mushroom as such and is instead addressed merely as an object that must be jumped on—it signifies primarily (or at least, also) as a game object with respect to its game rules function, rather than what it “means” in other respects (though whether this meaning is ignored or whether it is actually internalized is debatable).

Although several different models were developed in order to account for this differentiated attenuation (see Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Lindley & Sennerstein, 2006; Newman, 2002; Squire, 2006), the broad consensus was that gaming requires the player to constantly shift his attention according to the game’s requirements, and that one could, at first, at least, chart this chronologically: reading the game representationally, then shifting focus to learning game

operations (mainly rules and requirements), then shifting focus to the perfection of game operations. Therefore the process of actively playing the game (as opposed to merely watching what happens as one plays) shifts the focus from visually projecting/placing/locating oneself in the game world, to constructing it and affixing it in tandem with the play operations that the game asks the player to perform. This dialectics of player attenuation—shifting back and forth between reading the gamespace as consisting of either “interpreted” objects or “gamic” objects—is something King and Krzywinska (2007: 62) address when they state:

[The ideological associations of a game] can come into play, sometimes quite strongly. But they are never likely to reach a point approaching that of total gameplay saturation. They are bound to recede from consciousness, probably very often, during the implementation of basic gameplay tasks, and in the formulation of broader tactical and strategic approaches in a game...The cognitive demand imposed by these processes is such that they often become the focus of attention in their own right; it is not practicable to imagine them being weighed down, always, moment by moment, by the available contextual associations.

In other words, the nature of gameplay is such that although one must rely to some extent on ideologically loaded representations merely to make sense of the game, the tasks of gameplay require near constant attention, focus, and usually a (gradually learned) semi-unconscious adeptness at the controls vis-a-vis the visual interface (which buttons to push when, what the spacial layout is that allows a player to select tasks, etc.).

This requires accounting for the specific structures and practices that force the player to interpret the space *ludically* rather than in terms of representation, and through which the player may lose a sense of physical self; that is, where he reads the gamespace as if he is more or less “in” it—immersion and identification. Generally speaking, it is widely believed that games which are highly interactive, and which inculcate a greater sense of immersion and identification,

are therefore more intense and have a more significant effect on the player; crucially, these functions usually work in conjunction, such that the games that have the highest levels of immersion and identification tend to be (although are not always) the most interactive. In such ways, identification is thought to be aided by some combination of representation (akin to more traditional media studies notions of identification) and task-oriented engagement with the game, such that the player's actions are effectively the actions of the avatar, and what happens to the avatar is what is happening to the player (cf. Carr, 2002; Hutchinson, 2007; Klimmt, 2003; Lindley and Sennerstein, 2006; Newman, 2002; Squire, 2006). In each case, immersion and identification are assumed to be liminal, and to be brought to bear by particular combinations of game structures and visual representations.

However, where immersion and identification as discussed above deal primarily with a player's subjectivity vis-a-vis the representational and spatial elements of a game, elements such as flow and hooks deal primarily with the ways in which subjectivity per se is evacuated in lieu of the player being "immersed" in the activity of gaming itself. Although these concepts have received far less scholarly attention than immersion and identification, they are not less significant.

Flow (qua Csikszentmihalyi, 1991) is the term used to describe the cognitive and phenomenological state whereby a player proceeds through a game's tasks with little conscious thought to the game's structural or representational elements, or to the input commands required to carry out tasks in the game—where a player's thought is not rooted in conscious interpretation, but rather in the *future-oriented* focus on gamic objectives, in the process losing a sense of time and self. Optimum success at a game, *particularly in a first person shooter with*

constant action, often requires a type of engagement that is quasi-automated and semi-unconscious (see Tronstad, 2007). Therefore flow cannot only be expected of players, it is *required* in order to do well.

Aspects of flow are dependent upon hooks. Hooks are gamic elements which are structured to capture the attention of the player through a feedback loop of goals and rewards which encourage the player to keep playing the game. As Howland (2002: 77-78) notes, games contain different kinds of hooks—action, resource, tactical/strategic, and time—which keep the player interested and for which the player spends the majority of his time. The principle behind a “hook” is that the player can become engrossed in the game in service of these hooks, to the point that satisfying the demand of the hook(s) can become ends in themselves. For instance, a player may know that he cannot do well in the next level of a game if he cannot stock up on resources like ammunition and health, and will therefore devote considerable time—often at considerable risk to the avatar, or by contrast going through the incredibly tedious task of scouring every nook and cranny of a complex map—just to fulfill this obligation. Similarly, players may use a certain vehicle, or gun, or provoke a particular kind of action, merely to enjoy it as an aesthetic pleasure in its own right. As King and Krzywinska (2007) point out, individual hooks can run the gamut between those which inculcate obsessive and compulsive behavior (resource hooks) to hooks which focus more on the aesthetic pleasures of the interface (the sublime effects of movement, landscape, or action effects such as explosions), to hooks which necessarily reward players for finding new ways of being faster, better, more efficient, more uncanny in their finely honed abilities.

As I discuss in more detail in the concluding section of this chapter on spheres of resonance, hooks are therefore also integral to gamers' understanding of the specific pleasures (or irritations) of a game: players may devote hours not only to ensuring (say) that they are at full health, have the right weapon, and are crouched in just the right position to maximize their ability to ambush and annihilate enemies; players may also try to find ways to do this in the most *impressive* or *entertaining* way possible—a meta-commentary on both the game's rules and structures as well as players' expectations about how to do this the “right” way. Hooks can therefore inculcate flow in that fixating on hooks is what can bring players into rhythmic and game-centric activities, but may also become the subject of the player's attention in quite a different way, disrupting the normative interpretation of the game text and focusing instead on the quirkiness of the hooks themselves. Yet in pursuing hooks for their own sake, players may find themselves once more in a state of flow by way of fixating on this “new” or “meta” reading of the hook, due to the levels of practice and concentration it takes to do this.

The point here in talking about this form of gamic subjectivity is not necessarily to quibble over what it should be called or what the precise metrics are for determining when one is or isn't in a state of flow, or whether one is “in” or “out” of the game while engaging with hooks; nor is it to move the terms of analysis of this project from cultural to psychological. The point is that this is a frame of mind, induced by extreme concentration, that may serve to shift the interpretive emphasis from that of interpreting the space *representationally* to interpreting the space *ludically*. As King and Krzywinka (2007: 66) put it, “Contextual associations are likely to slip furthest from view in extreme states of play, at its most heightened and, equally, at its most potentially tedious.” In other words, this indicates another way in which games are not merely visual media to be interpreted by the player, but rather are capable of inducing states in

which it may be that the denotative aspects of an object move from being about what the object is to its gamic function, and where the connotative aspects of an object might disappear altogether. Moreover, the player may be in a state whereby the more “in” the game he is, the less he is apt to consciously “read” it. This is crucial in order to understand or locate gamic elements and/or ludic contexts which therefore affect the *meaning* of the game’s content, and subsequently of player actions.

This is not to say, however, that this state necessarily overrides the semiotic aspects altogether: the power or influence of how something in media is represented to the viewer is not nascent to the viewer’s overt cognitive appraisal of this representation. Rather, the power of myth, as Barthes (1957) argued, is in its ability to be taken for granted, to mean something to the spectator with little or no conscious processing. Therefore it is important to note that although some argue that the virtual self is in a sense just as real as the non-virtual self, this is still more or less a metaphorical or practical realness; it is not as if the two end up being the same thing, for as Rehak (2003: 104) points out: “To blur the distinction between players and their game-generated subjectivities is to bypass pressing questions of ideological mystification and positioning inherent to interactive technologies of the imaginary.” Therefore what the player sees and what he brings to the game cannot therefore be entirely discarded in favor of the mindset of gaming.

However, what this therefore highlights is that, first, the textual content is not under constant inspection by the player, and under such auspices can only resonate at the mythic level. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it is the *ludic structures* of the game which are most capable of transmitting ideological notions, rather than the representative elements. Therefore

when we talk about the impact of a game's content at the level of ideology, we must include the way this can work via a game's mechanics.

All of this interpretation of the game "text" is in aid of individuated experience—i.e., the game apparatus as experienced by singular play. But of course gaming as an activity includes an array of other contexts, including the setting (at home, in an arcade, etc.), the hardware (console, PC, etc.), and in particular the way in which the presence of other players may affect gameplay, in multiplayer and especially massively multiplayer online games. In order to make sound arguments about what players actually do vis-a-vis the text, and whether and in what ways playing with others online affects the gaming experience (and therefore the performative, configurative and interpretive act of play), one needs to address how gaming culture impacts gameplay.

The Importance of Context: Ecologies of Gaming Culture

It may be useful, first of all, to address the phrase "gaming culture." Although there are most definitely common features of "a" gaming culture, that is, a culture of gaming, as we shall see, under certain conditions and in certain instances, there are ways in which "gaming culture" with respect to notions of belonging to a specific community, say, is not quite the same as a "gaming culture" with respect to the more general expectations of playing games, which might more accurately be called a "culture of gaming", let alone the way in which a player can "game" his own culture through particular performative acts. Therefore "gaming culture" is best thought of as a pun. In each case, there are issues concerning boundary work, cultural production

(including game political economy), “real world” relations, and tensions between gamers and the industry. What researchers are essentially trying to get at is the different systems which spring up around a particular species or genre (genus, so as not to mix metaphors) of game, and which suggests an open system which highlights the tension between “the discrete or isolatable and the dynamic and multiplicitous” (Fuller, 2005: 6).

Matthew Fuller, in *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*, utilizes the term “ecology” to draw attention to (and suggest a method for analyzing) the constant vacillation between the local and the global, the micro- and macroscopic. Fuller states that the media ecology “indicate[s] the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter” (Fuller, 2005: 2). This notion also suggests a commitment to the exploration and mapping of the “dynamic interrelations” between the components of the ecology. In the case of videogames, gaming ecologies are composed of the operations of games, software, and players and the wider cultural assemblages through which mutually constituted, reciprocal transfigurations of context are in play. Kline, et al (2003: 53-57) describe this nexus where the player is simultaneously “discursively positioned as a protagonist within a fictional scenario, . . . a ‘user’ of computers and consoles that are increasingly linked to a networked telecommunications environment,” and vacillating between consumer and producer, where the latter deploys “surveillance, prediction, solicitation, and elaborate feedback relations” as ways of attracting consumers. Along similar lines, Katie Salen (2008: 8) argues:

Gaming is play across media, time, social spaces, and networks of meaning; it includes engagement with digital FAQs, paper game guides, parents and siblings, the history of games, other players, as well as the games themselves. It requires players to be fluent in a series of connected literacies that are multimodal, performative, productive, and participatory in nature. It requires an attitude oriented toward risk taking, meaning creation, nonlinear

navigation, problem solving, an understanding of rule structures, and an acknowledgment of agency within that structure, to name but a few. Gaming also requires...a cognitive attitude tied directly to the creative, improvisational, and subversive qualities of play.

Therefore claims about the game text can be extremely limited unless the researcher can draw out something about the context in which the game is played/consumed: the embodied place of play, genre expectations, paratextual material (more of which below), and so on.

While it is probably impossible to know everything there is to know about this in every context, the fundamental point is that some effort should be made to peruse at least one “ecology”, rather than merely one facet of this, particularly for games which have real-time, online components. This raises the question: what are the components of a gaming ecology? For our purposes here, a gaming ecology consists of (1) the game text as described above; (2) the paratexts surrounding a game; (3) the sociotechnical apparatus and social sphere in which players interact with each other in gamic space (separate from the “given” content of the game text); (4) the embodied context in which gameplay transpires (cafes, living rooms, arcades, etc.).

The importance of utilizing (or at least, accounting for in some way) these “exterior” artifacts and contexts is probably most visible in the texts which accompany games. Fan artwork, stories, and other forms of productive sharing vis-a-vis games is of course widespread and well established, differing little in its overall character than the sorts of fan community production that Jenkins (1992) famously observed. Numerous scholars have observed the importance not only of this sort of paraphernalia, but also videogame-specific material such as walkthroughs (Consalvo, 2003b), machinima (Lowood, 2006), and cracks/hacks/mods and other computer programming (Thomas, 2002; Coleman and Dyer-Witheford, 2007). Such material is what Consalvo (2007) refers to as “paratexts”, adapted from Genette (1997). Paratexts refers to

both modifications of the game texts themselves and the surrounding materials that frame players' consumption, experiences and meaning-making vis-a-vis the game. For Consalvo, the term refers specifically to the "communication and artifacts relating to [a game, that] spring up like mushrooms" (2007: 8) around it: they are the texts which analyze and talk *about* the game in question, the information from which players utilize to more easily make progress in a game or unlock its deepest secrets. This includes walkthroughs, cheats, FAQs, mods, codes, and other material which are produced by the game company, ancillary or parasitic third parties, or players themselves. In this way, paratexts is a concept which refers not merely to intertextuality, but also the political economy of the games (i.e. industry practices), participation in global culture, and existing practices of gameplay. Paratexts are hugely important for gameplay "because they shape players' expectations of what it means to play a game properly or improperly" (Consalvo, 2007: 183). Paratexts are therefore also essential to gaming literacy (Salen, 2008) through the ways in which they force the player to confront the special mechanics of the gamic elements and how other players understand and deal with them.

Paratexts also help inculcate particular forms of gameplay that primarily concern sharing, commiseration, and conferring status. As Newman (2005: 62) argues, "Even though the mass market may have access to these games, the 'true' player seeks different pleasures from them. If there is what we might term a 'hardcore' way to play the game, it is this that is fed by the walkthrough and particularly by tests and trials." Looking at the phenomenon of machinima, Lowood (2006) notes that while it may not always be something to which the game designers are sympathetic, it is usually well-regarded by players, whereby the "best" ones are judged not only by the quality of craftsmanship, but also the ways in which the films comment on game content — whether through critique or celebration. Similarly, Newman (2008) notes the phenomenon of

"superplay", which is about demonstrating such incredible skill and mastery of the game so as to demand plaudits from the gaming community. In all of these cases, such play speaks to colloquial understandings of ability and prestige vis-a-vis a game's content and/or gamic elements, and (as alluded to above) quite often calls upon players' mutual understandings of the game's hooks. In short, active game audiences (if audiences is quite the right word) may bring to bear a number of meanings, expectations and even narratives that are primarily fan concocted/oriented.

But of course such resonances are not limited to the paratexts surrounding games, but also inculcated within gamic worlds which are inhabited in real time by online players: the worlds players "inhabit" when they go into games and meet and interact with other avatars who represent real people. In MMORPG games in particular (and to a limited extent in other MMO's and online multiplayer), there are intricate ways in which player actions and discourses are heavily invested in community boundary work, that is, not only community building but also delineating social rules. However in part this is affected by game design—gamespace, game time, communication channels, etc.—known as the "sociotechnical" game apparatus.

For instance, Williams, et al (2006: 357) found that building on the game rules as "foundational," players created for themselves a series of social rules not unlike that found in team sports in which "self-initiated tactics, team strategies, styles, and goals that make the play space a stage for socialization, organization, and networks that often have little to do with the original game," from which Williams, et al conclude that "the locus of control is shared by producer and the consumer-socializers, paralleling many debates within cultural studies." Along similar lines, Jakobssen and Taylor (2003) compare social networks in online games to the

popular cultural conception of the mafia, whereby reputation (particularly of fairness and trust), individual achievement, working well with others, utilizing the skills of oneself and others, and so on is primarily what drives one's reputation within the gamespace, rather than one's gaming abilities per se.

Beyond echoing the work of others regarding the crucial sociotechnical aspects of online play, Taylor (2006b) also notes how "cheating" per se has no particular consistency in how it is defined, whereas the exploits of true power gamers (those who play for extensive stretches of time to maximize their rewards) and gold farmers (those who "grind" in a particular area for hours on end purely to build up in-game capital) seem like cheating to other players, even though both adhere to the game rules as well as terms of use. In these and other such activities, there is a blending of online and offline (or rather, gaming and ostensible non-gaming) activities, where players may feel socially obligated to their gaming peers (Jin and Chee, 2008). Particularly notable in this regard is that Jin and Chee's (2008) research is conducted on "PC bangs" which are gaming establishment hangouts—they are physical gathering spaces for virtual gathering spaces, and the boundaries between these spaces are liminal and negotiated.

This brings up considerations of "offline" or "real world" relations. These relations may not always be visible in the gamespace, but can in some cases have a significant impact on social interaction, whether through collaborative play among a small group who are contributing to a single player game (Schott and Kambouri, 2003) or the ways in which "the online and offline world are interdependent rather than independent" (Li, Jackson and Trees, 2008: 93-94). Relatedly, there has been a recent focus on the specificities of the site of gaming—the limited, embodied space where people play together (whether or not they play the same game). This is a

central feature of Thomas Apperley's work (2007; 2008), who forcefully argues that games are played primarily because they fit the affordances of the situation—and what makes a game “good” for the players is the extent to which it can slot in to the local context.

What is required, therefore, is a holistic consideration of both artifice/apparatus and situated practice, an approach advocated by the likes of Taylor (2006b), Steinkuehler (2006b) and Beollstorff (2006). In this vein, Giddings (2009) proposes a method of “microethnography” as a means of synthesizing the different aspects of game, gameplay, and player.

Microethnography describes “a nonscientific, improvised, opportunistic approach to recording, describing, and analyzing brief moments of everyday technocultural activity” (Giddings, 2009: 149). Microethnography, therefore, is intentionally geared not only toward the “micro” aspects of specific gaming events around a handful of players, but also the constant negotiation of meaning and affect as one plays a game. In order to study gaming culture, one must take into consideration the differing aspects of game structures, “offline” or “real world” meanings and connections, the ethos of gameplay, and the relationship between the political economy of gaming and the players.

Methodologically, game studies therefore includes (at a minimum, although with differing degrees of emphasis) playing the game object(s) of one's research, finding out about other players' connections and experiences, learning about or engaging with paratextual content, and learning about the game's political economy. Crucially, this multidisciplinary approach—especially in light of accounting for contexts—appears now to be the consensus in the field. As Malaby and Burke (2008: 323) note, many contemporary scholars “[Seek] to treat such spaces neither as wholly determined by outside factors nor as utterly *sui generis*, they aim to account for

the contingent and emergent relationship that these spaces have with other domains of human experience.” Doing game studies, therefore, requires thinking through the visual, phenomenological, and ludic aspects as well as embodied contexts in which players play. Although not every study must do all of these things, they are contingencies which must always be kept in mind, ready at hand to develop or deploy as studies move from narrower to broader foci.

It is these methods which guide my own methodology for this project: analyzing the game text using a mixture of media studies and ludological methods, analyzing gamic structures in order to account for certain aspects of player performance, and observing and describing the context(s) of gameplay. Yet contained within these mixed methods there are some uncertainties about how to account for potential discrepancies in the impact of different aspects of games/gaming on the player. First of all, I have established that the chief limitation of textual analysis of games is that representational elements recede to the background in favor of structural aspects, whether in terms of overt concentration on things like game objectives, or whether in terms of states of flow induced in part by gamic rhythm and hooks. Meanwhile, certain of these game structures might themselves either reinforce the ideological aspects of the representational elements, or undermine them. Secondly, although microethnographic research can reveal much about the “everyday technocultural activity” (Giddings, 2009: 149) of players, there is no clear means of establishing analytical categories for these activities—that is, in separating out the relative meaning and valence of interpretation, ludus, and social context.

In perusing such questions while developing this project, I decided that what I needed was a model through which I could (a) make sense of the iterations of ideology, since this is at

the heart of my research questions concerning war and masculinity, especially vis-a-vis the existing research in this area, and (b) easily, but not arbitrarily, move back and forth between the site specific and the broader context, and between the ludic and the representational, without either getting lost in the weeds of analysis or sacrificing one system of meaning for another; that is, to pick out specific moments in any one “level” of the holistic gaming experience that resonated with me, or seems to resonate with other players—to focus on the most affective aspects of the experience of playing COD4. What follows is a description of the considerations of ideology in games/gaming that lead me down this path, and the model I devised in order to deal with this—a model which structures the entire project.

Social Realism, Ideology and Three Spheres of Resonance

So far this chapter has focused mainly on how to “do” game studies: the complicated means of “reading” games’ symbolic and ludic elements, gamic structures which inculcate different kinds of engagement (and therefore presumably effect), meanings brought to bear by paratexts, and the dialectics of social interactions within a sociotechnical apparatus. I have also mentioned “social context” in a way that implies something broader than merely the boundary work one does in every day socialization—it also concerns a context in which the player finds himself thinking, interpreting and doing things as they come “naturally” to him, or toward which the player has normative dispositions. It is the context of the context, as it were: ideology. But how do we conceive of ideological forces at work in a gaming ecology, and which ideological aspects have the most resonance? What happens when an ostensibly “ideological” aspect of a game (e.g. a game which propagates a point of view that is ostensibly supportive of American

military intervention) runs up against a local social context hostile to this point of view, or that may adhere to the broader ideology but which provides gamic space for the polysemy of counterplay, or where popular paratexts ignore or even overtly flout the “preferred” movement or reading of the game? What about the problematic dichotomy of highly immersive (affective) games versus (or in concert with) gamic elements which are ideologically loaded?

Erring too much on the side of the didacticism of the game text runs contrary to recent scholarship on the important aspects of context; but erring too much on the side of contexts runs contrary to nearly the entire project of media studies—treating media as capable of instilling and perpetuating ideology. What is required is a model which provides a means of accounting for the relative intensities of game text, the ontology of gaming, and the social context of play (both within a gaming ecology as well as “broader” social categories such as nation or state). In this last section, I propose a model for the systemic analysis of ideology and affect in gaming ecologies, through what I refer to as different spheres of *resonance*—where the power of differentiated ideological components can be traced through their relative *resonance to the player* in a particular ecology. These spheres are:

- (1) Social fidelity: the fidelity of the social context of players—the every day ideology they already inhabit as well as local social interactions which inflect gameplay;
- (2) Gamic fidelity: the fidelity of specific gamic elements (representational and ludic) which are more or less didactic in their transmission of ideology;

(3) Gamer fidelity: the fidelity of gameplay to local and global expectations concerning things like genre, mode, etc.—whether and to what extent a game adheres to existing understandings of the experiences that the game provides or inculcates.

What I mean by “resonance” is the way in which something resonates—the extent to which players can recognize something as that to which they can relate, based on the normative functions of videogames in particular contexts. Fundamental to my definition of resonance here is its relationship to normativity: the extent to which something seems like “the way it should be” as experienced by or believed by the player. Crucially, “should be” indicates both something which reflects the player’s personal experience of what *is* (e.g. that chair is in the right place) as well as, in broader contexts, the player’s investment in a particular *social* reality (e.g. the U.S. military is the world’s best). Resonance is assumed to be higher when there is a higher degree of “fidelity”, where fidelity implies a certain verisimilitude to an existing, assumed or inhabited context. I use the term “fidelity” instead of the slightly more messy term “realism”, in that in some cases a game’s content may not necessarily reflect “reality” at all, but rather matches up more closely to what players understand to be “realistic” or credible. In short, the relative resonance of a game’s social, gamic or gaming fidelities correspond to the extent to which they do not provoke players’ notice—elements which succeed in keeping players “in the game”, and do not take them “out of the game.” In certain respects, this model builds on previous observations concerning the different ways in which games can be played differently and have different meanings in different contexts. It also builds on work which points out the different ways in which games are capable of transmitting ideology.

For example, Frasca (2003) argues that games operate on three different ideological levels: (1) narrative, representation and events; (2) rules manipulation: what you are able to do, but which is not the ostensible goal of the game; (3) goal rules: what the player must do in order to win, which confers preferences on those goals and social status on the player who achieves/completes them. He also tentatively includes meta-rules: mods and coding manipulation. But Frasca's model leaves out the crucial aspect of differentiations in contexts, as well as a more thorough perusal of which of these levels is or can be more affective. What I hope to accomplish with my model is a means of discerning the possible affective differences between videogame ecologies based on differing degrees of fidelity. Before delving into each of these three spheres of resonance, however, let us quickly examine the different levels at which videogames transmit ideological content.

Games and Ideology

As briefly covered above, videogames have representational elements akin to other media, but also contain structural elements with which the player must interact, and which are also necessarily imbued with meaning. Where analyses of the representational elements are thought to work much the same as other media, structural elements are analyzed based on the ways they determine, confine, or instill particular player actions. I established above how and why multi-method approaches are used in games in order to conduct analysis that takes into account both a videogame's representational as well as ludic or structural elements. In this section I detail what these levels are, and what analyses of different levels yields.

First, there are representational elements at the aesthetic and narrative level. In keeping with the media studies tradition, such analyses are concerned primarily with how things like race, class, sex, gender and so on are depicted (cf. Consalvo, 2003a; Consalvo and Dutton, 2006; Everett and Watkins, 2008; Jenkins, 2003; Leonard, 2003; Van Looy, 2003). The “story” of the game (including its narrative, if it has one) is also important, from the elaborately cinematic character and plot-driven narrative of COD4, to *Space Invaders*’ simple “story”, which is to stop the alien invasion of earth by shooting down the aliens. Although each example is vastly different in terms of complexity, both are providing a context which grounds the player’s actions in the game, and (following from Juul’s [2005] rules-fiction ordering) is crucial for understanding why one should be compelled to play.

Next are analyses that consider how game elements signify at the allegorical level, where representations are clearly intended to stand in for something else, not only in terms of specific representations (cf. Langer, 2008; Kontour, 2009), but also whole spheres of action (Stallabrass, 1993; Wark, 2007). But ideological analyses also tackle the ways in which game rules indicate ideology at work. Ted Friedman (1999) famously argued that the rules in the game *Civilization* dictate to the player that in order to “win” he had to follow the rules, and the rules replicated a model of imperialist expansion, where for example “barbarians” were to be either absorbed or destroyed. Others have noted how the rules-fiction operations of *Civilization* lionize a Western-oriented, teleological view of development and “progress”—utilizing a heavily loaded definition for “civilization” (see Douglas, 2002; Lammes, 2003; Pobłocki, 2002). Summing the ways in which this sort of ideological embedding can occur in videogames, noted scholar and “serious games” maker Gonzalo Frasca (2003) argues:

By stating a rule that defines a winning scenario, the simauthor is claiming that these goals are preferable to their opposite (letting the world crumble apart, leaving the princess behind and sharing our living space with the aliens)...Clearly defined goals do not generally leave much room neither for doubts nor for contesting that particular objective. Not surprisingly all military games are [this way] because they do not admit options that break its binary logic (friend or foe, dead or alive, with us or against us).

Rules delineate player actions, and in so doing confer values on these actions. Julian Stallabrass (1996: 89) argues that just as Adorno claimed that cinema demands assent from the viewer, “In computer games, the player not only identifies with the image but controls it in obedience to strict rules of conduct—or else!, and the sanction is usually a virtual death sentence—so conformity has been extended from assent to action.” It is debatable as to whether, as these three authors imply, these “actionable” ideological elements are more influential than assented ones. However it is nonetheless well established that such elements are at work in games, and therefore these elements require consideration when one is doing an ideological analysis and/or weighing the affective qualities of a game.

Standing at the nexus of game rules and allegory are representational and ludic frameworks which inculcate player actions or dispositions that are in keeping with a broader ideological framework. One of the earliest examples of analyses of this kind is Janet Murray’s comparison of *Tetris* to over-extended lives in late modernity, arguing that “Every game, electronic or otherwise, can be experienced as a symbolic drama,” and that “[keeping] up with the flow” of a game like *Tetris* is akin to the “constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules” (Murray 1997: 142). Although some critics lambasted Murray’s argument as a case of overwrought shoehorning, Murray’s article proved to be influential in providing impetus for subsequent analyses in this vein. Among Murray’s defenders is Ian Bogost, who conceded that Murray’s analysis was

flawed, but defended her overall approach, saying, “Murray’s interpretation takes into account a larger system that the game represents in smaller part, the function of the unit-operational rules of the simulation, and a subjective response to the simulation that embeds an ideology” (Bogost, 2006: 118). Subsequently, numerous scholars illustrated how some videogames’ representational and ludic qualities combined to reiterate and instill economic, social and performative activities which are heavily infused with ideology, such as, for example, the corporate-capitalist features of gameplay in the fantasy MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Aarseth, 2008; Rettberg, 2008; Kontour, 2009; Kücklich, 2009). To this end, games which are not ostensibly connected at all with “real life” nonetheless replicate many of the facets of its tasks and requirements.

These examples illustrate the complexities involved in analyzing games for ideological content, where the different levels at which games disseminate such content complicate things to a significant extent. Further, as noted above, such analyses are limited in that they are largely confined to the game text itself, and so do not address the context in which such games are played (although several studies, it should be noted, have included aspects of participant observation in online environments). King and Krzywinska (2007: 65) note the difficulties in accounting for these variables:

A number of factors can be identified, however, that might influence the extent to which contextual associations are in play, including: different moments of play within any individual game or game genre; the mode of play, including factors such as difficulty settings and the use or otherwise of cheats or walk-throughs; the volume of explicit reference to contextual

material in any individual game; the degree of contentiousness or contemporary resonance of contextual associations; and, crucially, the orientation of players, including their emotional or intellectual investment in character, genre or other aspects of contextual background.

Here their use of “contextual” is expanded to include not merely social or embodied contexts, but also the style of gameplay the player has and other such quirks of (perhaps) individual character.

Thus there seems to be a disconnect between considerations of what sorts of gamic structures, content, and contexts are thought to be the most affective on the one hand, and the relative power or presence of ideological content on the other hand—that is, between games which are phenomenologically affective versus games which are ideologically affective. I provide here a model which attempts to rectify these problems by detailing not only how ideological notions are transmitted or instilled, but how likely they are to *resonate* at the site of play (actually, at different sites of play), or at least, provide a framework for articulating the nuance and complexities involved in the connections between game, player, and gaming contexts. Once again, these spheres of resonance are gamic fidelity, social fidelity, and gamer fidelity. As we shall see, while these spheres are distinct, they are not wholly separate, but rather intimately intertwined.

Social Fidelity

As noted above, the social context in which players engage with videogames plays an important role in how players understand their play, and therefore presumably how they

understand the content of the game. This includes the social sphere of gameplay, whether geographically embodied (arcades, gaming cafes, living rooms, LAN tournaments) or virtually embodied (guilds, groups of friends), and refers not only to the meaning brought to bear by particular in-game social relations (Li, Jackson, and Trees, 2008; Schott and Kambouri, 2004; Taylor, 2006a, 2006b) but also the every day “rhythms” of locales where games are played (Apperley, 2010). But all such social relations are also rooted in a broader social context, at least in situations where (as is mostly, though not always the case) players who play together all inhabit the same *society*: a particular country, language, history, imagined community and/or level of economic and technological development.

Building on these kinds of observations, and tackling the existing shortcomings in thinking through “realisticness” in videogames, Alexander Galloway developed the concept of “social realism” to talk about the affect of the gamer vis-a-vis this broader social context. Galloway (2006) notes the difference between realistic-looking games which are set in overtly fantasy contexts, versus those ostensibly “about” real life, including most military combat games, as well as domestic and sports titles like *The Sims* and the *Madden NFL* series. But his chief concern is with respect to how we should “define realist games as those games that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice” (Galloway 2006: 73). Where most criticisms of “realistic” games understand realism to be about how games “exert ‘realistic’ effects back onto the gamer,” Galloway defines games with social realism as having a “congruence requirement” whereby “[r]ealism in gaming is about the extension of one’s own social life....[through] some type of *fidelity of context* that transliterates itself from the social reality of the gamer, through one’s thumbs, into the game environment and back again” (*ibid*: 78, original emphasis). Games must be understood to be

most affective, he argues, if they meet this congruence requirement in their rendering of the action in which the player must engage:

[This requirement] boils down to the affect of the gamer and whether the game is a dreamy, fantastical diversion from that affect, or whether it is a figurative extension of it. [There must be] a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability of the game to mimic and extend that political reality, thereby satisfying the unrequited desires contained within it...So it is because games are an active medium that realism in gaming requires a special congruence between the social reality depicted in the game and the social reality known and lived by the player (*ibid*: 82).

In other words, games which successfully replicate players' social realities are more highly resonant, more affective, than games which do not.

However Galloway's definition of "realism" here is also somewhat reductionist (or possibly inconsistent), in the extent to which a distinction must be made "between games that are modeled around real events and ones that actually claim to be an extension of real-life struggle (via virtual training sessions or politically utopian fantasies)" (*ibid*: 78). Galloway maintains that games which do not critique or engage with society's realities are not realistic, but I would suggest he has merely identified a way in which some games are more or less socially realist than others. Galloway's mistake is that by insisting that the production of ideological frames are not "realistic" (i.e. how the world really is in every day, lived experience), he is effectively arguing that the way players *understand* the world is not as affective as the way they allegedly *experience* it. That this is not necessarily the case seems evident in the highly variable ways in which people understand the political reasons behind their personal plight. That is, if we are to believe in the existence of such things as ideology or hegemony, most people live lives in which their understanding of reality does not necessarily correspond to reality as it "really" is (a notion

which invokes, for better or worse, the Marxist term of "false consciousness"). A videogame which presents the dominant ideology therefore may be "realistic" in its portrayal according to some players' points of view, but which is nonetheless different in its resonant qualities than a videogame which replicates "real-life struggle." To this end, an American teenager playing *America's Army* and a Palestinian teenager playing Hezbollah's *Special Force* are both playing games through which their respective social realities are transliterated. In the latter case the game is more affective due to the Palestinian teen's proximity to and (likely) direct experience with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (a comparison which may arguably be altered by that American teenager enlisting for combat duty). However this is not to say that the more removed experience of the American teenager does not resonate, or is not "really" realistic—to do so risks dismissing the affective qualities of such games in order to engage in (legitimate, but limiting) semantics. To this end, assessing the resonance of social fidelity must also include looking for content with which the player is likely to be so familiar as to seem normative, such as discursive, thematic or representational clichés.

The other shortcoming to Galloway's argument here is that it sets up a view towards social realism that encounters diminishing returns: if a game cannot be socially realistic enough to suit the direct, lived experience of the player, this therefore may create *more* distance between the player and the game than if the player does not have "lived" experience with the social reality to which the game speaks—a view which ultimately runs contrary to Galloway's ingenious insight about social realism. It is with this in mind that I use the term "social fidelity", therefore, in order to mitigate against conflating (or privileging) the "realisticness" of lived experience with the social reality in which players are ideologically invested, regardless of whether this matches up to reality as it is or as they have experienced it.

Since the vast majority of players cannot, nor will they ever, experience the most highly resonant form of social realism in gaming, our chief concern is therefore with contexts in which the games resonate for players with respect to their social ideology. King and Krzywinska tackle this aspect of FPS, arguing that “To play a first-person shooter is not to be shaped into the role of a shooter. It is to *play at* that role, which is very different. But to ‘play at’ does suggest some potential level of investment in at least some of the resonances that might be associated with the real equivalent” (2006: 201, original emphasis). Later they discuss how the popularity of games in this genre is indicative of a “cultural investment in that kind or mode of behaviour” (*ibid*). But for King and Krzywinska, this investment may not necessarily imbricate the player in his social reality as an *agent* in this social reality—just as games can create pleasure, they can also create frustration and anxiety. Where on an ideological level one could find resonance with the potency and abilities of the hegemon (or, by contrast, the insurgent), one could also find yet another space of humiliation and anger, like (in their example) the Palestinian who plays *Special Force* and is dominated in the game space, compelling King and Krzywinska to ask the question: “Does a powerful impression of agency created within a game reinforce broader cultural/ ideological notions of agency—or does the pleasure involved lie in some level of acknowledgement of the fact that such agency is, precisely, not available in the outside world?” (*ibid*: 206).

Therefore we must consider the *terms* of available actions in accounting for a game’s potential to resonate for the player, and how the player’s experiences with the game (particularly, success or failure) can affect the resonance of the game and/or gameplay. This broadens the analytical framework to include not only the relationship between the game’s representational

and narrative elements and the player's discrete as well as broader social reality, but also the affordances of gameplay that either enhance or undermine the congruence of context.

Gamic Fidelity

Gamic fidelity refers to the ways in which different gamic elements are “realistic” in their rendering. The first component of this is representational fidelity. The most obvious example here would be the photo-realism of high end graphics: landscapes, textures, shading, color, and so on. It can also include things like the soundscape: stereophonic sounds which authentically replicate real-world acoustics work in tandem with graphics to increase realism, while they also add to the immersive qualities of the game by placing the player “in” the gamespace’s physical (as opposed to merely visual) environment. Greater fidelity in this respect necessarily makes things seem more “real” and therefore are more affective. But greater fidelity must also be about the functionality of the gamespace: action, interaction, and the physics of the space (see King and Krzywinska, 2006: 125). This includes of course “real world” understandings of physics, like whether gravity works pretty much as expected, or whether there is congruence between an avatar’s “touch” and the effects this produces on the object being touched (e.g. when a character pushes open a stone door to a hidden passage, how much visible effort this takes, whether the stone grinds against the floor, whether dust and grit can be seen/heard, whether the avatar’s hand makes a slap sound that corresponds to hitting something solid, rough and cold, etc.). This can also include whether something acts or sounds in a way that’s consistent with the internal logic of the gamespace: perhaps a character is capable of walking on clouds, but the clouds themselves nonetheless should not have precisely the same qualities as brick walls, merely

because in this game clouds are “solid.” So it is in these respects that primarily, gamic fidelity concerns mainly making gamic elements “realistic” in terms of their phenomenologically immersive qualities: the extent to which the gamespace is able to draw in the player due to its verisimilitude.

But the “realism” of the representational quality of the game is not merely about whether it renders a “realistic” world in terms of aesthetics or objects—it must also be “realistic” in being a credible rendering of the particular world it depicts. In other words, gamic elements must necessarily be *believable*. This entails rendering a space either as it really is, or that resonates as being “realistic” for the intended audience (although in the latter case this bleeds into aspects of social and/or gamer fidelity, covered below). This last aspect is important, and the way in which it is rendered is subtle. It can of course include things like character (does a character behave like that sort of character would in this particular game?), but it must also necessarily be about the gamespace: the geographic “realities” of a location which simulates another location. King and Krzywinska (2006: 131) note that a simulation of a real-world location, particularly if it is well known, adds an extra dimension of realism and therefore adds to the intensity of the experience.

Presumably elements must also adhere to the internal contextual fidelity of the game world. This is likely to be true regardless of the social or gaming context that players inhabit. Whether the gamespace is someplace the player could ostensibly be or identify with is therefore partly a function of gamic fidelity. That is, a game must be able to replicate a sense of “imaginative immersion” (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005) whereby the player is able to imagine inhabiting the represented game space through interpretation: it has to “make sense” either on its

own terms or through its ability to render a world with which the player has some familiarity. As an extreme example, the most finely detailed and accurate rendering of a McDonald's restaurant would not be "realistic" on the surface of Mars, whereas a "realistic" crater of immense size might be—even if in the latter case this is not something with which the player has direct experience (and indeed until a few years ago, the presence of small geological features known as "blueberries", which actually exist on the surface of Mars, would not have seemed realistic). But less extreme examples abound, and this is where ideology can slip into such renderings: just as news reports and cinematographic depictions undoubtedly frame things, so too do simulated spaces. Therefore we may well ask, in assessing a game's fidelity, what its framing devices are, and what utility these framing devices serve in the effort to render a high fidelity gamespace—and perhaps more importantly, what "realistic" games choose to omit.

Many FPS, for example, feature urban landscapes filled with rubble, pock marks, smoking craters, etc. Some either explicitly replicate real-world locales, or render places which adhere to all the salient features of a real place to such a degree that they effectively convey the "reality" of that space to the extent that is deemed necessary for it to seem "real." This might include, for example, street signs, cars, plants, food, character archetypes, architecture and other details that indicate to the player where this place is supposed to be, even if that *specific* place exists only as an entirely created, virtual world. Weapons are usually rendered with a high degree of fidelity, not only in terms of appearance, but also ballistic performance and the quirks of sites, recoil, and the manner and time it takes to reload. Extremely few FPS, however, show truly realistic effects of combat on human bodies, most do not show civilians (alive or dead), and so on. Where some aspects of the combat zone are rendered in extremely high fidelity, others are

either not particularly realistic or they are completely absent, often in ways that are totally incommensurate with the technical capabilities of the game.

Why this might be and what it means is a discussion that will be had in subsequent chapters. For now, it is enough to note that this is a feature of the way in which gamic fidelity has contextual components which are part of the “realism” of the gamic elements. Therefore analyses must take into account these elements so as to discern what arguments the game is making through its contextual frames, which may ultimately be the argument that the game, as a simulation, is making about reality (whether its own reality, or reality proper). The extent to which this resonates with the player, of course, is dependent not only on the degree of gamic fidelity, but also on the context(s) in which players play.

Gamer Fidelity

Where a game’s social fidelity resonates at rooted, specific geographies and social realities, gamer fidelity, by contrast, refers to mores which are more or less universal to all regular players. That is, how universal (or near universal) expectations and understandings about specific games and game genres operate, and how this influences the way in which particular gamic elements, player actions, and social interactions are interpreted. For players who could be described or who see themselves as “gamers”, there are certain expectations about what a game is supposed to do or provide, and, following from this, what certain player actions signify to other players. For example, most games have common features such as clear goals, delineated action and space, power-ups, etc. Game series and genres have certain elements and tropes

which are featured in some capacity in each game, and therefore players who are familiar with them come to rely on them. This becomes important for our understanding of resonances in two ways: (1) the ways in which established gamic elements and tropes are themselves often ideologically loaded; (2) these elements and tropes frame and inform how players interpret certain actions and events in games—both in terms of how players react to actions and events with respect to commonly held understandings among gamers, as well as the possibility of their mistaking generic elements for realism. While at first this may seem highly contradictory, both trends can work in tandem in inculcating highly resonant gamer fidelity.

First of all, as alluded to above, players learn to read gamic actions and events in ways that suit the particular affordances of play. For example (as will be covered in more detail later on), in COD4, when a player shoots another player, “death” is signaled by an ostentatious blood splatter—prior to this, all wounds are denoted only with a distinctive “piff” sound. What is diegetically an example of a fairly gory end to someone’s life becomes read by the player as “success” in terminating another player. As Gareth Schott notes in his excellent study of the ways players interpret violence, “When textual detail is exhibited in virtual combat, as for example, enemies stumble backwards having sustained a shot to the shoulder or are felled by a shot to the leg, it also serves to reconfirm the players’ embodied presence as they witness the impact and accuracy of their aim” (2009, online). Greater textual detail here therefore at one level represents increasingly realistic renderings of carnage (or what have you). But in terms of gamer fidelity, such instances resonate as signifiers of a player’s agency and evidence of his actions in gamespace. The more detailed this is, in fact, the more the player focuses his attention on more and more details, which become “meaningful” in terms of determining what course of action the player must pursue next. Similarly, Reeves, Brown and Laurier (2009: 224) argue that

“Although environments such as those found in [FPS game *Counter-Strike*] are three-dimensionally complex and visually rich, their real complexity is in the play of the game with others, whether they are team members or wily opponents.” To this end, gamic actions and events are read by the player mainly in terms of how they determine or affect the player’s play, and how this jibes with other players’ tactics and strategies in manipulating and/or maneuvering in the gamespace.

When games do not adhere to an established structure, or do not contain key elements that players have come to expect, by contrast such events may take players “out of the game”, in two ways. First, the presence of new or eccentric material forces the player to concentrate more on the objectives and elements, because this is unfamiliar. For example, in a FPS a player immediately understands some of the basic setups, even if the specific actions to accomplish this are unfamiliar: targets to shoot, a first person point of view, a barrel or site to look down, status data on things like health and ammunition, and so on. A game which does not look like this or have these things takes some time to learn, and therefore the player’s focus will be primarily fixated on making whatever adjustments are necessary to play the game on its own terms. Secondly, such features can frustrate players and thereby call attention to these aspects—and if the player is focused on these unique features (particularly if the player is aggravated by them), this again takes the player “out of the game.” If on the other hand gamic events and features come “naturally,” then the player can more readily become immersed into the game. At the same time, however, these generic elements are what provide the framework for players to interpret and understand theirs and others’ actions in gamespace. That is, players’ ability to master, bend or (in certain instances) become victims of the generic elements frames the way in which players understand their play.

This is particularly evident in paratexts (see Consalvo 2007). Lowood (2006) notes that a common feature of machinima is its commentary on gamic elements or commonly held understandings of the game, which usually (although not always) largely ignore both the “official” or preferred interpretation of the game as well as what one might call a broader critical stance concerning these elements. Along similar lines, cheating (particularly if it is overt, as a kind of anti-social performance) draws attention not only to the specific game rules, but also social rules that govern players’ concepts of what is or is not acceptable play (see Consalvo, 2007; Taylor, 2006a). Mods and other kinds of changes brought to the text can also be crucial in framing players’ understanding of their play, from absurdist fare like creating an avatar skin for a combat game that makes the avatar appear as a Smurf, to server administrators equipping all players with shotguns or RPG’s, which drastically changes the tactics and flow of the game as it would otherwise be under normal circumstances. As discussed above, often this sort of engagement with the game draws on players’ understanding and appreciation of gamic hooks (Howland, 2002; King and Krzywinska, 2007), which results in players playing games specifically toward these ends, rather than played in the “usual” way: speed runs, high difficulty settings, and other means of setting goals and trying to impress other players of one’s abilities and expertise.

In this vein, one can point to the proliferation of Youtube clips of recorded gaming sessions which document extreme examples of skill or luck (good and bad). For example, the game *Halo 3* allows players to build their own battle arenas, filling them with various objects such as crates, cones, etc., and which all react in “realistic” ways when force is applied to them (i.e. they adhere to normal laws of physics). This sparked a fad whereby players would rig Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions designed as extremely elaborate suicide machines (i.e. player

avatars who would set physical reactions in motion, then await their deaths). The more elaborate the machines, the greater esteem in which players were held. Similarly, there are many clips from sessions of *Modern Warfare 2* which depict either extremely improbable kills/deaths (blind knife throws all the way across the map that hit home, uncanny 360 degree turn and jump sniper shots, etc.), or extraordinary examples of domination and humiliation (players who sneak up behind an unsuspecting player, take the time to type and send an instant message saying “Look behind you,” and then kill that player when s/he finally reads the message and turns around). This latter aspect is particularly important in that game events which in a diegetic sense might depict a cruel, gruesome combat death, might resonate at the level of gamer fidelity as being an extremely hilarious instance of gaming ineptitude meeting arrogant proficiency. But it also highlights the generic conventions of how a player is supposed to demonstrate success at the game: staying hidden, locating and terminating the enemy, maximizing one’s efficiency and lethality, etc.

Such instances of self-referentiality highlight both the importance of generic elements to the gaming community as well as illustrate how polysemic these elements are. This is closely related to the observations mentioned above about how signifying elements of the game recede into the background (Armory, 1999; Lindley and Sennerstein, 2006; King and Krzywinska, 2007) and how challenge-based immersion is different in kind to immersion inculcated via other means (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Mäyrä, 2008). However, here signification is not abandoned, ignored or internalized as such—it is re-routed to suit the needs and understandings brought to bear by gamer fidelity. To this end gamic elements are never completely shorn of their ideological content, but in most instances it is not representation in the traditional sense that compels the dominant mode of interpretation, but rather the way in which these elements are

in service of gamer fidelity: representations which are ideologically loaded are also *gamically* or *ludically* loaded. On the one hand, gamer fidelity by way of familiarity makes the ideological components potentially more insidious, because they are slotted into an existing, expected framework, and the more familiar it is, the less the player has to think about what he has to do, and the less he has to think about it, the more normative it becomes. On the other hand, gamer fidelity via social interaction and paratexts can be a means of altering (or repressing) the preferred or even inculcated movement or reading, in that the way the game speaks to gamer sensibilities (or at least, the way in which players might interpret the game as “gamers”) may become the predominating mode of interpretation (e.g., “I want to go out and humiliate a specific team member, and so I have to play the game in a particular way, and in-game actions and events must therefore be read in relation to this goal”). In this way players can establish goals that have relatively little or nothing to do with the social or gamic fidelity of the text.

At first glance, players’ relationship to generic elements would therefore seem to set up a contradiction in terms of resonance: the ability of generic elements to be more immersive in one sense (resonating at in the sphere of gamer fidelity) yet take players out of the preferred movement or reading of the text (its social fidelity)—undermining one purported effect of immersion. What this in fact highlights is the limitation of using immersion as a theoretical tool. Immersion is a means through which unconscious *phenomenological* affect can be inculcated; but that doesn’t necessarily mean that *interpretation* is unconscious in the same way—we cannot make the gross generalization that the “unconscious” aspects of immersion means players are being uncritical. The polysemy of representations therefore register at all three levels of fidelity, often simultaneously, although possibly not to the same extent in either cognition or affect. Further, one can be immersed in the game toward meeting the affordances of gamer fidelity (i.e.

immersed in the process of maximally adhering to whatever actions the generic elements require), which resonates differently from (although is not inimical to, nor necessarily wholly separate from) social and gamic fidelity. This is where accounting for gamer fidelity becomes key: (1) games with high degrees of social and/or gamic fidelity may resonate less if they do not have generic conventions which resonate at the level of gamer fidelity; (2) even in instances where gamic and social fidelity are high, players may be primarily fixated on the meanings brought to bear by gamer fidelity, rather than reflecting on the fidelity of the other spheres.

To some extent this undermines prior claims about the relative resonance of ideological components on the gamic and social levels. But there is another component to gamer fidelity where ideology more clearly comes to the fore, in that players become accustomed to the ways in which the generic elements cater to certain kinds of affordances—what seems “realistic” to the players may not necessarily be games which accurately render (say) what happens or is likely to happen in combat, but rather games which, even in becoming more “realistic” in terms of gamic fidelity, accommodate the sorts of actions that players find credible as a *simulation* of combat. For example, what happens when the gamer fidelity (rendering a space so as to best accommodate gameplay in a particular genre) and the gamic fidelity (rendering the gamic world as “believable”) have the same features? Rubble and burned out cars provide useful cover and obstacles, and are common features of the genre to be read as cover by experienced players, but they also correspond to news media coverage of war zones (and through which it is easy to make the mistake of treating this as a “realistic” rendering of a war zone). Similarly, the results that certain weapons might have may seem or become “realistic” to the player according to his gaming experiences, but which may or may not resemble those results or capabilities in combat

(e.g. the effectiveness of snipers, the capabilities of helicopter gunships, or perhaps the surveillance capabilities of a UAV (Uncrewed Air Vehicle)).

In certain respects, such details may seem, practically speaking, unimportant: how many of these players' ideological notions revolve around such things? However this principle bleeds out into broader contexts, like the logistical capabilities of the U.S. military, including whether any mistakes are made in identifying the enemy or planning for operations, communications and firepower capabilities, etc. This leads us to consider two different kinds of gamer fidelity with respect to gamic elements: (1) whether these elements are consistent with the intrinsic features of the game or genre; (2) whether these elements are consistent with a player's understanding of the world depicted in the game (both in terms of gamer fidelity and social fidelity)—the game may or may not reflect the *reality* of a particular situation or scenario, only seem credible according to the player's experiences or expectations. In the former case, this might be whether a laser blast “sounds” like a laser blast, even though nobody has ever actually heard a “real” laser blast; in the latter case, it might be whether a war zone seems “realistic,” even if almost no players have actually witnessed this. Either suggests not only a certain degree of intertextuality (perhaps ultimately based on the “real” sound of legendary Star Wars sound engineer Ben Burtt taking a hammer to an antenna tower guy-wire³, or of “authentic” combat footage), but also a certain degree of investment in created, mediated, virtual worlds—gamer fidelity is as “real” to them as anything else. In such cases, gamer fidelity exerts a tremendous impact on resonance, because videogames which do not cater to these expectations will not resonate, will not “ring

³ This is the method Burtt used to produce the now iconic sound of a blaster (the hand-held laser gun) for *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977).

true.” Effectively, the generic conventions become more “real” to the player than reality, or rather, *agon* frames the representation, genre infringes on verisimilitude.

Conclusion and Summary of Methods

For this case study, I am drawing on established scholarship in the field of game studies, which has compelled me to pursue my research in a particular way. First, I am drawing on established theories and methods for analyzing game “text” in assessing the representational, ludic, and phenomenological qualities of the game content and presentation. Secondly, I am compelled to study ethnographic aspects of the game, which includes participant observation in gamespace, “community” understandings which are present and inculcated in paratexts (i.e. secondary material produced by players which accompanies the official game text, such as walkthroughs, machinima, etc.), and a small sample of “embodied” participant observation in a specific geographic context, which I hope to demonstrate is representative regarding my claims about this game.

In pursuing this research, I logged several hundred hours playing COD4, in both single player and multiplayer modes. I also examined several dozen machinima made from COD4, as well as trawled through various forums and walkthroughs dedicated to the game. I also conducted an on-site microethnographic analysis in a cybercafe in Dunedin, New Zealand. I chose to conduct this study here for a number of reasons. First, New Zealand is a mainly Anglophone country with a significant “white settler” majority (somewhat more than 70%), a

significant “brown” or “black”⁴ minority of indigenous Māori (roughly 15%) and the rest of the population composed of a wide variety of nationalities and racial ethnic groups, particularly from Southeast Asia (The Social Report, 2010), and indicators such as health and wealth disparities between the white majority and brown/black minority are similar in kind and extent as those in the United States. This demographic comparison cannot of course be direct, but it is nonetheless instructive of comparable “white” hegemony in each country. Furthermore, the two countries are both categorized as part of the West in terms of global politics and economic development, share roots in English corporate, government and cultural institutions, and share similar levels of socio-technical attributes such as internet usage, and (with the recent exception of the U.S. invasion of Iraq) deploy their militaries in much the same way, and often in the same spheres (New Zealand’s deployment of combat troops to both Vietnam and Afghanistan serve as useful examples). Also, most New Zealanders are familiar with (and ambivalent toward) American culture, meaning they understand well American cultural tropes and sensibilities, though they may or may not share them. Finally, broad cultural understandings of masculinity operate according to similar modes as those in the United States, but are somewhat more extreme by comparison, with a greater emphasis on stoicism, hardship, mateship, and the authenticity of manual labor (see Campbell, 2009; Law, 2008; Liepens, 2009; MacLean, 1999; Park, 2000).

In short, I expected the extensive similarities between the two countries would allow me to focus on two areas in which New Zealand should provide a useful point of contrast: similarly rooted notions of masculinity which nonetheless are if anything more traditionalist; familiarity with American cultural tropes would suggest that these would be recognized and may resonate as

⁴ Māori are alternately described, by themselves and others, as brown or black in reference to skin color.

such, but they are unlikely to be similarly normative—meaning that New Zealand players may be in a better position to notice and be critical of such tropes. For this part of the research I logged a total of eight visits to this cybercafe, each time spending between three and five hours here. From my post, typically at the far end of the main room of the cybercafe, I would alternately play COD4 and pretend to play while watching other players. Occasionally, I would wander away from my terminal altogether and watch over the shoulders of other players, usually from the center of the room near the television, as an uninvited (but rarely unwanted) observer.

Finally, I have developed a model of spheres of resonance which I believe provides a means of getting at the ways in which different aspects of gameplay resonate for players. What a serious consideration of these different spheres of resonance allows the researcher to do is find a nuanced way of accounting for both phenomenological and social affect, and therefore point towards possible effects. The *exact* extent of affect is probably ultimately unsolvable/unknowable, and anyway effects are not a central concern of this project. However, this model further allows the researcher to link player responses, behaviors and discourses to particular elements and meanings as they resonate in different spheres, accounting for not only polysemy, but opening up a means of tracing meanings and situating them in the appropriate context. This also allows the researcher to differentiate between meanings which truly are as varied as each individual player, versus meanings that may be transcendent.

In the following chapters, I will use this model to chart the specific resonances within the FPS genre, which foregrounds my empirical work on *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. As will become apparent, this model will provide a useful means of understanding the broader social understandings of war and masculinity as well as masculinity and gaming; it will serve to

illustrate the gamic elements (representational and ludic) which are at work in this game; and it highlights the complexities of gamer behaviors and understandings as they are inculcated in the gaming ecology.

CHAPTER 3

The Social Fidelity of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

As described in the previous chapter, social fidelity refers to the fidelity of the social context of players—the every day ideology they already inhabit as well as local social understandings which inflect gameplay. This of course includes social relations rooted in a broader social context, at least in situations where (as is mostly, though not always the case) players who play together all inhabit the same society: a particular country, language, history, imagined community and/or level of economic and technological development. But it therefore also includes social understandings brought to bear by shared cultural touchstones, which in a gaming context more than likely includes knowledge of other games as well as other media, particularly movies and television. Therefore an important aspect of social fidelity is the way in which a game may evoke or replicate mediated social understandings—where games are intertextual and players maintain a certain level of cultural literacy. This is not to say, of course, that we can assume a certain level of cultural literacy among players, although we can make assumptions of the likelihood that certain *types* of content may resonate with players, based on a combination of demographics and the relative notoriety of particular types of content. In short, social fidelity, while potentially the most nebulous and unwieldy of the three spheres of resonance, helps establish the likely auspices under which game content is interpreted.

My analytical framework for social fidelity therefore works to establish the resonance of particular elements in the game which draw on broader ideological notions about the status, role

and performance of military masculinity, inculcated through a variety of media, from popular national discourses to action movies. Therefore this framework includes not only micro-level features of military masculinity such as bodily discipline⁵, but also macro-level features such as the tie between military masculinity and the state; that is, elements which evoke not only masculine attributes of individuals, but also masculine attributes of the nation (especially in times of war). Whether such notions are consistent or cogent is not as important as the extent to which they are both well known (i.e., established in the scholarship and/or something that “everybody knows”) and feature prominently in the game text. I argue that in creating a compelling game with a story told from a first person perspective, the narrative, thematic and representational elements of COD4 depict military masculinity in its most distilled, extreme form—that is, well-worn tropes of military masculinity are intensified by the game’s “hero” structure in both narrative and gamic terms. What follows is an assessment of the chief qualities of military masculinity as they are socially inscribed, along with an analysis of how specific notions of military masculinity are represented in particular game elements. In order to present this material in such a way as to make it sensible to the reader, I begin with a description of the plot and overall themes of the game’s single player campaign. Once this is covered, we can move on to a specific discussion of depictions of military masculinity.

⁵ At this point “bodily discipline” refers merely to the specific practices of physical conditioning required by military training, although I later invoke “discipline” in the Foucauldian sense of an internalized technology of the self.

“A James Bond Movie Directed by Jerry Bruckheimer”: The Story of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

Fade in from black, English-accented male voice: “Fifty thousand people used to live here. Now it’s a ghost town.” A crane shot pulls back to reveal an abandoned amusement park under a grey sky. Lettering appears at the bottom of the screen: “Prypiat, Ukraine. Chernobyl Outskirts.” As the shot lingers on this ghostly scene, another male voice, angry, with a thick Russian accent, remarks: “Our so-called leaders prostituted us to the West. They destroyed our culture, our economies, our honor.” Troops dressed in Soviet-era camouflage patrol a nearby field, accompanied by a handful of Russian-made armored vehicles. The scene then abruptly cuts to a squadron of American AH-1 Cobra attack helicopters firing missiles into an anonymous Middle Eastern city, as a female voice, sounding eerily like CNN anchor Christiane Amanpour, fades in: “. . . revolution, U.S. marines, stationed on high alert, were given the order to invade a small . . .” her voice fading out under the din of a troop transport helicopter, which emerges from the smoke and disgorges a squad of prowling marines. Suddenly, rapid cuts—a firefight aboard a container ship at sea, turmoil in the streets of an anonymous Middle Eastern city (including roadside executions carried out by men in red berets), and flashes of incredible combat intensity in myriad locales, featuring a cacophony of explosions, zinging bullets, falling bodies, and shouted commands. The action slows to focus in on a bald man of indeterminate ethnicity, who is eventually revealed in the game to be Imran Zakhaev, an “Ultranationalist” who wishes to return his country (it is not clear whether this is Russia or an ex-Soviet satellite) to the glory of the Soviet Union. Zakhaev then says, “Just as they have laid waste to our country, we shall lay waste to theirs.” On the last several words, two ICBM’s are seen rocketing into a pink, dawn sky, accompanied by the sound of a throbbing heartbeat. Then more flashes of conflict and chaos

ensue, eventually reaching a shocking climax: a mushroom cloud billows up from the center of a Middle Eastern city, scattering and destroying American helicopters in its wake. As the shockwave rolls past the screen, cut to black. Then the computerized title appears: *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

So opens Infinity Ward's *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. It depicts a "near future" world which is on the brink of catastrophe. To put it mildly, this is a fairly dramatic story line: Russia is in civil war, and its Ultranationalist faction is passing nukes to a Middle Eastern country that, although unnamed, appears from satellite shots within the game to encompass what is at least Saudi Arabia and most of Iraq; the U.S. invades this country; a nuke goes off in the capital city, wiping out not only the city itself but much of the U.S. forces operating there; and ICBM's are launched toward the continental U.S., when our heroes (i.e. the player and fellow characters) manage to battle their way into the facility and transmit deactivation codes. This is the scenario which grounds the game and provides the context for gameplay, and as such is well ensconced within the military-oriented, FPS genre with respect to the heroic narrative, high stakes, and action-oriented missions which progress the plot. The game draws heavily on contemporary international tensions and conflicts, and firmly establishes itself on the side of the status quo: a world order in which the U.S. and UK deploy troops and utilize special forces, more or less at their choosing, to combat the emergent and imminent threat of those who aspire to annihilate the West (or at least, radically alter the world order)—and in this scenario, these foes may have the means to do so. In fact, it is a world in which both radical Muslim revolutionaries and ex-Soviet dissidents are not merely enemies of the Anglo-American West, but effectively the *same* enemy, to the extent that they have managed to align their goals and capabilities against the Anglo-American West. The game not only renders political and military

scenarios which must play in the nightmares (or possibly fantasies) of the neoconservative mind; it also infuses this geopolitics with a muscular and unapologetic Orientalism (more of which below).

In single player mode, this includes serving in a dual role in both the British SAS and the USMC 1st Force Recon, in which each mission is a chapter, in what are literally referred to as Acts, that advance the plot as the player progresses. In multiplayer mode, players are able to play, in different maps, as a soldier in any of the four major forces featured in the single player campaign, which in addition to the two aforementioned are the anonymous, Middle Eastern “Opfor” (a generic term for opposing forces) and Spetsnaz (the Russian special forces). I wish to make clear that the structure of the game is such that in order to advance in the game in single player mode, one must complete mission objectives and basically “follow the plot” in advancing gameplay. That is, while there is a marked difference between the cinematic aspects of cut scenes and level interstitials on the one hand and gameplay on the other, there is also relatively little that the player can do by way of protean or elastic experiential play in the single player campaign. One can refuse violence and be killed and have to start over; one can explore the space, but only to a limited extent, since there are physical obstacles which prevent the player from leaving the battlefield altogether or finding a path which deviates from the intended narrative or mission requirements; one can kill enemies wantonly or haphazardly, but they will continue to crop up until one advances on their position and follows through on what the game (and the gamic characters) compel one to do; one can shoot one’s comrades in missions, but after a few grunts in (surprisingly mild) reaction to being shot, the player’s screen will blur and he will receive a notice that says, “Friendly Fire Will Not Be Tolerated!” and the player either re-starts

the level or goes back to the previous checkpoint⁶; and so on. What follows, therefore, is a reading of the game's didactic elements; a thorough analysis of the ways in which players react to these, undermine them, take them on, or otherwise utilize them will be covered in the following chapters.

Tropes of Military Masculinity in COD4

Although “military masculinity” is but one type of masculinity, in many respects it exemplifies the utmost ideals of what is usually deemed traditional or hegemonic masculinity, often in a highly distilled form due to the high stakes of war. As Braudy (2003: xvi) argues, “By its emphasis on the physical prowess of men enhanced by their machines, by its distillation of national identity into the abrupt contrast between winning and losing, war enforces an extreme version of male behavior as the ideal model for all such behavior.” To this end there is an array of traits which cohabit as attributes of both masculinity and martial conduct.

While there may be some fairly common, verging on universal, masculine attributes in the military, this is not necessarily wholly uniform. Where some attributes have remained more or less in place for centuries (at least in the West), others have emerged in reaction to new social developments and the personnel and technological makeup of the military. There are now multiple masculinities at stake and in play in the military, in part because of the influence and impact of women in the military and/or the impact of the military on women (both inside and outside the military), and especially because of the changing nature of military labor. Personal

⁶ There is, however, a glitch in the game wherein players can enable themselves to frag fellow AI soldiers with impunity, a fact which will be covered in the following chapter (see IVIlikeH0nch0, 2008).

and social identities have become more in flux, "Thus, the making of what might be called military gender is a practical, continuous, social accomplishment" (Higate, 2003: xiii). It is at the meeting of "traditional" constructions of military manhood, new and varied genders, and the state's socio-political requirements of military masculinity (the meaning of war, sacrifice, patriotism, etc.), that military masculinity is struggled over and ultimately forged.

In the following sub-sections I will detail a few of the more immanent traits of what we might call military masculinity, including both personal attributes and their relationship to the state and civil society, and how these are depicted in the game text. What I wish to accomplish here is twofold. First, in detailing what the attributes of military masculinity are, I am providing some historical context which bolsters my sense that these are attributes which would resonate as aspects of players' social fidelity, whether present in the "ether" of society or as a feature of popular (media) culture to which players are likely to have access. These are attributes which are both expected of military masculinity and values which are conferred upon it—the "complete" performance, if you will. Second, I link this context with specific game elements, detailing the ways in which such notions occur (or not) in the game text. I want to reiterate here that I cannot know for certain the specific social worlds that players inhabit; rather, I treat such elements and notions as emblematic of hegemonic norms inculcated in American society and culture. Their relative resonance, therefore, is no more or less assumed than with any ideological analysis of media.

Race and Nation: Defining the Self Through the Other

It should come as no surprise that military masculinity is not something which operates through all men equally. In its most visible and celebrated, it both reflects and reinforces the stratification of American society, particularly with respect to race and sexuality: “inferior” or undesirable men must either conform or be expunged. However in the insistence that military men must be the “best”, this also suggests that ideal masculinity is not a given but instead requires constant maintenance and refinement, whereby there is a mandate to vigilantly man the defenses, if you pardon the pun. To this end, it is not controversial to state that in a historical sense, the American fighting man has had not only the array of qualities listed above, but is also, in the mind’s eye of the nation, a heterosexual, “white” man—where whiteness is an unstable, but idealized category, defined by the dark, negative space around it. What is required in stating or assuming this, however, is some historical understanding of how this came to be, and the structures, discourses, and in certain cases specific events and contingencies which helped to create and prop up this notion, including the subtle ways in which that same normativity—white heterosexuality—still holds a position of dominance today.

In her superbly detailed history *National Manhood* (1998), Dana D. Nelson begins by framing American history in ways quite similar to treatments usually reserved for so-called Postcolonial societies: the importance of “othering” in cultural/civilizational encounters, the complicated delineation (geographic, symbolic, socio-economic, psychological) of “the nation”, the role of violence, etc. Nelson begins her treatment by a careful examination of the Lewis and Clark expedition, arguing that it establishes a framework through which the United States comes to understand itself, and which, with the help of institutions like fraternal orders and the

formulation of the capitalistic managerial structure, provides a foundation for an emergent national manhood. President Thomas Jefferson directed Lewis and Clark to conduct limited anthropology on the Indian groups they encountered, which

. . . offered a field for the science of human difference, a site for civilizing operations...For Jefferson ‘the Indian’ offered flexible, imaginative spaces to the physical as well as psychological territorializing of U.S. identity. Defining ‘Indians’ provided an opportunity for scientifically validating whiteness qua civilization, pedagogically mapping it for the body politic while extending it politically across the continent (Nelson, 1998: 66-67).

It is in this way that the encounter with the other works primarily to confirm the subject (white masculinity via the nation), which is totalizing and happens at every turn. The series of binaries fills in and fully renders what was heretofore a less stable notion of national masculinity. Nelson encapsulates this process in the term “Inindianation.” One might even say that American (white) masculinity *needs* the “Injun” in order to exist—tropes which still resonate more than a century later in Hollywood Westerns. Nelson also relates an anecdote regarding the Lewis and Clark expedition’s refusal to stay away from a mound that apparently had vicious “Little Spirits” on it:

In this pedagogical contrast, between ‘our’ understanding and Indian silliness, there is no place to consider that the story might well have been fabricated to keep the expedition away from a sacred site. Rather, the mound offers at once the vantage of geographical survey and the advantage of confirmed, heroic rationality to the Corps of Discovery and to the nation it stands for (Nelson, 1998: 83).

That it is possible that the expedition could mistake naivety (that the expedition would fall for the ruse) for guilelessness (that the Indians necessarily believe such things) is suggestive. Further, the combination of “scientific” mission and cultural certitude has a kind of snowball effect: white masculinity and nation are bound together, and signal, via technological

superiority/rationality and knowledge, civilizational superiority. Each component legitimates the other in a circular fashion: we are better men because we have better things; we have better things because we are better men. This cultural logic proved to be quite powerful in light of American westward expansion, where native peoples ultimately succumbed to the superior technological might and masculine grit of the white man⁷.

With the death of the Frontier and arrival of masses of immigrants near the end of the 19th century came new means of shoring up white national manhood, both through techniques of governmentality (cf. Hannah, 2008) as well as localized movements such as Muscular Christianity and broader trends such as the rise of the social and natural sciences (cf. Connell, 2003; Ching-Liang Low, 1996; Dawson, 1994; Nelson, 1999; Said, 1979). Masculinity (explicitly and implicitly white) was empowered through science to describe not so much what its own qualities were, but rather what these others lacked.

However, warfare still remained an important proving ground for masculinity as well, and the centrality of whiteness to nationhood played out in such conflicts as the Spanish-American War, where “the use of [the term] ‘smoked Yankees’ [black troops] implicitly defines ‘real Yankees’ as both a biological racial category and a political historical category, denoting the exclusive originating power and present capacity for self-government” (Kaplan 1993/1999: 229). Such terms reaffirm a whiteness, which can be defined against “color” in the face of significant immigration, allowing formerly despised ethnicities such as Irish and Italian can claim the mantle of “whiteness” (and by extension “Americanness”). To this end, it is also important in consolidating a national manhood which can be called upon to act in massive numbers in the era

⁷ That the vast majority of American Indians died in this era due to disease, particularly in heavily populated areas like the Ohio River valley, which may have posed a significant impediment to westward expansion had they been at full strength, is of course a somewhat less manly story.

of industrialized warfare. Describing the way in which American soldiers were (bodily) molded in World War II, Jarvis (2004: 5) writes:

In addition to being shot at, American male bodies were physically examined, classified, categorized, disciplined, clothed in particular uniforms, sexualized via venereal disease screenings, and subject to numerous other processes by the military and other institutions. Servicemen's bodies were racially marked by the military's Jim Crow policies, which segregated units and disproportionately assigned tasks on the basis of skin color. Moreover, representations of particular male bodies— young, well-muscled, white— were privileged as the U.S. symbolically rebuilt its body politic and prepared for war. Establishing the dominant model of American masculinity as white and able-bodied also helped create a range of alternate, marginalized masculinities that departed from this norm.

Notably, it is not white men per se that defend the nation, but a particular incarnation of white masculinity that symbolizes the ideal defender. To this end, the “look” of a soldier as being “young, well-muscled and white” was not necessarily merely a factor of having many more “white” bodies on hand, or part of a conscious effort to de-legitimize the contributions of men of color (although no doubt these were significant factors). Rather, the ways in which the nation has been understood as being defended by (and therefore circumscribed by) white masculinity is rooted in a centuries-long effort to conflate whiteness, nationhood and masculinity—all three of which must be constantly defined against an enemy which possesses qualities in opposition to them.

For example, the anger directed at “Islamic extremists” in carrying out the attack was immediately infused with racial and sexual epithets. As Puar & Rai (2002) note, there is a plethora of material through which the enemy was depicted, as they describe it, “monster-terrorist-fags” who are the recipients of vengeful sodomy, among other things. Moreover, it casts the conflict between the United States and terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in stark terms of

gender and sexuality, where heteronormativity and masculine virility are implicitly American and “good”, and the bad guys are deviant (and vice versa): “American retaliation promises to emasculate bin Laden and turn him into a fag. This promise not only suggests that if you’re not for the war, you’re a fag, it also incites violence against queers and specifically queers of color” (Puar & Rai, 2002: 126). This deviant and/or feminized male has its extension in domestic politics: to be against war in such times as these is also to be a “wimp” or a “surrender monkey” (with its dehumanizing connotations), as well as conveniently associated with the political left and therefore a “pinko”—that most feminizing color.

The flipside of emasculating enemies foreign and domestic is of course shoring up the normative (hegemonic) masculinity of “real” Americans who either backed or participated in the counter-strike against Al Qaeda (and later, against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq). A number of critics argue that this ethos was heavily inflected with older tropes of white patriarchy, returning as if from the grave with a vengeance. Kusz (2007: 78-79) describes such discourses, in part articulated at the highest reaches of the American political establishment, thus:

Bush’s hyper-masculinist rhetoric and imagery (drawing from the conventional masculinist codes and imagery of the old west and *Top Gun*), which tapped into, as it cultivated, American (White) men’s conjuncturally specific desire to ‘man up’ and once again feel like ‘real men,’ was not only used as the cultural conduit to drum up popular support for his war on terror, but it simultaneously played a key role in setting the stage to initiate this racial project to resecure a central and normative position for White masculinity in American culture and society in the name of patriotism and love of country. In the name of doing things for ‘the American people,’ this White nationalist racial project promotes a revival of ‘traditional American values’ and the return of an unapologetic pride in America that conservatives claim has been eroding since the social protests and upheavals of the 60s. Of course, this apparent nostalgia for America is really just code for creating and maintaining the optimal conditions for White

patriarchal global capitalism and the undermining of the minimal gains made by historically marginalized groups since the 1960s.

Kusz is referring to the way in which “America”—its people, mission, history, and national character—was described by (predominantly right-leaning) commentators, politicians, and other media and entertainment figures, adhering in general to a framework which drew on American cultural and institutional traditions as harbingers (or representatives) of American exceptionalism.

The point here is not so much to insist that men can only be patriotic on “white” terms (although there are elements of this that cannot be ignored, to be sure). It is rather to emphasize that in necessarily othering the enemy, this othering usually takes the form of creating a racial and/or emasculated other (which may include domestic “enemies” who do not “support the troops”) as well as solidifying an image of the patriotic American man as possessing the necessary masculine qualities that the enemy lacks—a process of reiterating the binaries which serve to consolidate national manhood along its historical lines. As Lott (1993/1999: 275-276) puts it:

In examining the racial unconscious of American imperial whiteness, I assume...that the connection between internal and international is intimate. If national esteem in racial matters is related to international prestige—the ability to wield power among foreign races—it is also (or therefore) the case that representations of national racial difference often provide displaced maps for international ones. Not to put too fine a point on it, the domination of international others has depended on mastering the other at home—and in oneself: an internal colonization whose achievement is fragile at best and which is often exceeded or threatened by the gender and racial arrangements on which it depends.

This worldview is heavily steeped in ideology in keeping with the terms of “national manhood” as defined above by Nelson (1998), and also operates on unacknowledged racial terms:

First, most subjects of American intervention are peoples of color, and the racial history of the United States makes it easier to dehumanize and do away with them. Second, American political culture came into being by defining itself in racist terms. And third, categories that originated in racial opposition were also imposed on political opponents, creating an American political demonology (Rogin, 1993/1999: 510).

This is therefore a white masculinity which operates from a position of global as well as national dominance, and does so hegemonically. Military masculinity is therefore signified through “masculinist moral capital” which appears in both sport and militarism, and draws deeply from the well of the moral authority vested in conservative notions of the strict father and the nation as family, which is closely linked to a notion of whiteness that “is more strongly associated [than other racial categories] with the capital of moral character and moral strength” (*ibid*: 103).

Here it is also worth mentioning that ethnic minorities are grossly under-represented in American special forces units (Kirby, Harrell & Sloan, 2000), which tend to be, as noted above, the most highly regarded both socially and militarily. In fact elite special forces in the U.S. military are (or perhaps were—more recent figures are seemingly unavailable) nearly all white (Crawley, 2000). Therefore media such as films and video games which valorize the exploits of America’s elite fighting forces as being the most manly, heroic, etc., are nearly to a man valorizing the exploits of white men. Although this is not necessarily damning in and of itself (these media are merely reflecting, largely without comment, the reality of the situation), the troubling flipside of this is the implied notion that either men of color are not capable of joining the ranks of the elite corps (lacking in smarts, grit, discipline, etc.), or that it is *undesirable* that

they do so. A quick thought experiment underscores the asymmetry in social acceptance likely to greet a predominantly black or brown special forces. In fact, it is precisely the diversity of regular combat units which emphasizes the unease mainstream America still has with black masculinity: in a post-Civil Rights era (meaning also, post-Malcolm X, post-Black Panthers), all-black units today would probably be regarded by significant portions of the white population as suspicious and possibly dangerous. Much the same goes for all-Latino or something on the order of all-Muslim units. All-white (and probably often, all-Christian) units, however, particularly the most elite, are by contrast presumed to be inherently acting with only the noblest intentions in “our” interests. While “white” manhood girds American notions of military masculinity, certainly any conscious articulation of this is currently strictly taboo, or, ironically, undermines American myths of pluralism, democracy, freedom, hope, and “civilization.” In short, multiculturalism provides evidence of the superiority of American institutions and character, yet this is a value which is still ultimately articulated on terms dictated by white hegemony. In sum, American hegemonic masculinity—particularly with respect to military masculinity insofar as the soldier represents the masculinity of the nation—was and to some extent remains heavily (in)vested in whiteness.

Such racial-nationalist discourses certainly operate in COD4, particularly with respect to, as I demonstrate below, the othering of enemy masculinity. This is accomplished not only in the the look of soldiers in the game (underscored by key instances of dialogue), but also in their performance, which in some respects are merely gamic functions. That is, the blending of stereotype with function in gamespace (all under the rubric of “baddie”) amplifies the othering process and works to solidify the self-other in both gamic, narrative, and ultimately ideological terms.

To begin with, nearly all the Middle Eastern enemies (at least, the ones whose faces are not mostly obscured by head garb), have faces adorned with mustaches and prickly five o'clock shadows—"swarthy" is a word that immediately leaps to mind. One or two SAS soldiers also have half-grown facial hair, but the appearance is much more that of a specially styled, unshaved look (the "sexy" look) rather than being unkempt. None of the American soldiers have significant facial hair. Moreover, enemies are not consistently in full uniform, which is to say they tend to have various styles of dress and do not appear orderly: half-open shirts, some with helmets, some with berets, some with scarves, some without any headgear at all, some with body armor, but most without, and so on. To be sure, these are fairly standard stereotypes that in part serve as shorthand in order to advance in the game: shoot these guys, not those guys. Nonetheless it is telling that these are the particular traits singled out for this purpose: the player is intended to identify with the clearly more professional, and not "dirty" soldiers.

But of course such depictions are not limited merely to personal upkeep. The operational practices of the British and American soldiers display an efficiency and professionalism that their foes appear to lack. Both Russian and Middle-Eastern enemies fight determinedly and proficiently, but frequently make mistakes—ill-timed charges, failure to check around corners or on their flanks, and so on. The Middle-Eastern troops are particularly notorious for wildly and blindly firing—usually around a corner or from behind a partially closed door, and all enemies commonly display bizarre histrionics when they are shot, such as spinning in agony, firing their fully automatic rifles in an airborne arc as they fall to the ground⁸. British and American soldiers, by contrast, die far more prosaically: they are fatally wounded and they fall down

⁸ Even if this depiction is based on the actual behavior of professional soldiers that the U.S. and U.K. have encountered in the Middle East and/or the contrasting professionalism of American and British soldiers, it nonetheless resembles bad guys in cartoonish action films, and reinforces a hierarchy and inculcates subject-object positioning vis-a-vis the player.

without incident. Undoubtedly such elements serve fairly benign functions: the blind fire and ineptitude of the enemy is a classic example of stacking the deck in the player's favor, common to nearly all FPS; portraying enemy deaths ostentatiously satisfies the player's sense of accomplishment, while portraying friendly deaths prosaically may simply be a tactic to avoid getting into trouble with the ESRB by making the game too intense or politically problematic. However, these choices have a politics to them insofar as they exacerbate ostensible racism.

There is something to be said for the fact that the American forces, at least, are fairly diverse: although the majority of soldiers appear ethnically white, there are a number of dark-skinned characters (not least Sgt. Griggs, who appears and sounds—in both tone and manner of speech—African-American) as well as nods to diversity in the use of Latin names. In this respect, at least, one may be very hard pressed to suggest that the game draws on white masculinity as its baseline understanding of the American fighting man.

However, I argue that it is precisely this diversity which highlights the complications of racial and nationalist discourse surrounding the GWOT: it is the Americans' racial diversity which identifies them as indelibly American in the face of a unitary enemy who are nearly indistinguishable from each other. One can see a (clean, well kept) black, white or Latino and know that he is not an Arab—therefore the game still trades on aspects of the racist discourses leveled at the Orient as described in the literature above. At the same time, however, while “whiteness” is unraveled from the core signification of the American fighting man, it is his mark of “diversity” which signify American myths of pluralism, democracy, freedom, hope, and “civilization” in the face of Arab (and, one cannot but assume) Muslim authoritarianism, backwardness and barbarism.

It is in this last aspect—that of “us” versus “them”—that the game’s quasi-Orientalist features come to the fore. Ostensibly the Middle Eastern revolutionaries are overthrowing their Western-backed dictator and wish to seek self-determination, while the Ultranationalists are leveraging this turmoil to further their own plans to break away from Russia (or perhaps take it over, this is unclear), return to an era of superpower dominance, and in the process make the West pay. But in depicting how this all unfolds, the game manages to conflate both the motives and peoples involved in this struggle.

For example, in a speech given during the opening credit sequence of the game, revolutionary leader Al-Asad says, “As one people, we shall free our brethren from the yoke of foreign oppression!” Who these brethren are is left unstated, but in context it seems unlikely that he is referring merely to other citizens of his country. Rather, this implies pan-Arab or pan-Islamic aspirations. The missions set in the un-named Middle Eastern country, while clearly left anonymous by the game makers so as to avoid political problems, nonetheless manage to underscore a notion of pan-Arab uprising. None of the locales in which fighting takes place are ever referred to by name, however where they appear on the satellite map is revealing. One location is set on the west coast of Saudi Arabia, and in its layout (although not its specific location), it closely resembles parts of Mecca. Another series of battles takes place in the center of Saudi Arabia, which is nearby (although isn’t quite at) Riyadh, while the very first Marine invasion mission takes place in what can only be Kuwait’s coast. Intriguingly, the location of the capital city changes, as well: at first the location is on Saudi Arabia’s west coast, but in the chapter “Shock and Awe,” audio from news reports indicates that US troops are “closing in on Al-Asad in the capital city,” and after the nuclear explosion the satellite interstitial shows a blast radius and billowing smoke emanating from what could be the Iran-Iraq border just north of

Basra. Whether anonymous or specific, the impression one gets is an entire region aflame, where national, regional and/or ethnic divisions and alliances are nonetheless completely unspecified.

Similarly, Zakhaev continually refers to “my country” and “my people” but who or where he is referring to is entirely unclear. The chapters in which SAS troops are fighting Russian Ultrationalists take place in two regions: the Caucasus and the Altai Mountains. In the former case, most chapters do not specify which particular parts of the Caucasus the player is fighting, although the chapter “Safehouse” is specifically mentioned as taking place in Azerbaijan—whether this is because the Ultrationalists happen to have operations based there, or whether Azerbaijan is a part of the Russian civil war is never stated. Similarly, the chapters which take place in the Altai range (from which Zakhaev launches two ICBM’s) do not clarify whether this is in territory belonging to Russia, Kazakhstan, or Mongolia (this is not made very clear by the satellite interstitial, either).

The effect, therefore, is that of enemies and populaces who are easily lumped together, and particularly in the case of the Middle East, by refusing to identify a specific people or country, this un-named country and people stand in for the entire Middle East, right down to specific spots on the satellite map which stretch across at least three or four actual countries. It is hard to avoid the impression, therefore, that this un-named Middle Eastern country may encompass, whole or in part, every Arab country south and east of Jordan. Similarly, the domain of the Ultrationalists (or bases set up in ostensibly “safe” territory for their operations) span from the Caucasus to the eastern edges of Russia proper. Because the people, state, and motivations of these anonymous peoples are not specified, it is impossible for the player to make any distinctions, meaning that it is both unimportant to make distinctions, and on the flip side of

the coin, that there are no distinctions to be made—by standing in for no specific people or state, this could be *any* Russian, Arab and/or Muslim people or state, perhaps even *all* people and/or states of Central Asia. This assumed uniformity, which at once plays off of generalizations about (and/or ignorance of) the Orient, is combined with a broad sense of (largely de-constextualized) militant hatred to give impetus to military intervention.

Although there are certainly political dimensions to this, I would like to stress that in a sense this is a *de-politicization* of events, where specific countries or policies *don't matter*: what matters is that *those guys over there* serve as a foil against “our” guys (who have both countries and names—even the smallest characters have names). Crucially, the game is utterly devoid of civilians (even though a large percentage of combat takes place in urban areas), and there are no women except for one Marine helicopter pilot (whose presence is significant, discussed below). In short, from the depiction of individual soldiers, to the qualities of whole regions, the (all male) enemy is represented in stereotypes and afforded a form of gamic inferiority that has consequences for the construction of the martial masculinity that the player assumes (in both senses of the word “assumes”). Where this text unambiguously rejects “whiteness” as a prerequisite for idealized military masculinity, it nonetheless still leverages something akin to Nelson’s (1999) notion of “inindianation”: constructing an ignoble and “uncivilized” enemy against which a national (military) manhood can be pitted.

Mental and Physical Toughness

There is no question that the rigors of combat require both mental and physical toughness, which requires the soldier to control one's fear, overcome significant physical and psychological barriers/threats, utilize and control aggression, and take on a certain degree of risk. That said, how "toughness" gets defined with respect to such tasks, and how particular values become attached to this, is of considerable significance in tying such qualities to military masculinity. If we put this in different language, we can see where several of these ostensible military traits may also be thought of as essentially "masculine": stoicism (Bradley & Phillips, 1992), the domination of weaker individuals (Rogers, 1988), and competitiveness and heroic achievement (Braudy, 2003). It is along these lines that traits which ensure operational success and individual and unit survival/cohesion become indelibly tied to a type of masculine performance.

For instance, in documenting the activities and attitudes of the British SAS, Tony Geraghty (1980: 262) notes: "The essential qualities needed for weeks and perhaps months in isolation were initiative; self-discipline; independence of mind; ability to work unsupervised; stamina; patience; and a sense of humour...they cling to the tribal security of a four man patrol with total loyalty." Woodward (2003: 44) adds to this, asserting that a broad consensus among various scholars is that the core of gendered practices in the military include: "[P]ride in physical prowess, particularly the ability to withstand physical hardships; aggressive heterosexuality and homophobia, combined with a celebration of homosociability within the team; the ability to deploy controlled physical aggression; and a commitment to the completion of assigned tasks with minimal complaint." Clearly there is an emphasis on traits which are thought to promote

battlefield success both at the individual and unit levels, where both individual (heroic) action and unit (coordinated) cohesion are vital—and cohesion tends to be defined by hegemonic norms.

This deliberate blurring of military and masculine performance is of course not incidental—it is made quite overt, as testing one's manhood has long been a motivation to fight in war (see Goldstein, 2001). Speaking of the British Ministry of Defence's marketing campaigns, which share significant similarities to those of the U.S. military, Hockey (2003: 15) notes:

The UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) publicity available to those aspiring to become infantrymen at the time of the research heavily stressed an image co-relating being a man and being a combat soldier. This action image, the epitome of aggressive masculinity, is still being used by the MoD in its current recruitment literature. Although as part of its definition of the soldierly role the MoD publicity now stresses learning a skill or an occupation, particularly in relation to technical corps (signals, engineers, etc.), the appeal to masculinity remains central to how it portrays the infantryman and his life.

Moreover, Basic Training constitutes a rite of passage, not only from civilian to soldier, but also from boy to man, where "real men" are stoic, aggressive, do not complain, and chase women; women are by contrast deemed weak, emotional, and prone to complaining (*ibid*: 16). As Kovitz (2003) notes, discussions about women's ability to serve necessarily revolve around essential differences (some legitimate issues of biology, some not), and particularly (ultimately) how well they serve in combat, even though combat roles are increasingly rare, and even though in actual combat physiological sex differences matter much less now than ever before. One possibility is that it is precisely because of the inclusion of women, alternative masculinities, and the changing nature of military labor, that masculine boundary work becomes *more* important, particularly for elite combat units like the special operations forces. To this end, combat

personnel in the special operations forces are the *most* masculinized of all possible military masculinities, or rather, they are seen to be the most manly. This is ultimately the ideological undercurrent running through this: yes, the toughest, most daring, most under pressure, and most violent; but also the most cunning, the most adept, the most in control, and (as will be addressed more fully below) those with the best equipment and most high tech gadgets at their disposal. It is no accident that most “modern warfare” FPS focus on the exploits of Special Forces soldiers to the exclusion of other enlisted roles and classes.

These notions are at the very center of the established world of COD4: all of the missions are played while on one of two special forces squads in the game: USMC 1st Force Recon, and the British SAS. To be sure, there is little question over the physical abilities of these troops: well trained and at peak physical condition, their ability to run, jump, pounce, repel, crouch, etc. to do what they need to do is uncontroversial. Furthermore, it stands to reason that such troops would be superbly focused on their mission, capable in combat, and able to manage incredible amounts of stress. But there are several key moments throughout the single player campaign that reveal something much more than merely a realistic portrayal of the men who make up the Special Forces. That is, it is not so much what they say or do as they way in which they do it.

At the very beginning of the campaign, the player hears the voices of two of the main characters, SAS officers Captain Price and Gaz. While they are talking, a satellite view establishes in turn the locations of the antagonists to which the officers refer, alternating from Russia, the Caucasuses, the Middle East, and finally zooming in to England. Their wry dialogue immediately sets the tone for the game:

Gaz: Good news first, the world's in great shape. We've got a civil war in Russia, government loyalists against ultranationalist rebels, and 15,000 nukes at stake.

Captain Price [sounding uncannily like a droll Ringo Starr]: Just another day at the office.

Gaz: Khaled Al-Asad, currently the second most powerful man in the Middle East. Word on the street is he's got the minerals to be the top dog down there...Intel's keeping an eye on him.

Captain Price: And the bad news?

Gaz: We've got a new guy joining us today, fresh out of Selection. His name's Soap.

There are a few noteworthy implications in this exchange. The blithe, cocky attitude that these men display includes bluster in the face of frightening global developments, confidence in their ability to handle whatever they are likely to face, and gentle condescension toward new recruits—the latter implying norms of combat experience, proficiency, mettle, camaraderie and hazing. It is a type of masculine display well established in other media such as action films, and it continues to feature as integral to the personalities of these and other characters in the game. Even the player's avatar can in one instance join in: as Soap McTavish, after dispatching an attacking dog by breaking its neck, a voice says, “Down, boy” (the only instance I could find of a “voice” for the player). Throughout subsequent missions, Gaz and Captain Price in particular are wont to elicit cocky certitudes and especially wry assessments of the situation in which they repeatedly find themselves: outnumbered, outgunned, and typically in the tactically more difficult position. Yet they speak as if they have the enemy right where they want them.

This is the dry, cool wit of an action hero, and is revisited (and re-emphasized) in the “Epilogue” mission that runs after the game's end credits, after it appears these men have been killed at the end of the game (indicating that this is probably a flashback, which puts a somewhat

wistful spin on the proceedings). In this mission, the SAS squad is tucked away in the air vent of a private jet, and must fight their way to the front of the jet in order to secure their target (naturally, by capturing him and jumping out of the plane). The mission begins in pitch blackness with this exchange:

Captain Price: We're going deep, and we're going hard.

Gaz: Surely you can't be serious.

Captain Price: I am serious. And don't call me Shirley.

Of course, the pun is a reference to this same famous line from the film *Airplane!* (1980), which is fitting enough since the mission is on an airplane. But between this and the sexual innuendo, the exchange is dripping with a playful, masculinized jocularity which eschews all fear and uncertainty, said mere moments before the player must take part in a highly intense, running gun battle at 30,000 feet.

The American troops are cocksure in a slightly different way: utterly certain of their abilities and, although certainly not as jokey or blokey as the British troops, can often be heard making sarcastic comments about the situation in which they find themselves or regarding the abilities of the enemy. To some extent the differences here have cultural aspects, but to a greater extent they seem to be much more an artifact of a different kind of activity—whereas much of the SAS missions involve stealth and conversational time between high intensity combat, the missions of the Marines are full scale battles. This difference is later underscored during the SAS and USMC joint missions. When the squad is airdropped into the Altai Mountains, Marine Sgt. Griggs is separated, and the mission begins by trying to track him down and rescue him

from the enemy. Upon finding Griggs, who has been tied to a chair, roughed up and questioned, the following exchange takes place:

Sgt. Griggs: 'Bout time. I was beginning to think you guys were gonna leave me.

Captain Price: I thought about it, but your arse has the C4.

The key aspect to Griggs' attitude is not only what he says, but how he says it: in a jokingly accusatory manner, implying that the rest of the squad took their sweet time. Griggs acts as if his temporary captivity and undergoing apparent torture has had no effect on him, and shrugs it off as if he were merely patiently awaiting the arrival of the rest of his squad. In fact upon being untied, he leaps to his feet and shakes his arms and head like a prizefighter immediately before the start of a round.

This blithe attitude to imminent danger is probably in its most extreme form near the end of the game. As the satellite interstitial shows the squad headed away from the ICBM facility (which in the previous mission they infiltrated, sustained heavy casualties, and ultimately were successful in beaming deactivation codes to the launched missiles), an American voice notifies the team that their primary evacuation point has been compromised, and they must proceed to the secondary point, then ending by saying in dark tones: "Enemy presence: substantial."

Immediately after this, the player overhears the following exchange:

Sgt. Griggs: . . . It's just too hot, man . . . But room temperature?
Please. A beer should be served ice cold!

Captain Price: A lager maybe, or a glass of water like you drink.
But a pint of stout?

Sgt. Griggs: I'm gonna have to school ya both when we get back
Stateside.

Gaz: Either way we're stopping in London first. I'm buying.

Sgt. Griggs: Yeah, well at least the world didn't end . . . Hit it.

This highlights certain aspects of culture clash, of course (“hot” English beers versus “weak” American pilsners), but the exchange also highlights several notable aspects concerning their masculine bonding: (1) after a long, hard, successful day’s work, it is the preferred activity for men to relax and drink beer together; (2) the actual rigors of combat have not affected their psyches (despite overt displays of the dead bodies of their comrades), and instead of expressing tension or fear, particularly as they are far from being safely in the clear, these men are merely looking forward to having some down time (indeed, the “it’s too hot” comment is clearly meant to play on expectations and underscore their toughness—having come immediately after the report that the area is crawling with enemies, it is supposed to surprise the player that Griggs is not talking about the “heat” of the evacuation area); (3) their just reward for saving the world is not recognition or compensation, but rather to go off duty and unwind; (4) despite that they still face a highly treacherous extraction from a land teeming with enemy soldiers, they are confidently planning out their leisure time (and as it turns out, they are literally dead wrong). All of the killing and dying is treated as if it is merely part of the job, and a hard day’s work is justly rewarded with a round of pints at the pub and/or some cold brewskis in the backyard.

In these exchanges we can see nearly all of the traits to which Woodward (2003) referred above: pride in physical prowess, homosociability and heterosexuality, controlled aggression, and finishing the job with minimal complaint. When mixed with action hero-esque discourse, however, these attributes are amplified in a way that suggests both emotional detachment (these men are so very hard that they are incapable of being rattled or shedding tears), as well as that ultimately this particular activity is little different than other masculinized occupations where

men make a point of joking and teasing as a form of masculine boundary work, particularly in blue collar settings. In other words, the utilization of action hero clichés, when mixed with the attributes of military “grunts” performing their jobs, produces a kind of interaction that moves the emphasis from *military* to *masculinity*: a form of masculine camaraderie with which many men could easily identify, if nonetheless placed in a context in which we are lead to believe men are teasing each other and cracking jokes while facing the very real prospect of imminent death (which is in fact what happens to all the characters in the very next level, apart from the player as Soap, and *possibly* Captain Price, although his fate is left uncertain). It is in fact the looming specter of death and the stakes of their enterprise that is taken up in the next section.

The Nobility of Sacrifice

Heroism, sacrifice and nobility have long been conferred on soldiers partaking in battle. Noting that military masculinity has, since the earliest Greek and Mesopotamian epics, been about the yearning for an already "lost" masculinity wielded only by the "good" dead men, Braudy argues that "As the prime way of being a man, military masculinity thereby can assume the double aspect of both future goal and lost ideal, both for critics who are nostalgic for the past and for those who reject it entirely" (2003: 7). In the contemporary era, this nostalgia has mostly been evoked with reference to World War II, not only in the sense of the alleged differences in the severity of hardship suffered by such men (coming as that war did on the back of the Great Depression), but also the difference in socio-political and cultural aspects of those who fought the last “Good War”, as opposed to Korea’s “Forgotten War” and then Vietnam, the war everyone wished they could forget. Especially in the late 1990s, World War II media idealized the fighting

men of the Greatest Generation, emphasizing their ability to pull together for their country and for each other. Moreover, potentially troubling issues are ignored or glossed over, such as war crimes or (particularly in the Pacific theater) the rampant racism which was in some cases overtly articulated as a means of instilling in the men a “fighting spirit.” It is only with 2010’s follow-up to *Band of Brothers* (2001), *The Pacific*, that such themes are touched on (clearly only possible in a political environment which has soured on the so-called War on Terror).

But arguably it is this fixation on the trials and tribulations of this generation—sandwiched between, as it turned out, a tentative rapprochement with those who fought in Vietnam, and the triumphant arrival of the “heroes” of the post-9/11 GWOT—which provided the space for venerating men in combat more generally. For instance, a film such as 2002’s *Blackhawk Down* (an account of an infamous mission gone awry in Somalia in 1994), which was accused by some critics of being “jingoistic” (Fryer, 2002) and “racist crap” (Burns, 2002), among other things, valorized the martial capabilities and masculine grit of the contemporary U.S. military’s elite units (specifically in this case the Airborne Rangers and Delta Force)⁹; all of whom were depicted as nobly and professionally doing as they were ordered, ostensibly to help the people in Somalia and act in U.S. interests. Similar themes run through such films as *We Were Soldiers* (2002) (depicting the harrowing Battle of Ia Drang) and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) (a fictional account of troops under fire at a foreign embassy deciding to fire in “self-defense”). The ideological ties between these media become clear if one looks at the strange way in which they decontextualize the conflicts in which they are set:

⁹ Interestingly, one of the positively portrayed main characters is based on a real soldier—a desk clerk who was asked suddenly to go on the mission and in so doing was awarded the Silver Star for bravery; it is left unmentioned that this soldier was alleged at the time of the film to have been dishonorably discharged and serving a 30-year prison term for rape and child molestation (Turner, 2001).

Band of Brothers and *Saving Private Ryan* revel in a 'sentimental militarism' that relies not on ideology, but faith in benevolent male authority...War stories written from inside out vary by geography, but they always tell the same story: death, fear, brotherhood. Bravery, courage, and the capacity to commit atrocities are not determined by the cause in which they are displayed. 'It's all about the man next to you,' one of the characters in *Black Hawk Down* says, 'that's all it is.' The flat statement, that one kills and dies for the man next to you, never leads to the obvious question: what are both of you doing there? Some historians, like Gerald Linderman, have written the inside story of war with attention to its contradictions, as tragedy rather than heroic epic. Contemporary war movies, from *Saving Private Ryan* to *We Were Soldiers*, follow [Stephen E.] Ambrose's lead. They abstract war from its context, leaving it standing on its own, self-justifying, impervious to doubt, a fact of nature (Young, 2006: 317).

Young concludes by arguing that a variety of these films wish to once again make all of America's wars "good wars" (even conflicts like Vietnam and Somalia), partly through the way in which the enemy is depicted, but mostly making the cause "us," the people, and more specifically, the "every day heroes" in uniform who fight for each other.

In this way, like in *Saving Private Ryan*, the mission is the man, or perhaps more figuratively, the mission is the nation's collective manhood. These men fight for each other, and it is through blood sacrifice that their bonds become sacrosanct. Slocum (2006: 16) adds to this notion in addressing the way in which the military man in combat is forged as eternal and at least in terms of intentions, beyond reproach, while the ostensible use to which he is put is never called into question:

War, in these terms [which is that duty is 'good', whatever the particular war soldiers find themselves in], transcends politics and military action is held outside ideological debates about policies in the present or the lessons of the past. The heroism of men, and the glory (or horror) of battle become timeless and apolitical. Rather than merely emphasizing individual action over political, economic, or structural context as earlier productions may have,

these films evacuate meaningful attention to culturally or historically-specific causes or motivations for the conflicts being depicted; they participate, through their replication of spectacle, in what Michael Rogin (2006) describes here as a process resulting in 'cultural amnesia.' War cinema in these recent years emerges as self-referential, concerned not just with a nostalgia for, or appropriation of, previous combat films, but a consistent set of values and behaviors transposable to any number of visually distinct but otherwise historically undifferentiated conflicts.

As Rowe (2007) argues, such media “conditioned American citizens to accept the undisguised militarism and jingoistic nationalism now driving U.S. foreign policy” (37), whereby even those media which espouse ostensibly liberal or even pacifist ideals depict scenarios where “all end up fighting, however, thereby linking a just-war thesis with liberal and antiwar sentiments” (47). Bacevich (2005: 2) echoes this sentiment, arguing that Americans have “fallen prey to militarism, manifesting itself in a romanticized view of soldiers, a tendency to see military power as the truest measure of national greatness, and outsized expectations regarding the efficacy of force.” As Donald (2001: 170) puts it, "Action films acquaint all of us with bloodshed, while war films groom American boys for manhood.” Moreover, as Lynda Boose (1999: 592) argues:

The sacrosanct story around which this nation's understanding of itself has been built...is the story of American masculine heroism. At the center of the story, within a semiotics defined by the male symbolic, lies the constructed image of the innocent American soldier. And American militarist ideology has been built on top of a public investment in protecting that image...While 'supporting the troops' is recognized as a public sign of support for the war they signify, to withhold such affirmation situates the protester at the juncture where the society's two most negative figures are condensed: the national enemy and the withholding mommy.

These media are more than merely affirmations of American ideals of nation and manhood, they are texts which tie such notions directly to a triumphalist view of war-marking as it must be undertaken and upheld by the noble military man. Whether and to what extent players have seen

a large number of such films or the specific examples mentioned above, nonetheless such themes are rampant in action and war media.

As alluded to above, while throughout most of the game the protagonists appear to be mostly invulnerable, this notion is undermined part way through, and particularly hits home in the last two levels of the game. In “No Fighting in the War Room”, the player must infiltrate the ICBM launch facility in order to transmit deactivation codes to missiles that have already been launched. The player’s squad (composed of a mixture of SAS and USMC 1st Force Recon characters) is joined by Russian Spetznatz and another American special forces unit. Although at this stage all main characters leave the level alive, the player must pass ostentatiously displayed corpses of American and Russian troops who have been killed by the defenders, and it is implied through “radio” noise that their deaths were due mainly to being assigned a more difficult route—that is, the player is left with the impression that he and his teammates got the “lucky” or “easy” assignment by comparison, and this is probably the only reason they are still alive. The sudden injection of a more “realistic” assessment of combat is driven home much harder in the final level, “Game Over.” This level opens with the conversation about beer transcribed above, but by the end the team has been wrecked on a mountain highway, badly outgunned. In slow motion the player sees Griggs shot and killed by Zakhaev’s forces, then watches as Zakhaev himself kills several team members, including shooting Gaz in the head and Captain Price in the chest. Eventually the player is tasked with shooting Zakhaev himself (while wounded). After this is accomplished, a rescue team arrives, and the player witnesses medics administering CPR to Captain Price while the player “blacks out.” As the end credits roll, the screen shows a

photograph with all the team members posing and smiling, presumably taken before they went on this last mission.

Clearly, these deaths and their subsequent memorialization are intended to heighten the drama and therefore lend a bit of weight to the story, especially since by this point these are characters the player is supposed to care about. But another effect at work here is that their heroism is made into heroic *sacrifice*, which is made more poignant and stands out more by virtue of their jocular, assertive, yet workaday attitude toward their mission—indeed, consider the difference if the men who died were constantly demonstrating fear, uncertainty, or sneering skepticism. Therefore it confers upon their efforts a particular kind of nobility which is well in keeping with that described above—wherein curiously their noble heroism is heightened not merely by their capable actions, but perhaps especially due to the fact that they were only doing their duty.

The twinning of masculine ideals with duty is of course not limited to sacrifice for the greater good. Near the end of the chapter “Shock and Awe”, which occurs roughly two thirds of the way into the game, USMC 1st Force Recon Sgt. Paul Jackson and his squad are evacuating from the besieged Middle Eastern capital in a troop transport helicopter, when suddenly an adjacent AH-1 Cobra is struck by a rocket propelled grenade, and goes down. It so happens this helicopter is piloted by a woman—the only woman to appear in the game in any capacity—who earlier in the level had to refit and refuel, and upon her return says in a coy, yet cocky way, “Miss me, boys?” As her helicopter goes down, she reports through a strained voice that her copilot is killed in action, and that enemies are descending on her location, all while she uses a small machine pistol to defend herself. Jackson’s squad decides to help the pilot out, knowing that if

the nuclear bomb goes off, they will not be beyond the minimum safe distance. The player must then run to the downed helicopter amidst a hail of bullets, grab the injured pilot, and carry her back to the troop transport helicopter.

Shortly after the player gets back to his helicopter, however, the nuclear bomb goes off and the helicopter, caught in the shockwave, crashes, and the scene goes dark. The screen then fades up from black, at first blurry and a bit uneven in color and contrast, then finally coming into focus. For the next few minutes, all the player can do is very slowly crawl around, listening to the sound of his own uneven heartbeat and the wind, in a scene of red sky, ash blown like snow, and, as the player gradually exits the helicopter and looks to the left, the player can see a mushroom cloud towering into the sky. Interestingly, despite that the helicopter was filled with at least a dozen people, there are only two bodies in the vicinity, and the only recognizable body is that of the female helicopter pilot, her lifeless doe-eyes staring straight up into the sky. After approximately 2-3 minutes, the player's heartbeat stops and the scene fades away into whiteness.

In this instance, therefore, not only does the player get to rescue an attractive woman from imminent danger, the player also confronts her dead body (just prior to his own death), the result of Al-Asad ordering his underlings to sacrifice themselves and the entire city in a holocaust of radioactive destruction—certainly it seems reasonable to interpret the scene through tropes of saving the princess and then having to avenge her death. Yet this interpretation must come with some caveats. First of all, although the pilot's gender may have some impact on the interpretation of dialogue and the urgency of the rescue mission, it is easy to imagine a male in the role, where both the dialogue and mission play out in exactly the same way. It is not the only time the player comes to the rescue of other soldiers, and it is not even the only time the player

carries an injured comrade. Secondly, it is possible for the player never to discover the body of the female pilot, because the act of crawling out of the downed helicopter and looking around is entirely within the control of the player; indeed the player can just wait inside the helicopter for death, if he so chooses. There is one aspect to this event that remains the case regardless of interpretations of gender issues here: the player's avatar dies in the selfless sacrifice of trying to rescue his comrade, and the player cannot choose *not* to attempt this rescue. In either case, ultimately the player actually experiences the "glory of death" in doing one's duty, which happens to correspond to saving a damsel in distress (albeit a "damsel" who is a combat helicopter pilot).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused my analysis on COD4's social fidelity—how narrative and representational elements compare to ideological notions of military masculinity as they are broadly conceived in American culture. In essence, I establish both the broader social context most players are likely to either inhabit or with which they will have at least some familiarity, as well as demarcating precisely which major tropes, themes and understandings make up hegemonic military masculinity (as articulated in both discourse and media). For each of these major articulations, I have found content that for the most part tends to reiterate/adhere to the dominant mode. While this is to some extent to be expected, it is the way in which this occurs that is intriguing.

Several of the game's elements illustrate a connecting theme regarding the depiction of a certain kind of military masculinity in this game. First of all, the way in which the game establishes and represents the “good guys” and “bad guys” of the narrative closely corresponds to well established discourses concerning race and nation vis-a-vis military masculinity. Although the historical centrality of “whiteness” is considerably downplayed or even eschewed, the conflation of the enemy-object's ignoble qualities on the one hand, and friendly-subject noble qualities on the other, links national (ethnic) and masculine qualities in a way that is well in keeping with the dominant ideology. Secondly, the men depicted in this game are basically action heroes: competent, smart, cocksure, unperturbed, and jocular. A very important difference, of course, is that they are not portrayed as singular bad-asses, like Rambo or several of Schwarzenegger's most famous characters—on the contrary, they are elite but otherwise “normal” soldiers. They also meld their lethal professionalism with a sense of purpose, of both morality and action: saving the world from nukes, saving the West from annihilation, helping out their comrades, and ultimately righteously killing the bad guys. Third, many of the depictions and actions undertaken in the game uphold well entrenched notions of nobility and sacrifice of the combat soldier, in which the political context of their assignment or role is subordinated to the magnitude of their (occasionally martyred) status as those who fight “in our name” (if not quite “cause”).

In a broad sense, therefore, the type of manliness on display is that of a daring certitude steeped in professionalism, confidence in one's abilities, moral clarity in the mission, relative autonomy, and superiority over the enemy in every respect: not only in their skills, armaments and technology, but their mental acuity and moral character. This is a potent combination, because it not only frames the player's and characters actions in a positive way (that is, ties their

actions to their traits as characters with whom the player is supposed to identify), it upholds and perpetuates well entrenched characteristics of military masculinity which grant its wielder a sense of purpose and potency. Pointedly, the genre elements at work here—heroic narrative, progression through the game, clear cut enemies which must be eliminated, action hero clichés, etc.—all work to augment and ultimately amplify the already heavily loaded masculine elements.

In many respects, such findings are not terribly surprising—indeed, it would have been surprising if a relatively mainstream product did *not* largely adhere to mainstream views about military masculinity, articulated in nationalistic discourses, media genres (especially cinema) and more than likely the game’s primary sources: raw footage, interviews with soldiers, military advisors to the project, etc. Yet this is where I would like to reiterate that this analysis ultimately serves to establish a baseline for the investigatory and analytical framework of the project: in order to assess critiques of the MEC, I first have to answer whether it is really true that this game articulates notions and a point of view largely in line with the MEC’s hegemonic aspects. It turns out that this text does reiterate normative ideas more or less as critics suggest, although it is interesting that this is intensified by the genre elements in sometimes surprising ways.

It is precisely this latter point—the finding that certain of these notions are subtly twisted by the requirements of genre—which points the way toward something more complex than what is happening at the “textual” level, and toward the possibilities of investigating the spheres of gamic and gamer fidelity. This is the second component to assessing critiques of the MEC: discerning what bearing the ideological notions articulated in the text (its social fidelity) may have on (or compete with, or are undermined by, or a congruent with) the game’s gamic and gamer fidelities. In short, watching this story unfold is not quite the same as bringing it about,

and this is not a trivial difference. While there are definitely parameters placed on player actions in which, ultimately, the player must bring the story into being through his actions, this is a process that is highly unlikely to transpire all in one go: it takes multiple tries, multiple means of engagement, and in the case of this game also includes a significant multiplayer component which, while utilizing all the same motifs as the single player campaign, *plays* very differently from it. What do we make of these differences? What do *players* make of these differences? What are the effect of these differences on masculine performativity? From here we move to an analysis of the gamic fidelity of COD4, in which I assess the way in which particular elements are rendered (including the quality of its physics and graphics) as well as how the game's ludic requirements instill particular performances and actions.

CHAPTER 4

The Gamic Fidelity of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

In the previous chapter, I detailed how narrative and representational elements make explicit and implicit arguments about military masculinity which largely adhere to traditionalist notions of military masculinity, albeit in ways which are intensified by genre—both in terms of the utilization of cinematic action/war genre tropes, as well as generic gaming elements. Chapter three therefore sets up this and the following chapter: how the game is actually played, both in terms of what the game requires of the player (covered here) and how players interpret and respond to such elements (covered in the following chapter). In this chapter, I focus on the ramifications of how the game renders combat through its gamic fidelity: the way in which particular elements are rendered (including the quality of its physics and graphics) as well as how the game’s ludic requirements instill particular performances and actions. As indicated in chapter three, gamic fidelity is the fidelity of specific gamic elements whose ideological features may be more subtle but also more ingrained, yet which can in certain instances also be leveraged through play to accommodate affordances or actions which may or may not uphold this ingrained ideology. Although there are not always clear-cut demarcations, this is the sphere in which the textual bleeds into the ludic, and ultimately where interpretive bleeds into performative—where “bleeds into” suggests a trajectory, but where gamic elements are not always clearly on one side of the ledger or the other.

This analysis therefore establishes what claims the game makes about combat/war (both explicit and implicit): performative requirements, affects and effects, the cues which necessitate particular actions, and so on. This is important in that a game's gamic fidelity connotes terms such as "realisticness", "realism", "verisimilitude" and "authenticity": terms which suggest some investment in a particular set of understandings about how people, places and actions operate or signify. Therefore the game's combat scenarios and simulations are in some respects making an argument both about what combat is like (particularly with respect to specific contexts), and what it is about combat that makes for a compelling game. As we shall see, both concepts are integral to teasing out the ways in which gaming requirements are linked to verisimilitude and authenticity. In this chapter the analytical focus is on elements which, in rendering a space that is "credible" with respect to both combat scenarios and gameplay, conflates certain aspects of each. I argue that there are a number of gamic elements which require of the player a type of (masculine) performance in which there is a subtle but important conflation of the qualities of being a good gamer and the qualities of being a good soldier, and that in both cases the information to which one has access in battlefield space greatly impacts one's performance—with ramifications for military masculinity. Furthermore, the game's mechanics have features which, while ultimately catering to gameplay (for the most part dictated by genre), carry considerable ideological weight. I begin by providing some context about the FPS genre more generally, then move into a specific analysis of COD4.

Common Generic Elements of the First Person Shooter

The predominating activity of the FPS is shooting things, whether computer-generated targets or human-controlled avatars. Although a FPS game might have an overarching story or framework that compels this sort of action, and there may be myriad other requirements in the game, shooting things is what the player must learn to be good at. There are many game genres, of course, which require a lot of shooting. FPS are set apart from most of these in that this shooting takes place from a first person perspective: the player inhabits the gaze of the avatar, as if looking out through the avatar's eyes. As Galloway (2006: 57) notes, it is a perspective directly borrowed from the subjective point-of-view shot used in cinema. If the player can see his avatar's body at all, it is usually only in a very limited capacity: hands and forearms gripping a weapon or perhaps (as has become commonplace in many FPS titles) shortly after one has been killed—the only full body view of “self” perception is of one's corpse. Further, all FPS operate in three dimensional space, which, when combined with stereo sound, can inculcate a sense of immersive presence (as alluded to in the previous chapter). It is the combination of point of view, action, and types of interaction that are the definitive characteristics of the genre, and following from Apperley (2006), it is these qualities, and not representational characteristics, which define the genre—representationally, *Doom* is best described as horror, *Halo* as science fiction, and *Call of Duty* as action or war, but all three games are FPS in gaming terms.

What I wish to focus on here are aspects of the genre which have political and phenomenological implications germane to our purposes here: the “first person” aspects of the genre, the increasing “realism” of such games, and the importance of information concerning the status of the player and the gamespace he inhabits. These are all fundamental to the FPS genre,

and understanding how they operate in general lays the groundwork for the detailed analysis of COD4 provided below.

Individual(istic) Heroism

The first person perspective is not merely that of aesthetics and phenomenology: it is also what grounds the story or narrative of the game. That is, necessarily all FPS are “hero” narratives, in which the player takes on the role of the chief protagonist, either directly as the singular hero, or as a main character among a contingent of heroes. To this end the FPS is celebratory of the heroic mode of storytelling in single player modes, indeed to quite an extreme. For example, by the end of *Wolfenstein 3D*, the player/protagonist has single-handedly wiped out a castle filled with elite Nazi troops numbering well over a hundred, and by the end of the third trilogy has defeated supernatural Nazis as well as the Führer himself.

Combining this narrative feature with the features of increasing difficulty and the shooting mechanism therefore produces a curious artifact wherein the player/protagonist must overcome absurdly overwhelming odds, and do so by being what is known in the parlance as a “badass.” Badassery requires the player not only to kill large numbers of enemies, but also, toward the latter stages of the game, must nearly always take on many of them at a time (and/or a small number of very powerful figures) and with a dynamic aplomb that necessitates high levels of aggressiveness, efficiency, and (usually) firepower resulting in aestheticized displays of sublime violence: carnage, explosions, destruction. This Rambo-esque quality is a significant part of the appeal of the FPS genre: the agency and power to single-handedly defeat the onslaught of

overwhelming enemies (or at least, the frustrating but ultimately gratifying challenge of being tasked to do so), to unlock the game's secrets, to *play at* being a badass. Coupled with the immersive qualities of the game apparatus, it is “about securing the self by defeating the other” (Travis, 2006). It is also, therefore, not merely a heroic narrative, but also about subject-object positioning, where the other must be lethally eliminated. In short, the combination of perspective and typical ludic requirements in the genre lionize a form of aggressive, individualistic heroism that is coupled with characteristics which help increase immersion and identification.

This is perhaps even more evident in multiplayer games. Multiplayer instances of FPS have similar operations, but there are also crucial differences. Although in multiplayer instances there is no increasing difficulty *per se* or a narrative surrounding gameplay, the “story” of a gaming instance is essentially the same: players attempting to overcome significant opposition to become the dominant player in the server, or at the very least a member of the most dominant team. There are a number of different game rules which complicate this aspect, but which nonetheless still ultimately cater to an ethic of domination. In a game such as *Halo*, players can choose to play in instances such as all versus all or play on teams. Although particularly in group or clan play teams may work together, practically speaking servers tend to be populated by a random assortment of strangers, and cooperation may be limited (or even, not particularly desired—more about such social aspects is covered in the following chapter). Therefore most gaming sessions are ultimately solo performances, where for the most part it is every man for himself.

Nearly all multiplayer games track how many kills and deaths players accrue over the course of a round, which is displayed at the end of the round for all to see, and the players with the most kills and/or best kill to death ratio will be denoted (e.g. in *Halo 2*, described with the highly coveted term, “Most Deadly”). In some games, other “awards” may be granted to players based on their actions, from “good” attributes lauding accuracy, to “bad” attributes such as staying in one spot too long (camping) or getting killed the most. Some games specifically encourage teamwork and assistance, such as *America’s Army 3*, in which players can get points for patching up wounded comrades or meeting mission objectives. However, even in these games, rewards, points and the bulk of action are still oriented toward lethal domination. In other words, both the rules and the framing of the action encourages players to become as dominant as possible, and therefore this dominance is granted status. In both single player and multiplayer modes, the locus of action is the self as (largely unaided) agent who must act (out) against a superior array of forces.

In order to fulfill these obligations, players must master two obvious, yet fundamentally important tasks: shooting, and avoiding being shot or otherwise damaged/killed. Therefore all action is centered on what is ultimately the most basic survivalist mentality: kill or be killed. Shooting in most contemporary FPS involves a number of variables that the player must learn to manage to suit his abilities and preferences as well as the affordances of the gamespace (packed alleyways versus open countryside, for instance). One of these is the qualities of one’s weapon: how much damage it produces, whether it is short or long range, how quickly or how many times the weapon discharges, whether it travels well (i.e. does it impede movement or not), how often it needs to be reloaded, how long it takes to reload, whether its aiming mechanisms suit the player’s preferences (scopes, open iron sites, hip-firing, etc.), and so on. Players over time learn

to play with weapons that not only suit their preferences and abilities, but also to suit the qualities of one's target(s) or the environment in which one finds himself: whether the weapon's power and velocity are enough to overcome a heavily armored or fast moving target, how far away the target is, whether the immediate environment may require short or long range weapons (i.e. shotguns for close combat instead of sniper rifles), whether a player wishes to use a silenced weapon in order to avoid giving away one's location, whether a weapon is practical for a particular area or purpose (e.g. rocket launchers which are fired into targets or areas which are very close to the player may injure or kill the player in addition to his target), and so on. Once again the focus is on individuated experience, in some respects reflecting a quasi-consumerist mentality of fitting out one's avatar with a highly specific set of preferences, which may include items that advertise both these preferences and the player's skill. Thus individualism is instantiated not only in progressing in the game, but also, in multiplayer, a form of display via one's weapon choice, playing style and accoutrements. In either case, the focus is on individual action that requires a certain degree of ruthless virtuosity, tied to an implicit or explicit heroic narrative.

Authentic Versus Credible Gamespace

It is important to point out here that these aspects are functions of increasing verisimilitude, and therefore the gamic and gamer fidelities work in tandem here. That is, increasing gamic realism results in the creation of features which affect gameplay, and which therefore add new dimensions to player's expectations of gaming. But once again, this is not gamic realism in terms of it being "realistic" per se, so much as that "realistic" aesthetic features result in greater

detail. This greater detail therefore serves the twin purpose of making more immersive, “authentic” spaces while at the same time increasing the interactive variables that affect how the game is played. Thus there is an unsettled territory where highly “realistic” graphics may run up against other aspects of combat which are not “realistic” as such but due to the level of detail can be credible.

For instance, perhaps it is more realistic to encumber players who use large machine guns with slower movement and longer reloading times, but this movement and the reloading process itself are not very much like being a real life machine gunner at all—even while it affects the way in which players must play the game. Similarly, several contemporary FPS have a melee feature which allows players who are close enough to their enemy to use a combat knife to kill the enemy by the press of a single button, graphically rendered as a swift swipe across the body or (at most) a grab and slice across the neck, resulting in instant death for this enemy. This is all made possible by software which is capable of rendering such action in fine detail. However, actually attempting this in “real life” combat is very time consuming, difficult and risky, and is therefore not very realistic in terms of the actual practices of forces engaged in heavy combat.

In fact it is telling that despite repeated requests, the makers of *America’s Army 3* refuse to include this feature in their game (and stating flatly that this will *never* be a feature of future incarnations of the game), citing the ways in which it is incommensurate with the game’s mission or Army uses of knives as tools only, as well as the fact that killing people with knives is extremely difficult because (1) they don’t die right away and are likely to therefore shoot you; (2) knives are unlikely to penetrate kevlar armor (America’s Army Forum, 2007); in other words, from the Army’s point of view this is not a credible feature of contemporary Army training or

combat. Equally telling, *America's Army 3* attempts to heighten realism by the fact that most players who are shot are merely “incapacitated”, and face one of three fates: slowly bleeding to death, being patched up and revived by team members, or finally killed by an enemy, which usually involves an enemy player leaning over the incapacitated player and pressing a button which elicits a zipper-like sound, instantly killing the player once and for all (although this is not rendered graphically, the process and sound mimics a special forces-style throat-cutting or strangulation). In both instances, increased gamic fidelity affects the way one plays (aggressively in the former, more cautiously in the latter), but in the former instance it is about graphical realism, versus practical realism in the latter case. The distance between “real world” combat and credible but otherwise fictitious combat certainly exists in COD4, and will be analyzed below.

Utilizing Information in Gamespace

In order to be successful at a game, players must be adept not only at shooting and avoiding being shot, but must also have a keen sense of space. Operating in this space is not merely about shooting enemies; enemies are nearly always presented as obstacles to the “forward” movement through geographical gamespace toward a specific goal, which is usually located at the farthest point from which the player starts the game. In certain respects FPS are obstacle courses, and it is through navigating the space and overcoming the obstacles along the way that a player’s sense of fun and achievement is enhanced. Obstacles here are usually thought of mostly in terms of buildings, mazes, pits, cliffs, or other hazards.

But I also briefly make a point here that will become important later on: other characters and avatars are also obstacles, in that they must be overcome in order to advance in or win at the game. In single player instances, there are some AI¹⁰ characters which can be safely ignored or avoided, but the vast majority must be overcome (destroyed) in order to advance—in some games, it is in fact impossible to advance until the entire map or level has been cleared of enemies, even if these enemies no longer pose any threat to the player or his mission (e.g. located in an area that the player has successfully circumvented). In multiplayer instances, some games require either single dominance (one player left standing) or the elimination of one of two teams. Often multiplayer instances are also set with time limits, but ostensibly this is to compel lethal interaction. In short: the primary function of complete domination and elimination supersedes the “realism” of safely navigating and securing a space.

Meanwhile, players must also avoid being killed (usually shot, but not always). This usually involves hiding behind various obstacles, but also usually entails either stealth or constant movement. Sophisticated players will also seek to maximize their ability to shoot at others without exposing themselves to fire, using tactics such as creating firing lanes, setting up ambush points, and perhaps most importantly anticipating the movements of one’s targets—anticipation that the player learns by memorizing the geography of the gamespace, familiarizing oneself with the way one’s targets move and how *they* utilize the space, and so on. Anticipation, in most FPS, is probably the most valuable skill of all, beyond quick reflexes and superb shooting and moving abilities in themselves, and it can only be achieved through committed repetition and memorization.

¹⁰ To reiterate, AI stands for “artificial intelligence”, or the shorthand denotation used for gamic “bots” which act in approximation to being players or intelligences in their own right.

Although shooting and avoiding being shot are the most important and immanent activities, players must also manage an array of informational displays. This includes, of course, one's inventory (ammunition, weapons, etc.) as well as one's all-important "health" status: how near one is to death, based on various wounds incurred in action. The means through which one's health is affected has become gradually more sophisticated, from the early days of *Doom*'s simple percentage display (where all damage determined the extent to which one was alive or dead, where even at 1% "alive", the avatar's performance was unaffected), to *America's Army 3*'s sophisticated gradation of battle wounds (where and how badly one is hit makes a difference to performance, while team members can perform limited battlefield medicine to revive "incapacitated" players, who can "bleed" to death if they are not treated in a timely fashion). Keeping tabs on such information is not only vital to a player's survival, but importantly determines the way in which a player must play: ample health and ammunition provides the player with enough security to take more risks, whereas low health and ammunition would usually instill more caution, unless the player decides either to take risks in acquiring more health and ammunition, or to utterly throw caution to the wind as one who is "already" dead, and go on a kamikaze run. To this end, once again the gamic function of this attempt at authenticity is more important than the quality of its fidelity—or rather, the extent of its fidelity is something the player must consider toward gamic ends.

Importantly, in nearly all FPS the gamespace is equipped with "power ups" that cater to these needs: specific locations where one can find health and ammunition. In early games, such power ups tended to be lying around in seemingly random locations (first aid kits, clips, and ammunition just sitting on the floor). Contemporary games tend to provide these in more "realistic" fashion, whether culled from fallen enemies or found inside a crate in a storage area.

But even here, they serve a function specific to the power up: to replenish and make the player more powerful, so that he can continue playing the game. Even in the most “realistic” scenarios, ammunition usually conveniently matches the caliber of weapon the player is using; first aid kits contain precisely what is required; both repairs and ammunition recharging/reloading take seconds or fractions of seconds (indeed in many games all it takes to reload or repair is to walk over the top of the box or kit and *voilà*—instant ammo and health). In this way game design is oriented toward delivering primary content (the action of the game) rather than drawing attention to the processes of this, or the logistics of “realistic” warfare. Ammunition, health, and other status factors are therefore not intended to account for the real ways in which someone in battle confronts this; they are presented as challenges to the basic gamic functions, in order to make them more compelling—in short, they serve as hooks.

These generic aspects are what form the basis of the FPS genre. Although each individual game has a handful of unique attributes which affect specific aspects of gameplay, overall genre elements are relatively uniform, and changes to the format do not affect fundamental mechanics or goals, but rather tend to occur with respect to increasing verisimilitude, and increased verisimilitude results in increased detail which is most likely to affect the game’s fidelity. Denoting these generic elements is key to understanding the *gamic* context in which certain actions and events transpire or are brought into being, in part because this distinction can affect interpretation, and in part because of the banality of these events due to repetition—that is, the extent to which they become normative features of the game.

Furthermore, this analytical procedure serves as a means of distinguishing between gamic elements which appear to operate primarily on thematic, narrative or atmospheric terms (e.g. can

you shoot down roving helicopters, or are they merely there as background animatics which add to the *mise en scene*?), versus gamic elements which require of the player particular actions in order to advance in the game, or which in some cases could be doing double duty (the helicopters are merely atmospheric at the beginning of the level, but must be shot down later on). Parsing in this way provides a means of assessing the terms on which a player is likely to interpret a particular gamic element. It also demonstrates the extent to which representation and action can become conflated, where for our purposes here the masculine attributes of game characters are brought into being by the player's performance. It is this combination of ostensibly "masculine" content that is the chief focus of my analysis here: representational and ludic elements which articulate particular notions of masculinity, types of action required by the player which are commonly thought of as masculine attributes, and gamic qualities which may aid in intensifying the player's experience and therefore have some effect on the player. With this established, let us turn now to a specific analysis of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*.

Credible Gameplay and the Importance of Informational Verisimilitude

The most immediately noticeable feature of playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* is its graphical "realism." The visual display is remarkable in its fidelity, whereby objects are rendered in high definition detail. The weave of the fabric, the cracking on leather, dirt smears, and the reflective qualities of different materials are all photorealistic. Faces have creases and whiskers. Weapons have serial numbers on them as well as various abrasions from use. Wood has a grain to it, steel and iron have rust spots and sheet metal even has mottling on it. The quality of the light (sunny or overcast, night or day—even morning or afternoon) is stunningly

captured, even to the point of undergoing coloring and filtration as it passes through translucent objects like glass, plastic and leaves. Concrete and drywall crack, powder, and slap as they are acted on. Bullets zip and ricochet, smoke trails and explosions erupt with astounding clarity, fire crackles naturalistically, and on occasion even dirt and mud display realistic reactions to being acted on. The only feature which is not disconcertingly realistic is human movement, that is, the locomotion and kinesthetics of the characters and avatars. Even this, however, approaches realism a large percentage of the time, and only deviates from uncanny accuracy in the movements of avatars that the player controls (which includes avatars controlled by other players in multiplayer). The overall effect, in other words, is a simulation that looks very realistic in ways that aid in immersion and identification: movement through 3D space, high fidelity physics, lighting, etc., surround sound, and so on.

But there is a politics to this fidelity. In rendering the game world in such high fidelity, the game is making a claim about authenticity and verisimilitude as it pertains to combat; therefore this implies authenticity which extends beyond aesthetics and physics, and into things like tactics and behavior. Just as with the narrative, several of these themes and elements are in keeping with aspects of less salient features of military masculinity vis-a-vis jingoism, racism, and imperialism. As we shall see, however, there is an important difference in that in several instances this is less a function of the politics of the overarching narrative as such than it is a function of gameplay: the ludic requirements as dictated *primarily* by genre. In other words, these are gamic elements that facilitate gameplay in the FPS genre, but whose construction toward those ends happens to also have a politics to them which we cannot overlook in sussing out notions of masculine performance as they pertain to acting in a surveilled battlefield space.

Let us begin by an examination of what kind of performance, in general, is required in order to do well at the game.

Aggression, Proficiency and Efficiency

Being killed is unpleasant, even in simulation. A player cannot afford to be cowed by frequently dying, however. On the contrary, a good maxim for success in this game might be, “Fortune favors the bold.” If during the single player campaign the player merely stands back and cautiously fires at enemies as they appear whilst finding refuge behind a wall, boulder or tree, he will quickly discover that his problems literally multiply. In fact the game is designed such that a player who stands in one place will face wave after wave of constantly regenerating enemies; instead, the player must kill and move up, kill and move up, as quickly as possible. Only then will enemies who are killed in a particular building, say, not be repeatedly replaced. Of course, too much brashness will result in almost instant death, so again one must emphasize boldness, not recklessness. Being bold also means acting with relative speed and efficiency—killing many foes quickly, and moving into the cleared area before reinforcements arrive.

By comparison, the enemy is far more cautious and most certainly not as intuitive or tactically inventive as the player is asked to be. Although enemies will react quickly to the movement of the player (enemy hearing and peripheral vision in particular is very, very good) and enemies will press their advantage by advancing on the player’s position if the player merely hunkers down, at no point will enemies engage in feints or use any kind of subterfuge. The main advantage of the enemy, therefore, is superior numbers (indeed, if the player does not act

effectively enough, limitless numbers). These and a number of other qualities of the AI aid in depicting the enemy as borderline incompetent. For instance, in fighting through the city, there is rarely any obvious tactics by the enemy: no ambush points, no feints, no claymores or tripwires, no set-up of crossfire, or anything—just house after house, wall after wall, of (occasionally ill-trained and cowardly) enemies. And of course, the good guys can't ever really fail: they are never killed or seriously wounded until the plot demands it; the player himself can be killed many, many times, but ultimately will always prevail and is in effect immortal, albeit not strictly invulnerable. Therefore the game's mechanics encourage a game flow that is not only brisk, but encourages taking risks and being aggressive in a way that one would undoubtedly be loathe to do in actual combat. This impression is underscored by the fact that the player has to do most of the work: although comrades will frequently take care of enemies on their own (particularly when first entering a building), ultimately it is the player who must either make the greatest number of kills or most difficult kills (e.g. taking out a machine gunner's nest, taking out tanks, clearing snipers or gunners who are ensconced in a building). If the player does nothing all other than simply try to avoid being killed, more than likely the enemy will advance on the player's position such that eventually the player must either kill or be killed.

That said, although in a few instances the player's comrades can be killed, main characters and most other "helper" AI survive, sometimes despite taking very direct shots from either enemies or the player himself. In fact that player can take some sadistic pleasure in watching his comrades wince and flinch when they are shot, which has no long term effects unless the player personally shoots one of his comrades in the head—at which point the game fades to a blur and text warns the player "Friendly fire will not be tolerated!" and the mission starts over from the last saved checkpoint. Obviously all of this is designed so that the player

cannot merely progress through levels by letting the AI characters do all the work for him. Of course the effect, therefore, is that the player must actually perform more or less like an action hero or at least certainly the most elite member of the team. It is a style of play in which ruthless efficiency is not only rewarded, but also the player's best chance for survival. Significantly, at no point are enemies seen to be taken prisoner, nor can they surrender (or vice versa). This is fully kill or be killed combat in all circumstances. Furthermore, enemies who are merely wounded will continue to fight, whether by recovering on their own, or, if wounded badly enough, making a "last stand" by lying on the ground, pulling out a pistol, and firing. Therefore any enemy that is not completely eliminated continues to pose a threat to the player.

The game's emphasis on overwhelming numbers as opposed to overwhelming ability is a function of both generic expectations and the limitations of programming technology. Part of the pleasure of such games is in the ability to take out large numbers of targets: the continual, near-constant requirement and ultimate success of killing an enemy provides a continual, near-constant surge of accomplishment. In fact this satisfaction has a chemical element to it as well, in that this sort of task management which is so crucial to video games of this nature cues the brain to release endorphins (through stress management) and dopamine (in being able to sate one's reward-seeking) (Johnson & Schlesinger, 2009). On the other hand, while it might also be satisfying to overcome a particularly skilled enemy, this is both extremely difficult to program given current technology (due mainly to current failings in AI) and also provides the potential for its opposite effect: extreme frustration and anger as the result of being consistently bested by a superior artificial opponent. To emphasize the difference, a player may accept being killed by overwhelming force because in all likelihood he will have at least have had the satisfaction of killing some of them in the process; being dominated by a single or small number of foes,

however, robs the player even of this small satisfaction. The politics of this are therefore twofold: (1) it underscores the notion that such enemies' chief threat lies in their being, essentially, a horde, and not truly skilled opponents; (2) this reinforces the pleasures associated with delivering maximum carnage and destruction.

Players can also choose to play levels from the campaign in “arcade” mode. The chief difference between this mode and the usual single player campaign is that this mode is not exclusively oriented around advancing the game's narrative. Rather, it is to continually improve one's proficiency at the game: scoring higher points, improving statistics like accuracy, and besting the game at its most difficult (higher difficulty settings, faster level completion times, etc.). In many respects the elements of COD4's arcade version are very much in keeping with the way arcade scoring works in other games (either in actual arcade versions or, as in this case, the “arcade” mode of the console or PC version of a game). For instance, points are awarded for each kill, with higher point totals according to variables like headshots (which score highest) and distance (the longer the better). Furthermore, points are awarded for inflicting damage on or destroying items or objects which are predetermined to have points value. This can be something as innocuous as a bank of televisions (such as in the level “Charlie Don't Surf”) or something as notable as warehouses and residential buildings (such as in the level “Death From Above”). The latter example is particularly interesting considering the dissonance between the fact that leveling the village church results in immediate failure, whereas using the howitzer to flatten nearly every other building earns the player up to a thousand points per building¹¹.

¹¹ Also worthy of note in this level: points here are awarded not according to accuracy per se (there is no way to achieve a headshot when firing on enemies from 5000 feet), but rather to one's ability to inflict maximum damage with minimum ammunition: a blast from the 40mm Bofors cannon which takes out, say, seven enemies at once, garners more points than a blast which takes out only three.

On an ideological level, there is a certain degree of contradiction here. On the one hand, players are rewarded for maximizing their lethal proficiency and efficiency in dispatching the enemy and demonstrating the right balance of acumen and aggressiveness which enables the player to aspire to a “flawless” technical performance: killing all enemies as quickly and efficiently as possible. On the other hand, players are rewarded for specifically seeking out atavistic thrills: destroying property and more generally becoming death incarnate. It is a performance which inculcates a view toward war which would seem only to play to the fears of the military’s harshest critics: amplifying soldiers’ willingness to use aggressiveness and lethal violence without consequence to collateral damage. Seen in light of the affordances of gameplay, however, the scoring system is merely catering to gamers’ appreciation of both quantitative measures of gaming prowess and aestheticized violence (sometimes lampooned as an affinity for “splosions”). The score produced by metrics such as accuracy and time provide “hard” evidence of one’s abilities and a means of comparison among gamers (and with oneself). The ability to increase one’s score by destroying various objects caters mostly to the thrill of virtual destruction, but also demonstrates one’s ability to manage a particular kind of task switching—that is, the ability to quickly and deftly vacillate between one skill set and another.

For instance, the aforementioned destruction of residential buildings in “Death From Above” is difficult to complete, because it requires the player to alternate between the frenetic pace of killing enemies on the ground (for maximal points, with either the gatling gun or the Bofors cannon) and then using the howitzer to blow up buildings. This requires not only quickly switching between weapons which have somewhat different points of view (the three different weapons are zoomed in at different magnifications) but also timing and aiming mechanisms (the howitzer moves and shoots more slowly than the others, for instance). Furthermore this must be

done through a limited number of circling passes around the battlefield area—the player controls the weapons, but does not pilot the plane, meaning that the available area under fire gradually shifts over time (particularly once the player passes the first checkpoint and moves to a second village and then the junkyard from which the special operations team on the ground is airlifted). It is not uncommon, then, for the player to miss either enemies or buildings as the plane glides to an area which is out of range of these missed targets of opportunity. Along similar lines, in order for the player to score maximum points by shooting out television sets in the level “Charlie Don’t Surf”, the player must destroy them all before the pre-recorded remarks of Khaled Al-Asad end after the assault team enters the (empty) television studio—which takes only a handful of seconds. This therefore requires significant speed, accuracy, and putting oneself in precisely the right time and place to carry this out.

However it is not just scoring points and staying alive as such that inculcates efficiency, proficiency and aggressive movement—one also learns by being killed. Where being wounded in multiplayer mode is identical to being wounded in single player mode (reddening vision, gasping, slowed movement), dying is quite different. When the player dies in multiplayer mode, he immediately sees a replay of his death in the Kill Cam: a replay of about ten seconds of footage of what it looked like for the player to die from the point of view of the person who killed the player—therefore, to some extent the player can experience what it was like for the player’s killer to kill the player. The utility of this feature is not primarily about replaying “How did I die?” per se: in the overwhelming majority of cases, it is quite obvious how this happened. The point, rather, is twofold. First of all, this highlights the skill set of other players: the economy of movement (particularly aim), the proficiency of weapons use, the advantage of using a superior weapon (this is particularly highlighted if it’s a weapon that the player has yet to

"unlock"), and in the case of grenades in particular, the knowledge that another player has of a map and the likely location of enemies based on this map (with and/or without the help of UAV radar). I have seen, via Kill Cam replay, players hurl grenades over several buildings and walls into tiny corners where they know or suspect enemy players to be—a feat that requires considerable knowledge, skill, and in some cases finely honed intuition. Secondly, the Kill Cam can point out weaknesses in a player's own habits or tactics. For instance, when one is killed by a helicopter, the "bird's eye" view (significantly, not the view of a person/gunner inside the copter) demonstrates how the player was exposed—which is not entirely dissimilar from the lesson learned from being sniped, if one was killed while "exposed."

Therefore the Kill Cam is foremost a kind of learning tool, which can expose lower-level players to the wonders of weapons yet to be unlocked (thereby encouraging rapid advancement in the game), as well as serving as a "teachable moment" in terms of tactics and the proficiency with which some players can utilize the gameplay interface to maximize their lethality. In this way, players can learn from other players and hone their own tactics and skills. Secondly, players can learn not only the methods of their killers, but their battlefield position: it reveals the tactics and location of the enemy (or at least, what they were doing and where they were when they killed the player), which can sometimes be acted on immediately after respawning. This is especially the case with snipers or sneaky "sweepers" (players who "sweep" through the flanks of a team using silenced weapons or knives)—their camouflaged location or successful flanking are revealed in the Kill Cam, which for them necessitates choosing between constantly adjusting their tactics, or merely forging ahead as long as possible until the inevitable moment where a formerly killed enemy seeks them out. What Kill Cam ultimately reveals and inculcates is a mode of martial proficiency which truly separates single player from multiplayer: the

tremendous difficulty of the latter compared to the former. As one gamer quipped to a reporter from *The New Yorker* magazine, “Single player is like taking a Spanish class; multiplayer is like going to Spain” (Baker, 2010). Only those who can master their movements, anticipate the movements of others, and in the process maximize their lethality will prevail.

Speed, accuracy, proficiency, planning, anticipation and probably a little luck all play a part in how accomplished one can be at the game, and it almost goes without saying that this takes considerable practice through repetition. Learning how to achieve these things does indeed take incredible skill; however it also (perhaps primarily) requires the player to learn the game so well that every single movement is planned out, based on the way in which the rules as well as simulated avatars and events typically play out (e.g. precisely where enemies are, when they appear, where they look, how they react, and so on—a mode of thought which cannot be *precisely* replicated in multiplayer, but is still very applicable and important). Not only this, it trains the player to move, see, and react in consistent, highly specific ways which become more or less automated. Therefore the most successful way to play the game is to aim for a perfect mixture of aggressiveness, proficiency and accuracy, where mastering combat elements (targets, ambush points, firing lanes, means of utilizing the landscape to advance without being shot, etc.) becomes more or less second nature.

The result is that one develops a sense for moving and seeing which can often be very flow-like: learning every corner of every level and where to look to expect enemies; learning to fire on the run; learning to instantly differentiate targets and adapt one’s aim to take them out, etc. In my own experience (which appears from chats and forums to be quite commonplace), this requires a ludically-oriented cognition and performativity which more or less eschews

interpretation; that is, enemies are not identified primarily in terms of the signification of the faction to which they belong, but rather whether or not they are designated as enemy targets. Certainly in my experience, not only did I have no conscious political, racial or other animus toward whichever enemies I was shooting, I had very little trouble in switching from one to the other from one round to the next—where I had spent ten minutes gritting my teeth and trying my damndest to shoot every Spetznaz soldier I saw, I could easily switch to shooting SAS troops only a few minutes later, and so on.

In short, this puts into question the extent to which players would find long term cathartic release in “killing terrorists” or “defending freedom” in a virtual environment. Instead, the sort of performance that is inculcated is almost robot-like: identify and eliminate targets, move so as to avoid being eliminated. This issue of what player performances and utterances tell us about this relationship to the requirements and affordances of gameplay will be covered in the following chapter. However I say here that this performance is qualitatively different than the heroism suggested in the game’s narrative, or which features more broadly in the discourse surrounding military masculinity: to excel at the game, it is difficult and perhaps counterproductive to play heroically, bravely, with passion; instead, one must play smartly, professionally, with cool precision. Meanwhile, the game also indulges atavistic thrills which are not in keeping with the officially sanctioned conduct of the professional soldier. Rather than instilling a disposition to combat that evokes Arnold Schwarzenegger’s character in *Commando* (1985) (a ruthlessly adept super soldier who goes after the men who kidnapped his daughter), instead players will do best by emulating a different Schwarzenegger character: the cold, highly efficient and ruthlessly destructive Terminator—fittingly enough, a cyborg.

(In)Credible Technology and Information

There are a number of gamic elements which are each ideologically loaded in two ways. First, many elements feature technologies or tactics which seem realistic in their presentation, but in fact take creative license with the capabilities and application of such technologies and tactics. These alterations certainly make the game more compelling to play and in some instances are absolutely vital to functional gameplay. However their ramifications carry ideological weight insofar as they make impossible or highly improbable things seem credible, even commonplace in contemporary warfare. Therefore there is some conflation between elements which provide a particular type of gamic affordance on the one hand, and those which are making claims about authenticity on the other. In both instances, such elements are fundamentally concerned with being “credible” vis-a-vis the playing experience. But here we must ask: what kind of credibility do they seek? What are the ramifications? Furthermore, these gamic functions repeatedly emphasize the importance of informational verisimilitude—lifting the fog of war by removing any doubts about aspects of battlefield space. As I wish to illustrate below, this repeated emphasis on information has ramifications for both the way in which combat is depicted as well as for combat performance. In this game, battlefield space is fundamentally a surveilled space, and this notion is at the heart of both gamic mechanics that affect performance and the ideological loading of the game.

One of the most prominent examples of this dynamic of surveilled space and the application of credible but fictitious elements is the “streak” feature available in multiplayer. When a player makes three kills in a row without being killed himself, he unlocks the ability to call in UAV (Uncrewed Air Vehicle), which grants his entire team the tactical advantage of

seeing their enemies on radar (excepting those who have a perk that makes them undetectable by the UAV). All players are informed either when their own or the enemy's UAV is airborne, meaning that all players know when the battlefield is under "eye in the sky" surveillance. After five kills in a row, the player can call in an airstrike, wherein the player directs the focus of the airstrike on the map. Airstrikes are often quite potent in that the enemy does not receive any warning of their impending arrival (unlike the UAV), and therefore players are commonly caught out in exposed areas and killed by the airstrike. It is quite common for airstrikes to kill several players, resulting in a continued kill streak for the player who called in the airstrike. Once a player has seven kills in a row, he then has the ability to call in a helicopter, which hovers over the battlefield for several minutes (unless shot down by large calibre machine guns), picking off enemies with its powerful gatling gun (the Marines and SAS call in an AH-1 SuperCobra, and Spetsnaz and Opfor call in a Mi-24 Hind gunship).

This feature has a politics to it in that it obscures the real world application of these sorts of technologies and tactical weapons; it also underscores the importance, once again, of battlefield information. In real world conflicts, more than likely an ultranationalist movement and/or an outmatched Middle Eastern state would not have the ability to call in helicopters nor especially airstrikes to the battlefield: the United States and its allies currently have complete air superiority, and are likely to in this scenario (in fact, it is implied that the ultranationalist movement is more or less in its nascent form, meaning that while the *official* Spetsnaz may have the logistical support of the large and proficient Russian Air Force, more than likely the ultranationalist movement has only limited air capacity). Therefore UAV, airstrikes and helicopters would not be readily available (not to mention that UAV technology in the actual battlefield does not have the capability to detect individual soldiers), and moreso these forces

would probably not have the communications infrastructure to be able to call them in even if they were available. But if this game replicated such imbalances in multiplayer rounds, those playing the part of Opfor would probably, at best, have access only to mortars or possibly artillery (which could in theory serve somewhat the same function). Odds are, however, that players playing for these factions would quickly be outmatched.

On the one hand, this depicts the enemies of the US and UK as far more capable than it would seem the single player campaign does, and problematizes the subject-object positioning of the single player campaign in that players regularly inhabit the represented bodies (and to some extent, voices) of these enemies, as well as possess equal capabilities (perhaps even to the extent that such figures are de-essentialized). On the other hand, suggesting that a realistic struggle between such forces would come down largely to individuated tactics and abilities downplays the extraordinary superiority of Anglo-American technology and logistics. Therefore this gametic function, intended to level the playing field among players and add a bit of “spice” to the fray, has a hand in altering the terms under which these forces meet in the narrative/single player campaign. More importantly, it suggests that both belligerents have access to a “knowable” battlefield, meaning that the stakes of the battle are played out not in the extensive differences in logistics, capabilities, and political power, but rather via the individual merits of individual soldiers—that each player’s (soldier’s) performance matters in the outcome of the battle. Again, this is not to say that players confuse this with the single player campaign or the real world terms of engagement; but it does reinforce a particular orientation toward gameplay wherein the combination of battlefield surveillance and the merit of an individual’s impact influence performance.

In terms of gamic affordances, the presence of both UAV and airstrikes are ultimately concerned with the superiority of accurate battlefield information. The whole point of UAV is to be able to detect the precise location of one's enemies—diffusing any tactical advantages they might have and exposing them to tactics to counter whatever locations they occupy. Along these lines, airstrikes are only effective if they can be dropped where enemies are massed in a single place or along a particular line, which suggests two things players on each side must know: for the players calling in airstrikes, they must have a good grasp of where enemies are; for players who are the victims of airstrikes, if they suspect the enemy knows where they are, it is in their interests to create space between each other that makes an airstrike less potent. Furthermore, whether a UAV is in the air or not, players can at any time call up a map which shows them precisely where they and other players are located, and in the HUD map (which is necessarily smaller and less detailed), players can see *exactly* where other players are located if either (1) the UAV shows them, or (2) enemy players reveal their location by firing an un-silenced weapon or are seen by other players. Therefore knowledge about the space as well as the capacities of the opposition is crucial to gameplay and ultimately dictates the player's understanding of his own and others' actions.

Tellingly, however, there are also features of the game which play off of players' utilization of these resources. Some players choose a perk which makes them invisible to UAV radar, and they can also (or alternately) use only silenced weapons when playing. Such players effectively become “invisible” to all but direct sight, meaning that while generally speaking players rely quite heavily on the HUD and the map displays to indicate the location of enemies, this cannot be altogether taken for granted: the player still has to actually be watchful in the more usual sense of looking with his own (or rather out through his avatar's) eyes. Furthermore,

particularly skilled players may try to set up traps by firing in a particular spot so as to make themselves visible and attracting enemies, and then moving quickly into another position so as to set up an ambush. Even in these instances, however, the utilization of battlefield information is front and center: it is a tool which must be used intelligently, not as a crutch, yet it is still nonetheless vital to the game's operations; tactics ultimately revolve around this technology.

Battlefield information is so specific, in fact, even wounding in killing are fully known. The player is notified that he has hit an enemy by way of a sound effect not unlike bullets ripping through cloth, which can be heard at any distance. Further, a player can be certain he has obtained a kill when two important pieces of visual information are displayed: first, he sees a "+5" or "+10" flit across the screen over the location of an enemy he has just killed (players will also see "+1" or "+2" when a teammate kills an enemy that the player has wounded, meaning the player has been credited with an assist); and secondly, the player will see a significant amount of blood spew from the body of the enemy. This is a very important detail: very little blood can be seen at any other time in the game—it is only at the point of a confirmed kill that blood spews from a body. To this end it is not simply a graphical rendering of the effect of bullets on a human body; *primarily* it is a marker of success at eliminating a target. Although the blood spatter itself is a very convincing effect, it as well as the other effects used to indicate killed or wounded soldiers are merely there to ensure certainty. Again, while this is merely a gamic element which caters to the requirements of gameplay (being able to confirm and track "success" in the game), it is an element which venerates *complete* battlefield information.

Another example of this orientation to battlefield information is the way in which gun battles tend to operate in the single player campaign, where the emphasis is on constant forward

movement. It is impossible to retreat or fall back, and as I mentioned previously, sitting and waiting is simply not an option in a scenario in which the enemy infinitely regenerates if the player does not attack with sufficient aggressiveness or proficiency. This is particularly highlighted in one of the first missions the player goes on in the single player campaign, “Charlie Don’t Surf,” which features the invasion of a coastal city via special forces troops who repel into battle from helicopters. This is the player’s first engagement as a member of USMC 1st Force Recon, and immediately the actions of the characters set the tone for the expectations of the player: the marines are gruff, gritty, and move with intent and precision. They also always move forward, as rapidly as possible, and are granted the assurance to do so based on the certainty that an area is cleared: enemies are either alive and shooting, or dead—there are no wounded, no enemies playing possum, no booby-trapped bodies. Furthermore, these soldiers seem to always know where they are going and what they are doing: there is no fear, no confusion, and nobody ever gets lost or forgets. In some respects it seems less a battle than a touchdown drive two minute drill, with the Revolutionary forces playing scout defense, giving significant but ultimately not formidable opposition.

This theme runs through the entirety of the single player campaign: soldiers move ever forward, never fearful or uncertain, always availed of precisely where they are and where they need to be. They do so with aplomb and not a little bravado, and at any point have the ability to contact exterior forces—that is, planes or helicopters waiting nearby for air support or extraction. In short, their certitude ultimately rests on their access to a logistical and technological matrix which equips them with both information (whether committed to memory from intelligence gathered ahead of time, or beamed to them directly in real time), as well as the knowledge that they can rely on some level of support should they find themselves in an untenable position.

To be sure, these are standard aspects of both the generic requirements of FPS gameplay, and tropes which are common to cinema and other media, wherein both the individual conduct of the marines as well as their capacity as a fighting force (and later, in similar regard, the SAS) is portrayed in a way that glosses over the messiness of real world combat, and their lack of confusion and fear therefore seems stoic and brave. However there is another aspect to this. It emphasizes that the soldiers are in a perfect relationship between information and action, which ensures mission success insofar as there are no foul-ups: the sort of tragedy that befell the soldiers in the infamous “Blackhawk Down” incident in Somalia—casualties incurred due to poor information about enemy numbers and equipment, and the horror of getting lost in the maze of streets and alleyways—is an impossibility for the soldiers in this world. In short, their ostensible grit, determination, certitude and machismo is enabled by and ultimately relies on the logistical and technological network to which they have uninterrupted access.

What it is important to emphasize here is that certain aspects of this network, at least as depicted in the game, do not in fact (yet) exist in the real world: soldiers are not equipped with digital maps, HUD’s, perfect intelligence, or debriefed so thoroughly as to have committed entire neighborhoods and/or the blueprints of the buildings in them to memory. These are of course elements which are included in order to enhance the features of gameplay: to keep the player from getting lost, to advance according to stages, to achieve particular gametic goals, and so on. In certain respects, the information on which the player relies is itself a form of power-up: instead of relative invulnerability or vastly superior weaponry, the player is equipped with better information. Such things are nods toward a kind of realisticness and in the game they seem authentic or at least credible, but as such they serve gametic purposes which obscure or downplay how they would occur in reality. One ramification of this is that soldiers are depicted as having

more certitude and aggressiveness than they would normally have. So here again these are elements suited to the genre, intended to augment the gaming experience, which nonetheless carry considerable ideological weight in their application.

I want to emphasize here that I am not claiming these elements are problematic because players believe them to be accurate renditions of what happens in combat. It would seem to be common knowledge that confirming battlefield kills is not as straightforward as documenting blood spatter, for instance. While there may be some confusion among players about the capabilities of UAV, the precision of airstrikes, the absence or presence of various kinds of information available to the infantry soldier and so on, this is not a question of whether *these specific things* are taken as being true or accurate. Rather, it is that their use and application instills a particular kind of performance, and instills an orientation toward combat which is information-centric, that relies on superior logistics and technology, rather than superior strategy or mid-level (as opposed to micro-level) tactics, to win the day. It is not so much whether this is realistic so much as the terms of this have enough credibility to be unproblematically taken on by the player as a part of the game, and it is these *terms* which therefore may be mistaken for being authentic. This is combat waged on the margins of creating and exploiting the advantages that superior information and logistics allow—where an ultimately “knowable” battlefield space is key. In short, the signification of the classic warrior-hero tropes that the game draws on are complicated somewhat by the fact that these men can act with a certain kind of bravado and view their enemy in particular ways that are almost purely an artifact of their techno-logistical superiority: satellite communications, integrated and coordinated forces (helicopters and airstrikes), etc. It is a kind of performance that is only possible under these circumstances, and it is different than the kind of masculine performance that is depicted in wars and/or combat

settings where such capabilities do not exist. It is not hegemonic masculinity per se, so much as the masculinity of the hegemon.

This underscores the link between technological and logistical power and masculine performance, and as we shall see in the following chapter, informational verisimilitude works not only to reveal the enemy, but places the soldier himself under surveillance. It is this aspect, the way in which individual performances are likewise monitored on the battlefield, that becomes key to understanding the disciplinary aspects of a surveilled battlefield space.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have focused my analysis on COD4's gamic fidelity, whereby a number of gamic features make an implicit argument concerning authentic or realistic depictions of combat. Where elements are rendered in high fidelity so as to both create a credible space and provide sufficient detail to cater to certain gamic affordances, there is also ideological weight to this fidelity, as well as ramifications for the type of performances it instills.

These performances complicate the received or presumed understanding of how such games train players to think like soldiers. On the one hand, a number of generic gaming elements, as well as certain elements exclusive to this game, undermine the problematic thematic and representational elements covered in the previous chapter: rather than engaging in gruff, passionate, yet jovial heroism per se, the game emphasizes almost dispassionate efficiency; rather than permanently inhabiting the gaze of the global hegemon, in multiplayer instances players regularly inhabit the bodies of the vilified other without bias or complication. On the

other hand, the game instills a type of performance which is easily transferrable to the skill set required of the contemporary soldier: maximized efficiency and proficiency and managing tremendous amounts of information. The performative aspects of becoming a soldier are therefore not necessarily about a particular mindset towards an enemy or allegiance toward a cause, but rather a disposition toward regulating self-performance that is in keeping with a soldier's combat training: not what a soldier must think, but what a soldier must do.

Furthermore, the veneration of and reliance on perfect battlefield information at once exaggerates the real world capabilities and uses of such technology, as well as inculcates a particular type of performance in which certitude, aggressiveness, ruthless efficiency and proficiency, and disregard for (or reveling in) destruction are not only enabled, but essential requirements for success. To this end, a surveilled battlefield space serves not only as a technology of combat, but a technology of discipline, where player/character performances are enabled/instilled by the logistical and technological apparatus to which they have persistent access—indeed they have no choice in the matter. And in this battlefield, the focus is on the individual in terms of both his alleged affect on the battle (where in multiplayer instances, and to a certain extent in the single player campaign, the mismatch in belligerents is eliminated or downplayed) and his every movement is knowable: recorded movements, number of bullets fired, number of enemies killed or wounded, etc.

All of this suggests that critics of the MEC are right to suggest that these games train players to think like soldiers, albeit in somewhat different ways and on different terms than we might expect at first glance. But while I argue that players cannot ultimately escape the way in which such gamic elements determine a certain type of gamic performance, this still leaves a

great deal unanswered. To begin with, how do players themselves understand their gameplay? If this type of performance is required in order to be successful at the game, are there ways players may resist this, alter it, or ascribe to it different kinds of values based on their own affordances? In short, what do they get out of this game and do variations in these affordances tell us something about both the way masculinity operates in a sphere which is famous for its seemingly contradictory iterations of masculinity (i.e. overwhelmingly male-dominated, highly aggressive spheres, yet allegedly populated by spotty, soft-fleshed nerds and misanthropes)? It is with this in mind we move on to the following chapter, which is an analysis of the gamer fidelity of COD4.

CHAPTER 5

The Gamer Fidelity of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*

In the previous chapter, I described the ways in which the gamic fidelity of COD4 inculcated a style of performance in which the necessary requirements of action (aggressiveness, proficiency, efficiency) and the values inherent in particular aspects of gameplay (venerating individualistic merit and action, fetishizing informational verisimilitude) are conflated with (or rather, become) masculine attributes, instantiated in both the depiction of game characters and the preferred performance of the player. In this chapter, I focus primarily on COD4's *gamer fidelity*: whether and to what extent a game adheres to existing understandings of the experiences that the game provides or inculcates through elements such as genre, mode, etc., which, while not completely overcoming the local context of gameplay (i.e. room, city, nation), are more or less universally understood by regular players. As indicated in Chapter Two, gamer fidelity tells us how the game resonates at the site of play, where meanings and understandings are generated within the gaming community.

In the two previous chapters, the focus of my analysis was therefore necessarily on the game itself: my interpretation of gamic elements in their representational and ludic capacities. Here I shift my analysis to my observations of players: what they talk about, how they talk, how they play, how they interact with others or describe their own engagement with both the text and other players, and what it is that resonates most with players—that is, what it is about the game they find compelling, and what they do as a result. In sussing out gamer fidelity, my aim is to

assess whether and to what extent the ideological and phenomenological aspects of the game are taken on by the players, and what ramifications this has for iterations of masculinity—whether embodied or aspired to. In short, this approach tells us what resonates with the players, and therefore what we might expect about their normative milieu.

I want to reiterate here that in presenting this as an analytical category I am not necessarily making the argument that this represents a sphere of agency or autonomy, or that the determinative aspects of the game are undermined or transformed (although as we shall see, there are certainly ways in which such qualities are present). Rather, this is a description of the utterances and understandings brought to bear by players with respect to the text, both during moments of play as well as in paratexts such as forums, walkthroughs, and machinima.

In this chapter I address some of the issues raised in previous chapters. To reiterate, the narrative, thematic and representational aspects of the game generally promote a kind of military masculinity that is well in keeping with traditional iterations, albeit with a few salient twists. Meanwhile, gamic elements inculcate and venerate a kind of performance which, while certainly closely connected to the military masculinity depicted in the game text, also contains qualities which deviate significantly from the more traditional mode, instead favoring a performativity borne out of operating in a surveilled battlefield space. To be sure, this is a disciplinary trajectory replicated in the sphere of gamer fidelity: player performances are not only tracked by the machine, but this tracking is public, visible to other players who are themselves also tracked, meaning that players are also under constant scrutiny by other players. This raises a number of questions about the nature of social norms and their relationship to the more determinative aspects of gameplay. If the locus of social interaction is ultimately the game, can we assume that

social norms are ultimately derived from the (determinative) aspects of gameplay? If the game values a certain kind of engagement and performance for success, and success is a marker of social status among players, then would it follow that its social discipline is ultimately rooted in the ludic? What social understandings influence (or dictate) performance and behavior in this environment? What are the auspices under which this occurs?

I argue that in the “mangle of play” (cf. Steinkuehler, 2006a) between gamic performance and the norms of gamer culture, we can see performances which, while steeped in hypermasculine and traditionalist masculine tropes, suggest also a masculinity that is deeply troubled and ambiguous. Gameplay in this sphere enables (and instantiates) the performance of a particular form of ludically empowered military masculinity, at the same time that interaction with other players (through play, chat, and occasionally physical proximity) instills a secure domain of masculinity where “boys can be boys.” Playing the game allows for a catharsis not of nationalistic revenge, but rather (military) masculine purpose—a kind of masculine purpose to which very few people would have access or recourse in real life. These masculinities play off of each other and are inculcated through disciplinary modes of gameplay—a ludic connection that has profound implications for iterations of masculinity in the military entertainment complex. We begin with a description of the diegesis of multiplayer gameplay—what happens solely within the circumscribed space of the game. This therefore includes the ludic aspects of multiplayer play as well as that which stems from voice chat—in-game utterances made by players in VOIP via microphone headsets.

Of Noobs and Pwnage¹²: Norms of Play in Multiplayer Combat

The appeal of playing online multiplayer games is multifaceted, but its central feature is competing against other actual human beings: sharing enjoyment of the game, getting pleasure from besting competitors, and facing the challenge of defeating enemies who are far more sophisticated and unpredictable than the game's AI. It then follows that players have developed elaborate means of signaling to each other their relative abilities at the game, as well as developed communal understandings of what constitutes good and bad play and an array of other norms. Game companies both enable and cater to this, and a brief description of the sociotechnical apparatus of COD4 on the Xbox 360 helps us establish the basic parameters of player communication as well as elicits clues about what is expected or valued.

In order to be able to play multiplayer games, a player must subscribe to Xbox Live's monthly service (US\$19.95 in 2009). This grants the player access to the "Xbox Community," through which people can "friend" each other to notify each other when they are online (usually to play together in the same game if possible, or send each other brief messages). Furthermore, through this system players can use points gleaned from unlocking various game features to be applied to purchases in the Xbox Marketplace, such as expansion packs or even full games. Unlockables therefore are not merely used in-game, but allow the player to commodify the time and effort he has put into these achievements. Such items are available on the console's main menu, where players can toggle between the his profile (which tracks stats on all the games he's played, acts as a message center, and so on).

¹² In gaming parlance, to "pwn" someone is to dominate them, thought to stem from a misspelling of "own" in an unknown online game, and having subsequently spread throughout gaming culture.

It is from the main menu that the player also loads whatever game is on either the hard drive or in the disc tray. Once a player selects a game, he exits the main menu and enters the “game world” of that game. Every Xbox console also comes with one wireless controller and a microphone headset that plugs into this wireless controller, through which the player is able to overhear and contribute to voice chat in multiplayer games. It is through the headset that players communicate while playing a game; all text messages can only be read by calling up a separate menu screen, during which the player is unable to also play the game (i.e., his avatar is effectively still or paused). In this particular game, players who have their headsets plugged in are identified in between rounds by a small speaker icon, which lights up when they speak. This is the basic setup of the console. In the following sections I describe common aspects of multiplayer play in COD4, including norms which are typical of in-game player performances and voice chat, as well as outlying or unusual circumstances or events which nonetheless illustrate important points about this game and its players. In this first section, I describe the particulars of the game in such detail for two reasons: (1) these intricacies emphasize the importance of a player’s status; (2) the way in which advancement in the game is structured bolsters my contention that player fixation on the intricacies of the game has ramifications for the masculine values attached to one’s abilities and knowledge in gamespace.

Playing Alone Together: Individual(istic) Merit and the Construction of Prestige

To begin with, multiplayer play is a very different kind of activity from that of single player play. First of all, playing against the avatars of actual human beings is quite different

from playing against the game's AI: actual human avatars move erratically, yet with purpose, and utilize an array of tactics which are beyond the purview of the AI. Furthermore, whereas in single player play a player must advance through a map in more or less a linear fashion through a gauntlet of enemies in predetermined spots, in multiplayer a player's targets/enemies may reside just about anywhere in the map, and as a round progresses and respawning places players at near-random locations, the entire map is an alternately lonesome and treacherous space. Thus multiplayer play is undoubtedly much more challenging, therefore players who can dominate in this space are afforded particular esteem. Status among other players, as we shall see, is extremely important and is both catered to and fostered by the game's reward system. The means by which this is achieved and regulated is instructive of players' relationship to the text and to each other.

To enter multiplayer play, the player must first choose in the menu what type of multiplayer play one wishes to engage in, and upon selecting is then placed in one of hundreds of possible servers.¹³ Such modes include Domination (in which players must try to "dominate" three bases, scoring points based on their ability to control each base), Headquarters (in which each team must compete to secure and hold randomly located "headquarters" on the map), Capture the Flag, Search and Destroy (where the goal is for one team on "offense" to plant and detonate two bombs, and the "defense" attempts to prevent this), Sabotage (where each team vies for possession of a bomb, which once secured they must plant on the enemy's base), Free for All (everyone against everyone else), Mercenary Team Death Match (i.e., random players assigned

¹³ On Xbox 360, the console chooses the optimum server for the player, whereas on the PC version, the player has the option of being able to select the server himself, based on a combination of server proximity (the closer the server is, the less lag there will be) and the type of map that the player prefers.

to teams as they enter the server), Team Death Match (usually populated by players who are friends and/or belong to guilds, although usually anyone can join such servers), or Ground War (a slightly larger version of Mercenary Team Death Match, which features between twelve and eighteen players in each server, rather than the usual four to twelve for all other modes)—the latter three being by far the most popular modes. There are also “hardcore” versions of several of these modes, where players may be more vulnerable to damage or unable to respawn.

Although each mode has its own objectives (blowing up the target in Sabotage, versus massing a total of 750 team points at 10 points a kill), ultimately the goal is for each player to score points in each round by killing or wounding avatars, meeting objectives, and so on. Points scoring is important not only to tell amidst the constant killing and dying who is “winning,” but also (perhaps especially) because these points are translated to XP, which are used as a means of enhancing the player’s profile—that is, in increasing the player’s rank, which is a marker of both esteem as well as access to better weapons, perks and markers of rank such as variations in the paint scheme of one’s gun. In effect, XP is the currency with which one purchases access, weapons, rank and ultimately prestige.

Acquiring XP is extremely important, because one thing that players learn early is the importance of superior weaponry and their tactical application. Although all players in theory have the same capabilities (ultimately it comes down to how good someone’s tactics and playing abilities are), some weapons are clearly more desirable in certain situations and for certain player styles than others, and certain weapons accessories and perks are simply easier to use or more effective. To this end, when a round starts each player must choose to enter battle by selecting one of five possible classes (Assault, Spec Ops [Special Operations], Light Machine Gunner,

Demolitions, and Sniper), which has a designated, customizable weapon type configured with three “perks” (covered in more detail below). Only three of the classes are available to a first time player; Demolitions and Sniper are unlocked as he gains more experience online and gains higher rank. Each class has certain advantages and disadvantages and suit different maps and playing styles. For example, Special Ops usually utilize submachine guns, which are powerful and spit out bullets rapidly, but are not accurate over longer distances. Sniper rifles are extremely accurate at great distances, but have low round capacities and take a long time to reload. And so on. Once a player has selected a class, he cannot change classes until he has either been killed or the round ends. Although the variation between the different classes is mainly about trade-offs concerning different weapons and perks combinations, some weapons are clearly superior to others. Such weapons are “unlockables”: weapons that only become available once a player has achieved a certain rank, which is itself achieved by the accumulation of XP.

When each player starts a profile, his rank is 1, and he is given the most basic weapons in the game for each class. With the accumulation of points and the achievement of higher ranks, the player is subsequently able to unlock an array of weaponry (various assault rifles, submachine guns, light machine guns, sniper rifles, and shotguns) as well as (perhaps even more importantly) accessories and perks. Some accessories add practical value to a player’s formidability, such as holographic sights, anti-recoil grips, silencers, and so on. Others are almost purely aesthetic and act as status symbols: initially players unlock different kinds of camouflage patterns, culminating in the “red tiger” design, which is bright red with black tiger-like markings, but eventually the highest ranking players can access gold plated weapons.

Again, this has little to do with function, and in fact is in some respects a hindrance to the player (since gold, red and blue are much easier to see). Running around with such a weapon, therefore, communicates two things: (1) I have played the game long enough and well enough to acquire this weapon; (2) so proficient am I at this game, that I will dominate you despite handicapping myself with a highly visible weapon.

Perks are used in combinations so as to maximize a player's abilities for particular weapons and/or playing style. A player must select three perks to go with each weapon for each class (obviously the combinations are minimal to begin with, and become more complicated as the player unlocks more weapons and perks). For instance, a player who wants to play the role of a sniper may wish to use perks that allow the player to hold his breath longer while aiming (for greater accuracy), another that reduces footstep noise, and a third that offers deeper bullet penetration, giving the player the ability to, say, shoot through certain obstacles like wooden fences. Players that prefer to charge ahead into the fray might select perks that increase health (making one harder to kill), allow one to sprint for longer periods of time, and increase hip fire accuracy, and so on. It is worth noting here that in order to continue to accrue XP, a player will probably have played each map in the game several dozen times or more. So, not only do higher ranked players have more experience with game mechanics, have better weapons, have more perks, and have probably figured out how to best integrate these things to the best of their abilities, they also have intimate knowledge of the maps: every weed, every brick, every feature of the landscape that they might use to their advantage (including the knowledge of what and where to watch out for other players).

Of course, such incentives continue even after most players have unlocked all weapons, perks, accessories and moved to the highest possible rank (55: Five Star General). Concomitant with these are, for example, a huge list of “Challenges”, which are difficult tasks for which the player receives XP. These include straightforward skill challenges (e.g. in “MVP Team Deathmatch”, one must get the top score overall in a Team Deathmatch) as well as things like “Humiliation” challenges, whereby one is encouraged to humiliate one’s enemy (e.g. in “Return to Sender”, one must kill an enemy by shooting the enemy’s C4 while he is planting it). Many of these are very difficult to get, and players must play a long time and have a good mixture of luck and skill in order to accomplish them. Furthermore, once one has reached the highest level, the player can choose to proceed to “prestige” mode, whereby one basically starts over (that is, loses all perks, weapons and accessories), but whose rank no longer includes the insignia of real-world ranks in the military, but is replaced by prestige insignias which correspond to rare special service medals. Prestige ranks therefore take tremendous amounts of time, dedication and skill to ultimately achieve, and as such are clearly status symbols, valued to such an extent that many players are willing to discard all of the advantages they have thus far accrued.

There are two main points I wish to highlight here. First, players are able to eventually demonstrate their individuality and slake their consumptive (or acquisitional) desires by being offered an array of choices which are partly aesthetic and partly customizable toward a player’s preferred style, or toward a range of styles with which the player wishes to experiment. Although this is obviously built into the game in order to keep players playing, the result is that these incentives provide points of comparison among players, on which basis players form judgments about each other. A player’s preferred class or perks indicates a particular playing

style, and this may invite either acclaim or derision (e.g. snipers are often considered “cheap” players by virtue of having high fire to kill ratios [one shot, one kill] and rarely being in the thick of the fray). Players can compare different challenges and swap stories (or commiserate) about either achieving these challenges or having been the victims of them (i.e. the humiliation of helping to fulfill another player’s difficult challenge). Differentiations in rank and weapons demarcate differences in experience and (usually, though not always) ability—therefore this can become a basis on which to assess a player’s relative skill or luck in killing others; and so on.

Secondly, truly skilled players use these custom features as markers of their abilities and status: gold plated guns and “prestige” rankings indicate a dedicated and talented player, and yet a really talented player will use the perks and weapons combinations either to maximize one’s killing proficiency, or in some cases they let it be known to other players that the player has combined perks and weapons in the least efficient way possible, such that when that player kills other players with proficiency, it sends a signal to the other players that this player is so good that he can dominate despite purposefully handicapping himself. Therefore in the culture of play, experienced players use these features to signal to each others their abilities, to show off, and to instill gamic camaraderie through mutual appreciation. By contrast, an experienced player who prominently displays these features and then gets dominated by less experienced players is the subject of ridicule. In short, these features are markers of accomplishment and indicate status, and are therefore closely tied to a player’s identity.

But these types of player assessments are not limited merely to the ends of rounds in particular servers. With each round the player builds a gamer profile. This profile can then be compared to all players in the entire world who have bought the game and have an active Xbox

Live account. Statistics are also shared and compared with one's friends, and include not only kill to death ratios, but more arcane (but nonetheless crucial and illustrative) stats like accuracy, win percentages, and so on. In this respect a player's abilities on the battlefield are quantified in utilitarian ways (how valuable the player is for points scoring, how "lethal" the player is in direct ways). Unquantifiable elements are therefore relegated to secondary or perhaps non-existent status. For example, there are player actions that can be extremely useful in gameplay which are not quantified and not afforded a particular status, including providing intelligence on enemy movement and positions, providing covering fire, drawing enemy fire, and so on. Some of these activities, in fact, might actually damage a player's individual stats while helping one's team win and/or boosting the stats of other players. The result of not quantifying such things, therefore, is that this instead encourages players to play in manners that boost stats: ruthless efficiency and a certain degree of (selfish) aggressiveness in creating the necessary flow of action to kill as many other players as quickly as possible, as accurately as possible, without himself being killed. To put it another way, it encourages players to largely eschew teamwork, possibly to largely ignore team members altogether, in favor of a virtuoso rampage.

Significantly, in all such matters players are constantly on display: a player's abilities, activities and tendencies are there for all to see. Moreover, after each round a "Leaderboard" dominates the screen, which ranks the players on each team according to total accrued points, and lists the number of kills, deaths, and assists performed by each. Therefore each player can see not only how he performed, but assess the performance of others in the round. To this end, players not only compete to see who can get the best score, but see who performed poorly, demonstrated by a kill to death ratio well into the negatives. Achieving the top rank is an

occasion to boast and trash talk; achieving the bottom rank is an occasion for embarrassment and occasionally scorn or ridicule. Merely “surviving” a round is not, therefore, an option: one must go forth and produce, and this production had better be positive.

In short, success at the game is measured by actions (labor) which are tied to quantifiable outcomes, and these quanta are translated into points (capital) for which players purchase items which signify status among their peers. While players play for “fun”, generally speaking it is *not* fun to play poorly at the game and face the humiliation of both being dominated and heckled. To be lacking in the accoutrements of prestige is a marker either of poor play or of being a “noob” (new player), which is a term equally worthy of scorn because in lacking experience such players tend not to fare well, and have also not figured out other nuances of comportment in gamespace (more on this latter issue below). The twinning of the markers of status with one’s actual abilities and/or experience therefore has a significant impact on a player’s identity there are consequences to poor play (which as we shall see, extend beyond having relatively low status on these terms). Playing with aplomb, therefore (e.g. aggressiveness, efficiency and proficiency) is not merely a requirement for gaming success, but also a requirement for social inclusion.

Cheaters and Virtuosos

While the game, combined with social pressures, instill a particular performance from the player, what separates the “men from the boys”, as it were, is the ability not merely to accrue XP, but to do so with flair. This is the sphere in which players tread in order to move beyond the

challenges set up by the explicit rules of the game (kills result in points, points result in accumulation and advancement, etc.). The very highest acclaims is given to players who impress with their abilities and knowledge. This may include players whose shooting accuracy is uncannily good, or whose tactics are unparalleled (i.e. the ability to goad, trick or otherwise outmaneuver other players in a firefight), or who may have discovered “tricks” to the game that others have not. There is a fine line here, however, between those who do so in a way that is in keeping with socially constructed norms of fair play, versus those who do not: the line between hackers/cheaters and virtuosos.

Players regularly work hard to discern “exploitable” aspects of the gamespace, and part of the task of gaming is to figure out how to best utilize these to the player’s advantage. This can be in straightforward terms, such as the best location from which to snipe or ambush. Players might also find exploitable aspects of the gamespace which challenge communal understandings of what constitutes cheating. All such exploits are elements which are a part of the normal rules and parameters of the game, but which players have discovered that can be utilized in a variety of (apparently unintended) ways. Examples of this may include firing a grenade, blindly and at the opposite end of the map, at *just* the right trajectory to hit the opposing team’s spawn point at the beginning of a round, or the practice of “rocket jumping”—jumping in the air and firing a rocket into the ground, which propels the player higher than he can jump under his own power. The extent to which such actions constitute cheating is of course negotiated, but it would seem all agree that exploits are part of the game. Players who discover them before others are afforded a lot of esteem, and soon it becomes paramount for “serious” players to learn and utilize these exploits, as well. To this end, Youtube and forums are filled with advice on how to find

and/or perform certain exploits, rocket jumping being among the most popular. Once again, the focus is on demonstrating skill at and knowledge of the game: prowess confers status. But just like any such demonstration, it must also be used sparingly: people who, say, rocket jump constantly or at ill-advised times will not impress anyone, but rather could face sanction for “being a douche” or ruining the flow of the game.

Similar complications arise when players find glitches in the game, rather than mere exploits. As a personal example, while charging through a creek bed in COD4, I was shot by a player who had discovered a glitch in the game: s/he found a spot in the embankment where s/he could place the body of his/her avatar *inside* the embankment (whereby shots at the ensconced player were read by the game as hitting mere mud), but which allowed him/her to shoot outward at other players, even up through the ground on the other side—appearing from his/her point of view as if players were running in mid-air. This player was therefore able to shoot other players with impunity. At first, this elicited bemused congratulations on the part of other players in the server: the player had successfully found a “secret” to the game. However, as it became clear that this player had no intention of moving from his/her spot, infuriated and frustrated players who were the victims of this player’s exploit angrily demanded that the player leave and/or stop cheating—a situation which deteriorated since the player eschewed all communication (s/he eventually left the server). Finding the exploit and demonstrating its utility in the first place is the mark of a virtuoso; using it to pad stats and dominate other players by utilizing a patently unfair advantage is cheating.

This kind of enforcement of social rules also applies to player chats, which are often used to impose differentiations of status: players who respect or know each other on opposing teams

may at once socially bond with each other and socially spurn others by making fun of the “noobs” on their own teams. Contrary to the optimism of Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), informal sociability is by no means guaranteed in this otherwise welcoming “third” space of online gaming—players can in fact find a new space in which they are socially humiliated and ostracized, by making unwanted comments or playing poorly, or merely not being part of the clique. This underscores the highly contingent nature of group cooperation and togetherness, where in addition to there being two teams consisting of “us” and “them” (which in games with a contemporary setting have real-world signifiers and therefore politics), there exists the more prominent hierarchy of noobs and badasses.

The stakes of improving one’s skills at and knowledge of the game are therefore quite high, and this is particularly pronounced in the game’s paratexts. To reiterate, paratexts, coined for this purpose by Mia Consalvo (2007), refers to both modifications of the game texts themselves and the surrounding materials that frame players’ consumption, experiences and meaning-making vis-a-vis the game. This includes walkthroughs, cheats, machinima, and other material which are produced by the game company, ancillary or parasitic third parties, or players themselves. As previously stated, paratexts are hugely important for gameplay “because they shape players’ expectations of what it means to play a game properly or improperly” (Consalvo 2007: 183), thereby forcing the player to confront the special mechanics of the gamic elements and how other players understand and deal with them. For our purposes here, my analysis is focused exclusively on the content that is player-generated. I have excluded professional or official paratexts because the purpose of the analysis is to delve into with the gritty, greasy immanence of player-generated and shared media—how they communicate with each other about the game.

First and foremost, nearly all the paratextual discourse I encountered falls into two categories: sharing methods for beating the game or improving one's standing or skill within it, and talking about aspects of the game as a means of "sharing" in the sense of community-building and camaraderie: emotional reactions to gamic content, frustration and anxiety about particular aspects of gameplay, complaining about or praising certain elements of gameplay, utilizing gameplay elements for creative outlets, and so on. Forums are rich in straightforward discussions of this nature. Crucially, the vast majority of posts in most forums fall under the former category of advice and help concerning how to play the game better. This can include everything from opinion-seeking about the best method for completing a particular level (sometimes in a particular way), to what the "best" form of prestige is. It may also include very basic questions of the "how do I" nature: players seeking help in overcoming a part of the game that they have been unable to crack. While overwhelmingly answers to these latter questions tend to be succinct, helpful and supportive, occasionally questions can be deemed (either by individuals, or collectively within the forum) as an indication of "noob" play; that is, the question indicates a sufficiently low level of skill, effort, and/or knowledge that the asker is mocked for posing the question. Such incidents, though rare, indicate that even among players seeking help and common cause among other interested players, there is a requirement for a minimum level of certitude and proficiency in order to be treated seriously.

Certain forum topics inculcate what one might call confrontational or adversarial camaraderie: complaining about specific types of poor or undesirable play (teammates who block doors, spawn campers, etc.), hatred for certain game mechanics (the inability to slide or roll, guns which are over- or underpowered, etc.) and offering snark or fake advice to players

whose questions or posts are the kind with which one might take umbrage. But there is also something at stake in pursuing these topics. For instance, in a thread in which a player asks for the best combination of weapons and perks to blow people up with rockets, some posters answer the question straightforwardly, while one poster responds with with:

Personally when i do that, i use:

Get the fuck out w/ you suck
SMD silenced

RPG-7/flash bang

Just turn off your xbox
Maybe take a nap
Also, eat broken glass

This post indicates that first, this player finds that style of play (using rockets instead of guns) to be objectionable (because rockets are easy to use and cause tremendous damage, skills such as accuracy are not required); second, that players who play this way should not only not be playing, but be punished for doing so. Along these lines, occasionally forums will reinforce or reiterate trends in gamespace, where one player will be picked on, while other players (in this case posters) will pile on and appear to gain appreciation for each other's skill at chastising (and in rare instances, harassing) the picked on player. Therefore once again we see the importance placed on particular forms of proficiency, and those whose proficiency are called into question are demeaned and emasculated.

In a somewhat different vein lie paratexts which feature tips and walkthroughs. Text walkthroughs of the game are fairly common, and range (like other walkthroughs as described by Consalvo [2003b]) from very utilitarian (do this, go here) to extraordinarily detailed and almost

story-like in their presentation. Again, such walkthroughs are almost exclusively focused on the fairly utilitarian goal of providing a guide for players to use in successfully overcoming the game's obstacles and unlocking its secrets—particularly those which provide advice on methods for doing so optimally. Perhaps the most interesting type of walkthrough or advice media, however, are tutorial videos, uploaded to sites like Youtube and Machinima.com. Such videos may not be machinima in the strictest sense, but rather are recorded gameplay sessions of a highly instructional nature, nearly always accompanied with the voice-over of an “expert” player, recorded either in real time or after the event of gameplay depicted in the video. Such videos are frequently very illuminating for a number of reasons.

First of all, most videos in this genre are produced as series, sometimes organized by level, but more often organized according to themes, very much like “how to” series one might find regarding plumbing or home repair. Such themes might include things such as how best to play a certain game mode (e.g. Headquarters), which perks to use with which particular weapons or maps, how to exploit certain maps, how to move and shoot in a particular space so as to maximize one's proficiency, etc. To this end tutorials are essentially giving insider, expert pointers to players who might have the reaction times but not the gaming smarts to figure out or create such tactics on their own. In keeping with my own observations about the nature of gameplay in COD4, most videos emphasize economy of movement and the art of anticipation: learning how other players move, where they are likely to be, how to account for their goals and therefore head them off or surprise them, and so on. In this respect advice may also include subtle aspects of subterfuge, like how to set traps for other players and utilize quirks of the game to one's advantage. An example of this might be to fire off some shots which gives away one's

position to the enemy, then move to an ambush point overlooking both where one fired from as well as likely locations where enemies will be running from to one's former position. These videos therefore take for granted players' ability to shoot and move, instead focusing on the fine details which separate the "men from the boys."

Secondly, the proliferation of such videos, and their manner of presentation (not to mention that they are put out for free and even pushed) indicates that the makers of these videos also wish to tout their own abilities. Generally speaking, the commentary style on these videos tends to be either extremely dry verging on being purposefully laconic (either to seem particularly skilled by virtue of seeming to be unchallenged, or by contrast to seem droll), or boisterous in a way that is intended to inculcate a kind of "kick ass" energy. Videos made in the latter style are almost always produced by players (usually in a guild or as part of a group who operate as if they have their own "show") who are clearly trying to make a name for themselves, either with the purpose of becoming well known sub-celebrities among other players, or perhaps trying to land some kind of sponsorship. This is further evident by the fact that the former style of tutorial almost never includes specific information about who the player is other than his gamer tag, whereas in the latter style of tutorial there is often a brief introduction given by the (filmed) presenter of the video, which can sometimes include a (filmed) "special guest" who is contributing "exclusive" advice. In either case, however, advice and commentary is focused almost exclusively on what is required in order to improve one's skill and be better than other players. Such videos exhibit the importance of (their superior) gamer capital even while they are trying to equip other players with the ability to raise their own.

Such themes are also reiterated in machinima compilations: edited footage from instances of gameplay which are a “best of” showcase of the talents of a handful of players (usually members of a guild), denoted by their gamer tag and accompanied with thrashing rock music such as speed metal (it is nearly always music in this genre: fast-paced, heavy guitars, lots of distortion and heavy snare, etc.—on very rare occasions, heavy hip hop is used). The music, editing, and overall presentation exudes aggression and the aestheticization of high speed violence. These compilations are clearly meant to tout the abilities of these players and/or their guild, and the apparent utter lack of self-reflexivity in their presentation (to the point of cliché) would seem to indicate a legitimate and earnest investment in both excelling at the game and advertising their proficiency and prestige—such compilations are about showing off and shoring up one’s status.

Such instances underscore the degree to which the meaning that is taken from and ascribed to the game is imbued with the cultural norms of the gaming community. In short, much of the intensity of gaming experiences (enjoyment, amusement, frustration and hostility) hinges on players’ abilities and familiarity with the expectations of the gamespace, both social and ludic. These negotiated and contextual aspects of social interaction form the basis of gamers’ understandings of gaming activities, and the ways in which these understandings (ludic and discursive) become codified and solidified form the basis of gamer fidelity.

This is not, however, exclusively an artifact of the gamic interface in isolation. Several aspects of FPS play, from the types of play that players find to be “fun” (i.e. why certain generic elements have proven to be popular and are now near-universal in the genre), to the discourses surrounding gameplay (aggressiveness, posturing, trash-talking, camaraderie, etc.), are heavily

imbued with particular understandings, discourses and performances of a particular masculinity. The way in which players display their abilities is to some extent a natural function of any competitive environment. However it is the *manner* in which this happens that is instructive: overt displays of bravado, dominance, humiliation, and especially knowledge (through the use of game exploits, unusual firing positions, advanced tactics, or perfect utilization of the space such as “blindly” throwing grenades into far corners with repeated success). Clearly these are not merely “gamer” attributes, but indicative of masculine social interaction—a type of interaction which is displayed in particular in the way players speak to each other, to which we now turn.

Manning the Defenses: Maintaining Gamer-Space

The way in which players communicate with each other not only tells us something about their collective understanding of the utility of gaming elements, the importance of game-related status, and the “correct” manner in which to play. It also indicates something about norms of comportment—that is, social performance among gaming peers. The way in which players interact with each other extra-diegetically (i.e. outside of the explicit confines and mechanics of the game world) is, to be sure, heavily imbued with masculinized language, gestures and assumptions. At first glance, such masculine traits and tropes are so overt that it would be fairly easy to categorize them as alarmingly hypermasculine: the use of misogynistic and homophobic language, the aggressive and sometimes suggestively violent nature of interaction, and so on. However there are subtleties at work here, and making such sweeping characterizations inadequately addresses the influence of contingency and the manner in which players’ actions

constitute a form of aspirational boundary work. First, let us examine the way in which players talk to each other over voice chat.

Of Fags, Bitches, and Braggadocios: Discursive Norms of Online Play

Unlike most multiplayer PC games, Xbox consoles do not have keyboards, and thus all “chat” in multiplayer games is voice and not text (it is possible to text message, but this is infrequently used during gameplay). Therefore although most players are effectively anonymous to each other, they nonetheless cannot help but reveal certain aspects of themselves if they choose to speak: gender, approximate age, and to some extent race or ethnicity (indicated through tone, accent, word choice, semantics, etc.). There is therefore some stake in chatting online, and the interactions between players may often reflect assumptions they have about each other. At the same time, however, there is a fairly consistent quality to chat which seems to transcend all such boundaries, and that is the highly masculinized (and to a significant extent misogynistic) discourse of online play. This discourse reveals both something about the nature of expectations of gamic performance and how this performance is tied to a particular mode of masculinity which is playful and somewhat self-reflexive, yet at the same time perhaps hypermasculinized in terms both its coarse language and aggressive (perhaps even overcompensating) posture.

For instance, rarely does an online session pass without at least one player uttering ostensibly homophobic or misogynistic epithets. Faggot (or nearly as often, “homo”) is probably one of the most commonly uttered words in mulitplayer play when referring to other players.

Interestingly, it is not necessarily a catch-all epithet, but rather uttered specifically toward opposing players who are either very good at the game or very lucky—in either case players which have caused the epithet-uttering player a great deal of misfortune or difficulty. Examples of this include, “Oh you fucking homo!” in reaction to a player which has deftly managed to kill a player, or “C’mere, you fucking faggot!” shouted at a player which the epithet-uttering player is attempting to hunt down. Although the term is clearly derisive, it is entirely unclear whether this has any direct connection to homophobia per se; rather it is a commonplace and almost playful epithet in keeping with terms like “motherfucker” or “asshole”—ironically, in context it seems these latter terms are in fact deemed to be worse, and are usually uttered with a tinge of legitimate anger or malice which rarely accompanies faggot or homo. In fact, homophobic terms in general tend to confer a great deal more playfulness and respect than overtly misogynistic terms like pussy, a term which is usually leveled at players deemed to be weak, ineffectual, or prone to complaining. Bitch, meanwhile, is perhaps the most flexible: “You bitch!” may connote more or less the same meaning as “You faggot!”, while “Take that, bitch” indicates both dismissiveness and confers upon the object player a certain degree of subordination—to make another player one’s bitch.

References to rape and male penetration are also extremely common, and have specific contextual meanings. For instance, a team or person which is thoroughly dominated in a round or in a single combat encounter is often described as being “raped”, and threats to “rape” someone are understood to mean to thoroughly dominate in the gamespace. Similarly, on occasion players will reference sodomy when issuing challenges to players or referring to the outcome of particular in-game events, again usually with respect to one person or team

dominating another: “Ooh, you just got *ass*-raped!”; “Get my cock out of your mouth and play!”; “Stick *that* up your butt!”; etc. This conflation of various sexual metaphors requires some clarification:

- Players who get dominated are raped, and may be described as being pussies or bitches by the dominators
- Players who dominate may be described by those who are dominated as faggots or homos, indicating that while the dominated may concur that they have been raped, they are not pussies but remain implicitly male, meaning they have been victims of unwanted sodomy

All such terms serve as small points in a broad constellation of sexualized language that is common in online play (and which is not limited to this game, or necessarily FPS, but can be found in other types of multiplayer games). Again, although it is unclear that such terms indicate that players are necessarily homophobic or misogynistic *per se*, these actions and terms carry with them particular meanings which undeniably derive from such attitudes: being subject to (homosexual) advances or acts is undesirable and worthy of ridicule, serving as a metaphor which determines hierarchies of domination, empowerment, and “manliness.” That is, only dominant individuals who never suffer such acts are the manly ones, although there is some effort on the part of their victims to make them less manly by virtue of describing the dominators as being gay.

However, I want to emphasize here that this taxonomic understanding is not fully fleshed out nor appears to be a part of players’ conscious development of terms. Rather, most of

them operate in the abstract, normative sense. Rape, for instance, is bandied about somewhat mirthfully, signaling a detachment from its real world equivalent, connoting only a particular form of dominance. Similarly, although pussy is used straightforwardly as a misogynistic term, its use here is well in keeping with its use in the broader culture: conveying weakness or ineffectualness, and not typically considered to be directly invoking female genitalia—a marginality it shares with the word “gay”, which may sometimes be used to describe something lame or unwanted, where the word’s purveyors might deny espousing homophobia.

My point in making this distinction is not that any such language uses are unproblematic, of course. Rather, this indicates something about intent and frame of mind: these terms, while steeped in aggressive, hypermasculine nomenclature, are not typically uttered with malice or as a means to overtly challenge other players’ masculinity *per se*; instead, they are used in normative terms as playful rejoinders and mild taunts, accepted by the culture in ways that other language (such as racial and ethnic epithets or compound epithets such as “cocksucking motherfucker”, which carry with them considerably more animus) typically are not¹⁴. Whether it is “better” or “worse” that such terms are so normative as to have little or no “punch” in discourse, it is important to make this distinction in order to point out that this aggressive language is not usually uttered in ways that are nearly as aggressive as the content of the language; that is to say, they are often (though not always) uttered as a matter of course (and not infrequently, with a bit of mirth or competitive joy), not necessarily as a means of directing “hot” aggression at other players.

¹⁴ That said it is not entirely uncommon to hear players call other players “nigger”, no matter what the presumed race of the players, though this sort of language is on the very margins of acceptability, and is usually met with considerable push back.

Players appear to have some level of self-reflexivity about the nature of this discourse, evident in forums (either in playful reiterations of this kind of language, or in complaining about the extent of it), as well as in material such as humorous machinima. Humorous machinima tend to be relatively short pieces which tend to parody either military life or certain absurd aspects of the game itself. For instance, in the film “The Badass 1: Lesbian Gold Guys”, the director details his (clearly much enjoyed) exploits of team killing other players (specifically, those who “ask for it”, beginning with “singing players = kids”), and noting their use of (usually homophobic) epithets in reaction to being killed (wherein each utterance of “homo” or “fag” or similar warrants the insertion into recorded game footage of famous gay men or men engaged in obviously gay behavior, such as open-mouthed kissing). The film’s humor is twofold: playing on the vicarious entertainment factor of rudely killing players on one’s own team (typically a ban-able offense), made funnier by the director’s playful calling attention to (and therefore undermining of) players’ use of homophobic epithets. Films of this sort play on players’ understanding of gamer culture and typical playing norms, at once critiquing and celebrating this as an ingrained feature of gamer culture.

This use of language is tied to another aspect of masculine discourse that can be described as masculine “puffery”, which may include a mixture of bragging or specific threats leveled at players. This sort of language can be used playfully or ironically (particularly by players who are known to be lesser in their skills than other players in the server), but is probably most frequently wielded in the most overt ways by players who give the impression of feeling under threat or who are invested enough in the outcome of the game that they act out angrily toward other players who “piss [them] off”, or in reaction to things not going their way. In fact,

perhaps the most commonly heard utterance is purely exclamatory reactions to the game itself, and nearly all of this is negative. These are attempts to draw attention to gamic instances which have not gone well for them, and which usually compel in players complaints and in some cases even expletive-laced, raging tirades. This is the one aspect in which there is unequivocally an anti-social, perhaps even violent, effect of the game: when players are made to feel impotent (whether through their own lack of skill or the dominating skill of other players), many become extremely hostile.

Although it is hardly surprising that players would become upset at not doing well at the game, it is notable that they feel the need to express this to the rest of the team. What they are communicating, therefore, is two things: (1) they feel compelled to both emotionally vent and make a display of their dissatisfaction; (2) they are aware that their actions are judged by the other players, and so they want to frame this judgment in advance via a litany of excuses: I did poorly in this round because that player's too good, my team is not good enough, I suffered terrible luck, my ping is too high¹⁵, and/or this game is "bullshit" (meaning its ludic elements and rules are unfair or absurd). This anger and lashing out suggests an emotional investment in this activity which moves beyond the mere psychological impact of winning or losing as such; I submit that this reaction is indicative of the extent to which winning and losing in this context is tied to one's identity, exaggerated in both triumph and defeat.

¹⁵ Ping is the term for the distance between the player's computer and the server; the higher the ping number, the greater the distance, and the slower this player's actions appear in gamespace because the information, and the player's reaction to it, takes more time to travel this distance. Players with high ping numbers, therefore, are at a tremendous disadvantage.

I would like to note here that whatever the mode of chat, most of it (other than exclamatory) takes place not in-game, but rather in between rounds: the time between when one round ends, and the few minutes it takes as mandatory rest time (i.e. dictated by the game) before the next round begins. During this time, players may enter or leave the server, and it is not uncommon therefore for the number of players to be constantly rotating. It is here that actual conversations, as opposed to exclamations or brief asides, are commonly struck up, particularly where unaffiliated “randoms” (i.e. players without guilds) have proven themselves good enough to be openly recruited by guild members who are playing together in a particular server. It is also, of course, a forum for everything else: sustained personal attacks (which may often include a piling on), sustained whining about misfortune, and occasionally a mixture of gentle ribbing, international exchange, and light chat about weather, current events, etc.

These findings corroborate those of Natasha Chen Christensen (2006), who asserts that “the reproduction of masculinity online [is] aggressive, violent, misogynist and homophobic [in ways that] may be more stereotypical and rigid than in ‘real life’”, where “chat function of the game is utilized in order to both dramatize superiority as well as manage defeat.” Certainly, such language is used in this way, although I caution against Chen’s interpretation that this language indicates an actual intensification of hypermasculinity. The impression I have from hours of listening to such chat is that in part it is employed with such frequency because it is a space where players “get away with” with discourse (both in language use and style) that is simply not tolerated in off-line interactions—the sphere in which “boys will be boys” away from the prying eyes of (feminizing) social order (and as I indicated above, not necessarily with animosity). In other words, the use of *hypermasculine* discourse is an overcompensation, a constant

engagement in boundary work, where players can exhibit/exude a form of masculinity that may or may not correspond to that which they are able to wield in the “real world”, not least including a realm thought to be (and to a great extent maintained to be) exclusively male. Therefore the use of language here seems much more in keeping with the “subordinate masculinity” described by Mia Consalvo (2003c), where males act out online in order to compensate for the extent to which their masculinity is called into question or undermined in their off-line lives. Indeed, it is a discourse which suggests a masculinity which is more aspirational than practiced, performed online in lieu of its performance in “real life”; in gamespace, a person can say whatever he likes without serious consequences, and he can dominate a virtual space through martial prowess in a way that he most likely cannot in physical space.

Bravado, Bitching and Blokiess: Observations from a Cybercafe

As briefly explained in Chapter Three, my reasons for entering a cybercafe in remote Dunedin, New Zealand were twofold. First, the cybercafe can serve as a test of the virtual in the context of the situated—a demonstration of the extent to which gamer fidelity resonates in a specific context. Secondly, New Zealand serves as an interesting comparison to the United States in a number of ways. First, New Zealanders have an ambivalent relationship with American and British media culture, which is both embraced and derided in this Anglophone country. Second, in terms of national political culture, New Zealand generally sees itself as playing a small but important role in the economic and military interests of the West. Third, New Zealand’s demographics and cultural, institutional, legal and political history provide a

number of parallels to the United States in terms of race relations, structural similarities, and so on. Finally, broad cultural understandings of masculinity operate according to similar modes as those in the United States, but are somewhat more extreme by comparison, with a greater emphasis on stoicism, hardship, mateship, and the authenticity of manual labor.

These attributes are such that I can assess the resonance of a text with an ostensibly American point of view in a context in which this viewpoint may itself be treated (or as the case may be, taken on) with some ambivalence, in a number of respects. Broad cultural, demographic and developmental similarities would indicate that players would likely to be similar to those in the United States in terms of socio-economic status and therefore occupy similar relationships to games/gaming more broadly; familiarity with American cultural tropes would suggest that these would be recognized and may resonate as such, but they are unlikely to be similarly normative—meaning that New Zealand players may be in a better position to notice and be critical of such tropes. Finally, norms of masculinity which operate in similar ways but which tend more toward traditionalist hegemonic norms may reveal whether or not masculine performances which are nearly identical to those of American players are likely to be an artifact of “universal” masculine norms inculcated in gaming culture; by contrast, masculine performances which deviate significantly from American norms of gaming performance indicate a masculine performance situated in a local/national context. I wanted to know: would players here exhibit the same traits during play that I tended to hear over voice chat from players in the United States? How would they react to the affects of the game, as gamers, in gamespace? Was the performance of gaming and masculinity largely the same, or crucially different? Would there be something about either distance or proximity (i.e. the dialectics of virtual and physical immanence) that made their

interactions different than what I experienced in cyberspace? With this in mind, I found a popular, centrally located gaming cafe and set to work. Prior to relaying my observations, I must produce one caveat to my research: I was repeatedly rebuffed in my efforts to interview players at another time and location about their gaming.

One enters this cybercafe through a skinny, unobtrusive door at street level, which immediately requires the patron to walk up creaky, particle board steps to the second level. As one reaches the top there is the reek of stale beer, ancient smoke (clearly caked on over many years, as indoor smoking has been banned since 2004), and sweat. Directly to the front and left is the dingy pool hall; directly to the right is the even more poorly lit cybercafe. A counter commands the front left side near the entry way to the cybercafe, from which emanates the only constant light source, a bright fluorescent tube. Behind the counter is a cooler, well stocked with various caffeinated soft drinks and energy drinks. There are also two computer terminals and a cash register, and staring intently into one of the computers is a young man in what might be deemed prototypical “hipster” gear: military-style cap and shirt, rocker jeans, Converse sneakers, polypropylene undershirt, and thick-rimmed glasses. He is “on duty” tonight, begrudgingly breaking away from his own game to attend to me. I inform him that I want to sign up for a new account, and he sets it up for me, (too) quickly going over various policies and informing me about how to sign in. “Take any of those computers on that bank,” he says, pointing to his left.

Opposite the counter is a large flat screen TV, which plays both DVD’s and satellite television, which is available for rent by the hour (although frequently it is broadcasting one or the other merely as background). Around this central space are a handful of chairs and bean

bags. To the right of this screen, near the door, is a bank of five computers, all occupied by people playing *World of Warcraft*. To the left, away from the door, about a dozen people are seen playing various games, mainly fantasy MMORPG's, strategy games, and any one of an assortment of FPS—COD4 and *Battlefield 2*, I later learn, are far and away the most popular. Although generally speaking Dunedin is a relatively cold and damp climate, this cybercafe has most of its windows thrown wide open to help dissipate the considerable heat put out by so many operational computers, as well as undoubtedly air out the mild but nonetheless noticeable body odor which permeates the entire cybercafe. The ancient paint along the edges of the windows is both chipped and in places mildewed, revealing the original native timber beneath. The carpet, serviceable but otherwise short and rough, a variety akin to what one might see in a community church annex or a small municipal building, appears to be either brown or plum colored (it is difficult to tell, due to both light and lack of cleanliness) and is riddled with dark stains and sticky patches.

While the exteriors of the computers have seen better days, not to mention the furniture around them, the screens and hardware innards are top of the line, with the very latest video cards, processors, etc. Upon booting up, the player is taken to a fairly sophisticated main menu, built exclusively for this particular cybercafe, which has a complicated industrial aesthetic (i.e. the appearance of steel air locks and blast doors, turning gears, etc.) and a female voice saying “Welcome...” From here, patrons can select from an array of over four dozen different titles, organized by genre. Clicking on the name or icon of any one of these then loads the game. Amidst a seemingly unkempt and slightly depressing place, housed in what was (or at least could have been) a historic building, there is an aura of global high tech.

Over the course of the thirty plus hours I spent in the gaming cafe, playing COD4 against or alongside players, or (more frequently) watching them play with or against each other, a few things stood out as being the usual course of things. For starters, there was a rotating crew of approximately six people who had to run the front desk—five males and one female. Each of them in turn were clearly gamers, spending all of their spare time (even while behind the front desk) playing some sort of game. While it seemed that the men tended to play a variety of games, I was unable to see the lone female play anything other than *World of Warcraft*. There was always at least one female gamer in the room, and sometimes as many as four or five, but they always remained significant minorities, and rarely played either with a group of males or as a group unto themselves (there was one exception in each case: a girl who played with several guys in a session of *Counter-Strike*, and one group of young women who all played together in a strategy game, the title of which I was unable to discern). The typical clientele tended to be males in their low to mid-twenties, roughly 70% Pakeha (ethnic white in New Zealand) and 30% Asian—most of whom appeared to be, based on mannerisms, utterances, modes of dress, and so on to be international students from China, Malaysia and Korea (in all my time there, I encountered only one person who appeared to have Asian racial traits but who was, by accent and mannerisms, a Kiwi).

While any given night there would be between eight and fifteen players at any one time in the cybercafe, Friday nights tended to be the busiest times—it was not infrequent for a handful of young Asian men (usually international university students) to spend their evenings playing, as well as a small group of young Kiwi men (also usually university students) to show up and play for a couple of hours before then leaving to go drinking at a pub.

Generally speaking, people who come in as individuals or as a pair largely kept to themselves, in every respect: playing their own game, keeping their reactions in check to some extent, not fraternizing much with other patrons. Pairs of players who played FPS nearly always played each other in the same server, usually in an exclusive one-on-one game, but occasionally in the same server as part of a larger group of (telepresent) players. The difference between these game modes elicited very different reactions, although both are shot through with a similar theme.

For instance, players playing each other, and only each other, tended to enjoy intense bouts of exclaiming camaraderie-building, boisterous epithets and challenges at each other: “Oh you fucker, I *had* you!” “Haha, you can’t shoot for shit!” “Ah, you dick!” and so on. Not infrequently, one of the two players was consistently better than the other one, whereby the discourse basically consisted of these sorts of exchanges gradually giving way to the increasingly frustrated, excuse-laden comments of the victimized party dominating the interaction, with the superior player either saying relatively little (out of pity) or guffawing and occasionally interjecting with some gloating (which was less common than the former). In all cases, the action appeared to center entirely around each player’s enjoyment of killing his friend, with special delight taken in extreme humiliation, extreme luck, or incredibly intense exchanges (particularly when something unusual or slightly silly would happen, like both running out of ammunition and having to fight with knives, or one player badly outgunning the other player—in which case tremendous delight was had either at a player who had to constantly run away and cower, or when the outmatched player managed to miraculously beat the odds and kill the other player). These interactions, then, were almost exclusively about the ability of the game to

engender friendly competition and/or exercise tensions within the friendship, but still conducted according to norms of masculine competitiveness described in above sections.

Pairs who fought as part of a larger group of telepresent players (i.e., two friends logged into the same server, whose other players were located elsewhere) talked somewhat differently, whether they fought against each other or as the same team. Players would frequently remark upon the skills of other players and even engage in quasi-cheating such as sharing information about each other's locations or those of other players. On several occasions it became apparent that some pairs would share this information for the express purpose of trying to kill each other, and only each other, to the extent possible in these servers—a tremendous challenge in a game in which one is killed with extreme frequency, often in sub-minute intervals. Therefore in such instances this was also about sharing and competing—not, pointedly, fighting *together*.

Groups of players interacted somewhat differently. I should note here that in the time I spent observing, I did not observe members of a common guild play in the cybercafe—whether because I merely missed them, or because in this context any players serious enough to belong to a guild play at home, or some other reason, I cannot say. Therefore the groups I observed were typically friends or acquaintances, ranging from four to nine players, who also ranged in ability from hard core gamers to casual players. All, however, appeared to be familiar enough with the game that they understood the terminology, dynamics, and general pace or flow of the game. That said, hard core players made their presence known through “expert” opinions and advice given throughout sessions, whether recommending particular tactics, weapons combinations, “tricks” to particular maps, or merely how to pull up a particular set of options in the menu screen. Furthermore, among groups who had the opportunity to play as a team, these figures

became de facto leaders, and as such de facto field generals and cybercafe bullies: chastising players who played poorly, cajoling team members to accomplish a particular task, directing tactical plans, and so on.

Generally speaking, groups tended to be relatively raucous in both their play and talk. Interestingly, bodily movements in reaction to in-game action—facial expressions, head tilts, gesticulation, etc.—were often much broader and exaggerated among group players than among solo or paired players. Similarly, verbal reactions tended to be louder and more vociferous, clearly intended to be heard by the whole group (even when, curiously enough, all wore headsets, meaning they could hear each other perfectly clearly in the game). Player discourse tended to fall into four categories¹⁶:

(1) Vituperative exclamation: shouting loudly in reaction to in-game events, most often to something bad that happened, and nearly always with an obscenity, “Fuck!” being the most common; occasionally players would give whoops of delight and/or success, but this was far less common. The exclamations appeared to be not only a genuine reaction, but their volume appeared to be performative, to let other players in the group know about it—quite similar to exclamations in telepresent chat elicited by players who were playing poorly. This would seem to indicate some investment in demonstrating intense engagement with the game, as well as the stakes involved in a player’s actions and results with respect to the rest of the group—particularly since such exclamations would be

¹⁶ These categories apply to English-speaking groups of players. Although outward body expressions would indicate that players who did not speak English engaged in similar patterns of behavior, I was unable to consistently verify this.

uttered in reaction to getting killed or missing out on a kill or some other sought-after action.

(2) Observational/sharing: often consisting of telling a brief story about in-game events, usually with respect to things that the player finds amusing, frustrating, or tactically useful. Examples may include: “I totally snuck up on this dude from behind,” “Ah man, there’s this sniper covering the alley there,” “Did you see that stupid bastard run across the road? I can’t believe he’s not dead,” “Jesus, I died by falling off the goddamn roof?!” and so on. Effectively these are meta-commentary on the game, or rather, the actions and events of gameplay, for the purpose of mutual appreciation or utility.

(3) Camaraderie-building: whether spoken or shouted, discourse that was aimed at engaging other group members *as* a group. In instances in which groups were playing as a team, this took the form of team-building, in the affirmative as in “Come on guys, we can do this!”, or in the sardonic negative, as in “Well, we’re hosed. Way to go, fellas, hahaha!” Most of the time, however, this would take the form of gentle (and sometimes not so gentle) ribbing of other group members. Usually this would be with reference to a player’s in-game performance, particularly if it was poor, which often resulted in a pile-on, and whereby the player who was piled on could assert himself and maintain some dignity and respect by giving back nearly as good as he got, yet with a humility which recognized his poor performance. Not infrequently these exchanges would often bleed into teasing of a more personal nature, sometimes with respect to past events about which

group members were privy (the territory of inside jokes). The most frequent exchanges of this nature dealt primarily with three things: suggestions about the nature and frequency of a player's masturbation habits, expressions of sexual desire for or the sexual habits and qualities of the player's mother or girlfriend, and occasionally light-hearted accusations of a player's homosexual and/or pedophilic predilections. Again, it was incumbent upon other group members to single out particular players (usually rotated through, although not infrequently one member of the group was the object of this kind of friendly ridicule moreso than others), and for the teased player to respond with aplomb. Failure in either respect tended to result in a dampening of interaction and what would seem to be a somewhat deflated *esprit d'corps*.

(4) Ironic or parodic “gamer” discourse: instances in which common gamer tropes or utterances were utilized or made fun of, including vocalizations of gamic content such as the in-game voices shouting warnings such as “Enemy UAV is airborne!” On more than one occasion, players would not only utter this phrase in their best approximation of how the game character says it (in a thick Russian accent), but would either (1) build on this to start speaking other random phrases in this same stereotypical and agitated Russian accent (“I am drinking a Red Bull!”) or (2) say the phrase in different accents, such as rustic Kiwi, Chinese, Scottish brogue, etc. Occasionally this mockery would also extend to common phrases uttered by gamers while gaming, including excuses and complaints, in this case usually uttered in a whining falsetto: “No noob tubes¹⁷, you guys!” Such

¹⁷ A “noob tube” is the derisive term for the grenade launcher, so called because getting hit by a grenade means instant death, and it takes very little skill in order to use one; hence only “noobs” are wont to use it in their desperation to keep pace with more skilled players.

utterances were aimed at inculcating mutual appreciation for gaming as an activity and the quirks and cliches of this game in particular.

A common aspect to all of this was the fact that the game's content—the political or ideological aspects of representations within it—were never commented on. That is, not once did I personally witness or overhear utterances which engaged with this material beyond its purely gamic or gamer functions (i.e. its relevance either to mundane and utilitarian aspects of gaming, or at most regarding content utilized for #4 above)—a finding well in keeping with my other observations of online play. Furthermore, these utterances were often exaggerated both in tone and particularly in volume—not only to be heard, but to be vocally dominant. Several of these utterances often came with exaggerated gestures such as arms up high in the air, fists bounding tables or keyboards, headsets thrown violently, and so on—gestures rarely, if ever, performed by players playing alone.

In these ways such behaviors resembled the sorts of gestures which Christensen (2006) describes as a player demonstrating the potency of “his real life physicality” in order to compensate “for his loss of masculinity in losing.” Indubitably, players whose performances were poor often expressed desires either to leave well before others in the group were ready (signaling having given up), or pleaded with the group to stay longer once consensus had been reached that they were going to quit for the night (in a vain attempt at redemption). In this latter respect, one might say that what makes gameplay so compelling is not merely the hooks and other such gamic affordances; it is also, perhaps even primarily, that only the truly gifted player can avoid near-constant emasculation, and so what keeps players playing is the chance (or rather

the compulsion) to reclaim their pride and self-respect. This suggests that the activity of playing this game is the locus of a tripartite masculine proving ground: one must continually demonstrate one's masculinity by playing, talking and acting, and failure to sufficiently demonstrate this in at least one of these three areas severely undermines the status of one's masculinity. Moreover, the required masculine codes tend to be distilled from hegemonic masculinity, but with a twist: the efficiency and proficiency of the gamer.

War, What Is It Good For: The Apolitical Politics of Gamer Culture

As I noted in Chapter Four, the politics of COD4 are not exactly subtle. The game depicts a world in which smelly, swarthy Arabs and Soviets torture and kill people on their way to exact revenge against the West, where American and British special forces are justified in applying whatever force necessary, and so on. In short, it is a text rife with racism, jingoism, imperialism and implicitly in support of a brand of fighting man (and his techno-logistical apparatus) well in keeping with MEC critics' complaints about the valorization of "perpetual war." In this section I would like to briefly touch on how this political content is engaged by (or not) players.

First of all, I should note that overwhelmingly, players simply do not discuss the game's politics. In scouring hundreds of threads in dozens of forums, I did not come across a single significant discussion about the political content of the game. In logging hundreds of hours of gameplay, not once did I overhear chat that directly referred to the game's narrative or thematic content in a way that would seem "political" as such. The vast majority of paratextual content,

including machinima, are all oriented toward the gamic affordances described above with respect to improving one's performance and learning more about the game in detail. This is in itself is significant, in that it suggests that whether players reject, accept, or ignore this aspect of the game's content, it is in essence deemed to be *unimportant*. In all my research I came across only a few things that we might use to get at players' engagement with these aspects, which I believe may nonetheless provide some instructive clues about gamer culture's relationship with such themes and how they connect to notions of masculinity in this sphere.

To begin with, in the hundreds of hours this author logged in multiplayer rounds, in only one instance was there even a single remark on the context of the game. At the beginning of one round in which I was assigned to Opfor, another player yelled out, "Dirka! Dirka! Dirka! Kill the infidel!" This quote requires some explanation: "Dirka! Dirka! Dirka!" is a mock-Arabic nonsense phrase used in the satirical film *Team America: World Police* (2004), which in the film is usually accompanied by (in no sensical order) the words "Muhammad", "Allah" and "Jihad." These four words form almost the entirety of "Arabic" spoken in the film. The intent of this in the film is potentially threefold: to satirize Hollywood depictions of Arabs, to satirize American perceptions of Arabs, and to satirize the sound of Arabic to non-Arabic speakers. Of course, in effect this also means that the satire may not translate—that instead it is merely making fun of Arabs/Arabic.

This polysemic aspect of the text is reproduced in a polysemic, intertextual moment of the utterance at the beginning of the round: the meaning is not entirely clear or straightforward, but it nonetheless is in dialogue with the context of the text (playing from the point of view of a presumably Arab soldier who is fighting American troops). To some extent, the meaning of the

explicit content of the message is in the end unimportant, in context. Rather, it was what the message itself communicated: a jaunty, winking engagement with the text that was meant to instill a bit of humor and potentially camaraderie. In other words, whether the player was mocking Arabs directly, or mocking the game's simplistic rendering of an Arabic enemy, the player's utterance was clearly intended as a bit of levity mixed with a somewhat ironic but nonetheless earnest attempt at instilling team spirit—it invoked politics solely for gameric purposes.

The only other instances of players invoking the political content of the game were in narrative machinima, which can be either dramatic or humorous. Narrative machinima are typically made by recording player actions in an exclusive game space, usually a locked server. Sessions are recorded by positioning the in-game “camera” (not an exterior, “real life” camera) at strategic locales throughout the space, then painstakingly moving one's avatar into place and directing it in accordance with the required action. In a sense the process is somewhat like stop motion animation or filming with marionettes, particularly given that such machinima are the sort which gave machinima its name: particularly in the case of dramatic machinima, the cinematography and editing are cinematic, and usually so are the story structures (adhering by and large to Hollywood stoytelling styles in the action and occasionally film noir genres). Even credit sequences and specialized techniques like flashbacks and cold opens are usually done in cinematic style. Of course, there are limitations to what the player can do with COD4's locales, *mise en scene* and particularly the often troublesome fact that avatars are incapable of lowering their guns or gesticulating in any but a small handful of ways. Humorous machinima sometimes make light of this fact, whereas dramatic machinima typically find ways around this (typically by

mandating either action or a situation in which players can talk at length with guns pointed without it being strange or awkward, such as dialogue between snipers in position or reconnaissance personnel). Occasionally directors will use existing game footage (say, from a normal mission in the game) and place cameras in positions different from that of the first person point of view, as well as alter the footage in some way, using techniques such as coloring, rack focus effects, blurring, slow motion, and so on, to lend a more “cinematic” feel to the proceedings.

Dramatic machinima are almost exclusively series which detail the exploits of a character or some characters who are on some mission to save the world. Such films necessarily parallel the narrative of the game, though usually take one of two tacks in creating a unique story line: following the exploits of characters which live in the same diegetic universe as that of COD4’s narrative but which have a different mission or take place in a different theater of the conflict, or maximizing the “real world” aspects of COD4 to create an entirely new scenario which is nonetheless set in more or less the same locations. The tone may vary from Clancy-style, celebratory action films which champion the soldiers and their cause (such as Michael Barnes’ “Splintered Edge”), to darker and more cynical takes on war in the modern era, replete with soldiers committing war crimes, governmental agencies undermining each other for bureaucratic points scoring, and the ultimate inhumanity and futility of war (such as Sgt Padrino’s “Retaliation” series); that said it is not uncommon for most films in this genre to have elements of both styles.

Something which is common to both types is the almost universal use of soundtracks which convey not only a sense of drama but also perhaps profundity: minor key, moody music

which, when not taken directly from the game's own soundtrack (which is composed in this style) is often taken from other war epics such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Blackhawk Down*, *We Were Soldiers*, and even medieval epics such as *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005). Perhaps most interesting of all, however, is how dreadfully *earnest* such films tend to be, exhibiting their creators' overt desires to be taken seriously and provoke thoughtfulness about the subject matter. It is not hard conjure images of meticulous auteurs painstakingly playing through their shots, editing, and recording voice-overs, imagining themselves as the Ridley Scott of machinima. Among the dozens of films I watched, there is considerable variance in the way in which war and its participants are depicted—from heroes to rogues—but not once did I encounter a film which gave serious thought to or criticism of *particular* or *specific* policies which would lead the U.S. into war, even if war *sui generis* is nearly always depicted as undesirable. Even films which venerated the troops and their mission did so from a micropolitical standpoint: good men asked to do difficult things which may ultimately benefit the country; but the broader theater in which they conducted their actions (i.e. the *context* of their mission) was never explicated.

Humorous machinima operate differently, but are also by and large concerned with many of the same themes, namely the horror or absurdity of war and the status of those who fight. For instance, the film “Broadcast” features two jihadis using the television station to broadcast their manifesto (for the country of “Dirkistan”), which they discover they accidentally left in their car (where it turns out they forgot to defuse their car bomb and they blow themselves up). The film “Change of Heart” depicts a conversation between two members of an Islamic terrorist organization (named Chad and Mark, but whose co-workers are apparently all named Muhammed) in which Chad wants to quit the organization in order to become a marriage

counselor; the organization is depicted as being structured akin to any corporation (with accounting and human resources departments). While in most instances such films play off of the humor of stereotypes about Islam and the Islamic world (tellingly yet unsurprisingly, films of this nature do not depict Russians), often these are twinned with subtle digs at the impetus behind the GWOT, as well as common depictions of America's enemies: however unflattering these depictions may be, they are most definitely not in line with the more mainstream depiction of such figures as dangerous, devious and possessing frightening potency and competence—quite the opposite. While these depictions can be interpreted as clear indications of a form coping (in making terrorists look foolish, they seem less scary), the tone and content of these films overall also indicate a playfulness well understood and widely practiced within gaming culture: taking the horrors and difficulties of the real world with a grain of salt, held at bay through the “unserious” activity of play, and operating within a framework in which soldiers on all sides are ultimately workaday schmoes who must undertake a thankless (and occasionally very tedious) task.

Where it is impossible to tell the difference between earnestness and parody are the many videos which use COD4 footage is used to bolster pro-military, pro-American, pro-war action trailers which serve more or less as home-made propaganda or political statements. In these montages, footage from COD4 is typically spliced with other footage, such as other combat footage, shots of American flags, monuments or military personnel, life on the home front, and so on. Such montages seem to belong less to COD4 per se, than a whole genre of videos posted on Youtube and other sites which all tend to utilize similar imagery to make more or less the same set of claims about America and her mission. Where some of these videos are relatively

slow-paced and are set to music such as Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" or similarly emotive music, videos which use footage from COD4 are almost exclusively much more fast-paced, usually with soundtracks of symphonic bombast or (more commonly) driving rock or hip hop. Tellingly, a fair number of montages utilize the parodic driving rock song "America: Fuck Yeah!" from *Team America: World Police*, some apparently in keeping with the parodic theme of the song, and some using it self-reflexively and with irony—they know the song is parodic, but actually agree with the sentiment which is being parodied, and so have embraced the song in ironic fashion.

Lastly, footage from the level "Death From Above" is posted many times on Youtube in ways that are purposefully intended to trick viewers into thinking it is actual war footage. This tactic frequently works because, as described in Chapter Four, the look and sound of this level is virtually indistinguishable from authentic footage recorded from AC-130s and Apache helicopters which is also readily available online. It is not always clear what the intention of this is—merely to have fun tricking people, to demonstrate how terrible it is that videogame footage is so realistic, to demonstrate how *neat* it is that videogame footage is so realistic, or what have you—but whatever the case, it does demonstrate the effectiveness of the footage as a depiction of modern warfare.

Based on these examples, three issues come to light. First, there is every indication that players of COD4 are likely to be just as diverse in their political opinions as members of the general public, in that there is no consistent reaction to or depiction of this aspect of the game. Whatever the influences of the game, it does not appear, at this stage, as if the game successfully indoctrinates its players. Secondly, the extent to which the above examples are exceedingly rare,

fringe instances of a direct engagement with the game's representational, narrative and thematic elements indicates that overwhelmingly players' focus is on the affordances of gameplay, where this content may or may not be germane to the locus of their activity. Third, there nonetheless is a common thread that runs through these examples, which is this: players understand that soldiers are afforded a certain status which is contingent on their performance of certain attributes. These attributes include grit, cunning, resolve, and vestment in the mission—whether dramatic or humorous, narrative machinima judge their characters for their ability to uphold this. That in two of the three, these abilities are either critiqued or made light of is telling of the filmmakers' (and we may presume, a number of gamers') thoughts about these values.

Conclusion

In careful examination of the performances and utterances of players in gamespace, paratexts and in the situated context of a cybercafe, it becomes clear that players are fixated not on content *per se* but rather accomplishing in-game goals. Undoubtedly players work toward such goals for the obvious reason that they play games for fun, and part of the fun of playing games is meeting the challenges the game sets. However, an important finding here is that such accomplishments are tied to status, and this status (and its maintenance) are understood and instantiated in masculine terms. The values conferred on a particular style of gameplay indicate that players' understanding of "good" gameplay is to a significant extent determined by the ability of players to adhere to a style of performance described in the previous chapter: certitude, aggressiveness, ruthless efficiency and proficiency, and disregard for (or reveling in) destruction.

Furthermore, the values conferred on performance are bound up with gamic functions which cater to players' understandings of honor, prestige, cheating, and masculine gamesmanship and posturing. Secondly, these elements of gameplay require players to maximize their efficiency and proficiency through such things as accuracy, economy of movement, and most especially anticipation based on typical player behaviors as well as an intimate knowledge of the gamespace (i.e. details of every map and how player behaviors are affected by this as well as the game mode or style of play).

These understandings come to the fore in gaming paratexts, where players utilize paratexts both to enhance their own proficiency (and subsequently gamer capital), as well as share, comment, and dwell on these understandings. The situated context of the cybercafe demonstrates the extent to which a highly masculinized gamer fidelity has more or less universal qualities, in which specific types of masculine utterances and performances are intimately tied to one's gaming performance, where gaming proficiency is required. It is in this sphere that gaming virtuosity becomes the highest form of masculine performativity. To the extent that gamer discourse and performativity contain all the hallmarks of hypermasculinity, this hypermasculinity is deployed in an overcompensatory way, and functions mainly as a form of boundary work. Crucially, this behavior is in great measure instilled by the knowledge that all players' gaming performances are under constant scrutiny by other players, where players either display their prowess, must make amends for poor play, or seek revenge against those who "publicly" humiliated them. In short, the game determines the parameters of being "good at" the game, and being good at the game is what grants players status; meanwhile, gameplay *in toto* becomes a form of masculine boundary work, and as such gaming performance is inimically tied

to masculine performance, in which at the end of the day being a good player is commensurate with being manly.

Lastly, and importantly in light of criticisms of games like COD4, the politics of the game's content is almost never mentioned, and the political context of the game itself is likewise hardly ever referred to at all. To the extent that it is, such material is ultimately concerned with the status of soldiers. There is therefore a gap between the overt point of view of the game, and the (non)views expressed by players. While this suggests that the vast majority of players I encountered may be taking for granted the politics of the game (i.e., at face value, unproblematically as either the status quo or the way things ought to be), the dead silence on this issue would seem to indicate much more about the players' focus on "purely" gamic requirements: competition, accumulation, performance. This is quite understandable in that the game rewards proficiency, and players confer status on those who do so with flair. It is in this respect that virtuosity becomes coupled with an inimically martial performativity, whereby players who "rule" are considered the most "manly", and where those who are dominated are effeminized—because they are unable to secure their masculinity through gaming performance. The universality of this understanding, the fixation on being good at the game, and the almost complete lack of any reference to the content of the game suggests that this particular masculine performativity is central to players' engagement with the text. In the conclusion which follows, I will discuss the implications of these findings for both war and masculinity as they become subject to the social, technological, and political economic forces of the military entertainment complex.

Summary and Conclusion: Gaming Military Masculinity

As warfare evolves over the next several years, there are few certainties about where and when conflicts will erupt, or whether and in what capacity American soldiers may be deployed. However, we know *how* these soldiers will fight. They will be equipped with heads up displays that give them readouts concerning the location of known enemies and objectives, the status of other soldiers in their unit, mission parameters, and vital information. They will have prepared for this mission by training in various simulations, both in entirely virtual environments as well as in “live action” war games exercises in which pyrotechnics and makeup, actual materiel, paid actors, and software simulations are all integrated. Whether piloting combat and surveillance robots with interfaces or trudging across open ground geared up and wired up, their combat experiences will not be entirely unlike the videogames they grew up playing.

All of this will have been made possible by the input not only of Pentagon whiz kids and visionary officers, but also of Hollywood special effects specialists, scriptwriters, software engineers, and of course videogame companies. The vast majority of young men who join the ranks of the military will have watched movies and played videogames throughout adolescence, and through this consumption contributed to the political economy which is responsible for equipping them for battle. For a very select few of these recruits, they will also serve as consultants or extras in movies or videogames themselves, in which they must act as “authentic” soldiers, public relations spokesmen, recruiters, and role models all at once.

Given this changing landscape of military service and of what constitutes a combat role, an important consideration here is what compels this soldier to fight. First, there is the level of personal compulsion: what motivates a particular soldier to do his duty, and how he sees himself as a soldier—both in terms of his personal identity as well as how “soldier” is imbued with particular responsibilities to one’s comrades and nation. This is the “interior” motivation for putting oneself at risk, bound up in an array of values and beliefs which give meaning to the soldier’s actions beyond merely doing one’s job. Second, there is what compels the soldier to do his duty from the “outside”: the reasons he is given for why he must risk his life. This may include national security, national prestige or honor, economic prosperity, humanitarian or juridical causes, or some combination of all of these, bound up in nationalistic myths (i.e., for one’s country) or the duty-bound values of the American military (i.e., because the Commander-in-Chief said so and we are bound by the Constitution to comply). It is also this “outside” compulsion which is central to waging war in the first place: to have the consent (or at least, assent) of the governed—to make the case for why war is necessary and just(ified). However centralized, removed, or powerful the authority for waging war, in the American context ultimately war cannot happen without the citizenry, and especially the soldier who must carry out his orders, agreeing to do so.

Although rarely is this explicitly articulated, it is this fundamental truth that lies at the heart of critiques of the military entertainment complex; that is, it is the belief or worry that the power of this complex is such that the terms of consent/assent have been or will soon be altered—where the impetus for war is greater and the threshold for making its case is lower. There are a number of factors that have all come together which cause critics to express alarm along these

lines, and therefore critical evaluations of the impact and ramifications of the MEC primarily contain one or more of three main critiques.

First, this is a sphere in which media companies not only capitalize on hegemonic norms concerning war and masculinity, but have a direct stake in their maintenance—that is, they benefit both from a large, technologically advanced and oft-used military, as well as from the popularity of combat-oriented entertainment. Hollywood studios and theme park “imagineers” are commissioned to devise scenarios and simulations in order to prepare soldiers for the rigors of modern warfare; videogame companies and various other software companies reap the benefits of military funding and/or consultation in return for their services in producing technologies which assist (directly or indirectly) in making the military more formidable; where the military wants eager recruits to fill much-needed positions, entertainment companies want enthusiastic consumers. In this political economy, it is no longer the case that the military receives incidental benefits from popular war media, or that entertainment companies receive incidental benefits from military intervention—both entities have synergized and have mutual stakes in there being some form of ongoing warfare. Perpetual war and a militaristic society therefore could be in their mutual interests. Therefore we should be seeing evidence that commercially produced media are promoting the military writ large, as well as, possibly, that these titles perpetuate the dominant ideology, in which values, themes and representations of the military and the conflicts in which the United States is involved or likely to be involved are cast in normative terms—terms largely steeped in, according to critics, militarism, xenophobia, racism, and jingoism. Most importantly, conflict would seem both naturalized and “fun”, while painting the U.S. military in a positive light.

Second, this is a sphere in which military technologies increasingly resemble videogames for both training and combat purposes, and vice versa. This is significant in that, first of all, if the military deems it advantageous to train their troops on simulators which look and play an awful lot like commercially available titles, then isn't it the case that such games can in effect provide training for its players, at least on a cognitive and/or phenomenological level? If this is so, then we must address what it is that this training is supposed to accomplish: automated lethal responses, dehumanizing enemy combatants, unquestioning acceptance of the terms of the combat mission. Secondly, a possible media effect may be that these simulations (both military and commercial) give a false impression of the rigors and uncertainty of combat: in real war, targets are not so easily "decided", the political context of combat involvement may not be so clear, and so on. Furthermore, in effect this would appear to be a nefarious means of reaching potential recruits and "pre-training" them—a particularly problematic issue considering that players well below recruitment age frequently play such titles (whether or not they are technically supposed to according to ESRB ratings).

Third, the saturation of combat-oriented media includes not only an array of books, toys and visual media, but also combat-oriented videogames which are presumed to have a greater cognitive and phenomenological effect on people—consumed by the vast majority of men of recruiting age. Critics take it as more or less given that these games simultaneously downplay the real world ramifications of combat while extolling the virtues of soldiering, and if videogames are more capable of producing effects than other media, then this has very real and significant political consequences. In essence, such games pave the way for political consent that moves beyond raising the cultural capital of the military. Such games also valorize the men and mission

of the military in normative terms—effectively making it so that hegemonic military masculinity represents the most ideal form of masculinity. When coupled with the misleading portrayal of modern warfare and the positive portrayal of the military more generally, this serves to place war at the center of forging state and manhood, indelibly tying the status of the military (and its men) to the status of the nation. In short: the war pig has gotten larger and fatter, its vested interests now *directly* including the “cultural” sphere of media; the citizens and soldiers whose consent is so vital to waging war are being trained both to accept war on terms which benefit the establishment as well as participate in it as it is or will soon be waged—which in many respects would be a familiar experience/interface which they would have previously enjoyed.

In order to assess the validity of these claims, I have conducted a case study of one of the most popular combat-oriented videogames of all time, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. In conducting this case study, fundamentally I was asking whether this game venerates a particular form of hegemonic military masculinity—learning to think like a soldier in terms of both martial capacities as well as a particular set of dispositions concerning manhood—and if so, whether this hegemonic form is inculcated through gameplay. Presumably if both of these are present and in active operation, then I can say with some confidence that the game both contains and manages to perpetuate ideological notions which set the conditions for perpetual war (or at least, war making under conditions which are amenable to the MEC).

The complexity of the relationship between masculinity and the self, and masculinity and the state, as well as the complexity of games as texts and gaming as process, required that I find a workable way to assess text, process, and player. Furthermore, a review of the history of the MEC reveals that players’ engagement with these games, and the industry’s reaction to player

creations and demands, are an indication that this is a hegemonic realm, and therefore a key aspect of this analysis must ask: what is it that players get out of playing these games? Why do they enjoy them? Therefore I formulated a unique analytical framework that allowed me to account for the relative intensities of game text, the ontology of gaming, and the social context of play (both within a gaming ecology as well as “broader” social categories such as nation or state). This model consisted of three spheres: (1) social fidelity: the fidelity of the social context of players—the every day ideology they already inhabit as well as local social interactions which inflect gameplay; (2) gamic fidelity: the fidelity of specific gamic elements which are more or less didactic in their transmission of ideology; (3) gamer fidelity: the fidelity of gameplay to local and global expectations concerning things like genre, mode, etc.—whether and to what extent a game adheres to existing understandings of the experiences that the game provides or inculcates. In implementing this analytical framework, I categorized the thematic, narrative and representational content as belonging mainly to the sphere of social fidelity, given both their inherent function as signifying elements as well as that many of these elements clearly draw on established media, particularly cinema. Those elements of the game which are part of the ludic structure were addressed as belonging mainly to the sphere of gamic fidelity, given their utility to gameplay and their exclusivity to gaming. The discourses, performances, and paratextual production of players clearly belongs in the sphere of gamer fidelity, insofar as players essentially told me what resonated with them as players, and how they understood particular aspects of the game.

My first aim was to analyze the game text for the sorts of values, themes, and representations this game contains in order to substantiate the notion that a game such as this transmits ostensibly pro-military, pro-“American” values according to the terms described above.

Does the game have a clear political bias? In what way are its characters/avatars, geographic locations, and/or particular cultures depicted? What are the auspices under which war is undertaken, and lethal force used? In conducting this aspect of what is essentially a textual analysis, I asked these and other such questions while examining the game's thematic, narrative, and representational elements.

There is little question that the thematic, narrative and representational elements of this game reiterate dominant notions about both military masculinity and the relative status and role of the U.S. military and its allies, set against a threatening “other”, through which this dichotomy bolsters both preconceived notions of the American state. This includes the normative terms of engagement (*of course* the U.S. and U.K. have both just cause and the capacity to intervene throughout the globe), the auspices under which conflict is engendered and justified (the “evil” of the enemy and existential threat they pose), and the way in which American and British troops are portrayed in contrast to their “lesser” foes. This latter point is particularly important with respect to notions of military masculinity, insofar as the game text largely adheres to traditionalist norms: the self is defined and secured by its engagement with and comparison to the other, being a soldier requires mental and physical toughness above and beyond that required of “average” men, and soldiering carries with it the nobility of sacrifice, from small discomforts all the way up to one's life. Therefore, in many respects the claims of MEC critics are supported.

That said, the delivery of such content is not as straightforward as in other media. A key finding was that many of these tropes are either directly referenced or augmented by content which is mainly put there for *gaming* purposes—that is, adhering to formal genre elements and/or required in order to facilitate a player's advancement in the game (e.g. the “heroic” narrative,

the clear identification of enemy targets, etc.), and to this end their role in perpetuating such notions is largely structural, preceding even many aspects of the MEC as we know it today. In certain respects, this distinction does not at the end of the day represent a serious challenge to a common understanding of such games as containing or eliciting the most extreme and problematic aspects of American militarism and expressions of jingoism and xenophobia: whatever the motive behind the inclusion of such content, or the reason it appears as it does, is in the end somewhat academic in light of its purported effect as ideologically loaded media. However, it turns out that such content is nonetheless largely unimportant to players, even if such content may not be completely innocuous. Player chats, performances, and paratexts are almost completely devoid of commentary on the politics of the game, and instead players are fixated on increasing their proficiency at the game. Indeed, it is not even clear that players indulge in a form of political catharsis (i.e. killing terrorists virtually in lieu of being able to do so in real life). So what do they get out of the game? What does the game evoke or instantiate, and how does this process work?

This brings us to my analysis of the spheres of gamic and gamer fidelity. In analyzing gamic fidelity, I assessed the gamic content for claims to realism: not only photorealism and physics, but the makeup of the combat zone and the “realistic” depiction of the combatants and immanent terms of combat (i.e. the capabilities and uses of weapons, damage, etc.). In so doing I also made the distinction between gamic elements which were “authentic” (realistic) versus those which were merely “credible” (not realistic, but believable for the purposes of gameplay). Seen this way, it becomes clear that where elements are rendered in high fidelity so as to both create a credible space and provide sufficient detail to cater to certain gamic affordances, there is

also ideological weight to this fidelity: combat zones come to resemble “real” places; combatants come to resemble “real life” people(s); the veneration of and reliance on battlefield technology exaggerates its capabilities in a way that could have political ramifications for their real-world use; most of all, the game requires and inculcates a particular type of performance in which certitude, aggressiveness, ruthless efficiency and proficiency, and disregard for (or reveling in) destruction are not only enabled, but essential requirements for success.

This ethic extends to the sphere of gamer fidelity. In examining gamer fidelity I spent hundreds of hours watching players perform in multiplayer combat, listening to countless players chat, pored over a large volume of paratexts, and devoted several hours to a micro-ethnography of players in a gaming café. The two main take-away points from this component of the research are (1) overwhelmingly, players are entirely fixated on improving their proficiency at the game, and (2) in performance and chat in gamespace, and in the gaming café, players display an intense investment in masculine boundary work. Crucially, both of these behaviors are intimately related, whereby gaming proficiency is tied to the status of one’s masculinity. The talk serves as a constant reminder that this is a masculine sphere; the gaming performance is what confers masculine status.

So how do we make sense of these findings in the spheres of gamic and gamer fidelity? How do they jibe with my findings regarding the game’s social fidelity? Clearly masculinity is at the forefront of activity here, in terms of both content and performance/discourse, but what do we make of it, and in what way does it resemble, undermine, or operate in tandem with military masculinity?

First of all, the gamic elements undermine the dichotomous masculine tropes which are emphasized in the game text; that is, the game requires one to perform (as both player and character-avatar) in ways that are not in keeping with hegemonic military masculinity. Rather than indulging in gruff, passionate, yet jovial heroism per se, the game emphasizes almost dispassionate efficiency; rather than permanently inhabiting the gaze of the American “Soldier” (i.e. his normative construction), in multiplayer instances players regularly inhabit the bodies of the vilified other without comment. The game’s gamic fidelity if anything places greater emphasis on the importance of aggressiveness, certitude, and martial proficiency resulting in a style of masculine performance in which players (and characters) press ever forward, confident in what they must do (by virtue of knowing where they must go and to a significant extent what lies in their way), and focused on mission success. But this performance ultimately rests on the availability of battlefield information which is, while for the moment somewhat fantastical, well in keeping with the current trajectories of battlefield logistics and technology; and it is access to such logistics and technology which ultimately affects performance.

To this end the game instills a type of performance in keeping with aspects of the desired qualities of the contemporary (and certainly future) soldier, from which many of the qualities of traditionalist military masculinity have been shorn (or deemed irrelevant). That is, while the *characters* in the game may elicit traditionalist norms of military masculinity, the way the player must play eschews nearly all of this in favor of a performance which values proficiency and efficiency. This form of performance is required in both single player and multiplayer instances,

meaning in the latter case players do not act out scenarios in which terms such as “heroism” have any meaning, nor do they value them.

It is this performance, which emphasizes gaming proficiency, that therefore determines the ways in which players understand quality gameplay, and therefore greatly influences the social status conferred on players’ various abilities. This is a sphere in which to a great extent proficiency is all, and those who can do so with particular virtuosity are afforded the very highest status. This status is loaded in that the kind of performance that is required contains indelibly masculine qualities, by virtue of the culture of the space: a male-dominated sphere characterized by hypermasculine discourse which is used as a form of boundary work—it is a place where boys can be boys, and where an ethic of virtual virtuosity reins supreme. This underscores the importance of maintaining this as a masculine space: if it is no longer sufficiently masculine, then its ability to confer masculinity upon its best players is reduced. In this subculture, ostensibly traditionalist forms of hypermasculine discourse (imbued with characteristics of misogyny, homophobia, heteronormativity, and confrontation) are tied not to traditionalist notions of military masculinity, but rather the player’s mastery (or not) of performances instilled by gamic fidelity. In short: masculinity is literally won or lost in gamespace. In fact, in light of the almost complete absence of any reference by players to the political context of the game text, this suggests that masculine performativity is vital, perhaps even a central feature of gaming—it is at the forefront of what compels them to keep playing, and it is the combination of mastering these elements, the camaraderie of attaining/performing them, and the stakes of this competition which makes the game “fun.”

This notion corroborates earlier studies which suggest that this kind of gaming is a form of gender work: games such as this contain imagery and themes with which the target demographic (18-39) is intimately familiar (Burrill, 2008), males dominate gaming sites in both a physical and virtual sense (cf. Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, Heener, Denner & Sun, 2008; Schott & Horrell, 2000; Taylor, 2003; Vered, 1998), and gaming itself is a means of securing one's masculinity (cf. Holin, 2008; Payne, 2010). Coupled with videogames' popularity and the research findings in this project, this suggests that the gaming console, PC, or whatever the site of gaming, is now a thoroughly ensconced domestic apparatus of masculinity. So the "proving" of masculinity is not merely a metaphor or fantasy via the avatar in a gameworld filled with content that we might read as being violent, misogynistic, or hypermasculine. It is also, and perhaps even primarily, a means through which one demonstrates one's masculinity by being proficient at mastering a masculine, technological domestic device—less exclusive, but more high stakes than, say, a barbecue grill.

The type of performance that is instilled in gamespace (both by players and game characters alike) is ultimately reliant on and inculcated by a surveilled battlefield space. In the case of COD4, this is a space in which the player's actions are all recorded, quantified, and publicly displayed. His performance is therefore judged, both by the machine and other players. Subsequently, masculine status is maintained through being good at the game. Players are thus disciplined, and it is in this manner that the appropriate gender performance is forged. This masculine virtuosity is often performed in an embodied (and often public) space, but is ultimately cultivated by and dependent on performance in gamespace. While this is a gender performance that cannot leave behind the body entirely, it nonetheless decouples masculine

performance from the hard(ware) body of man, quantified in gamespace and qualified by the flourish with which one wields it in a gaming gestalt which is subordinate to the codes of gamer fidelity, as inculcated by gamic fidelity, and given context through social fidelity.

While critics of the MEC are correct in noting the ways in which such games are filled with problematic content, such content is not proselytizing, but rather catering to players' social and gamer fidelities, and in this respect such content is not really thought about much by players or deemed important to gameplay. Therefore the hegemonic form of masculinity that is in operation here is not traditionalist military masculinity as such. This is something different, possibly something quite new. The performative aspects of combat are no longer about trying to emulate Audie Murphy—rather it is much more utilitarian: ruthless efficiency, accuracy, quantity, rhythm, “gaming” the space by discovering and utilizing its every quirk and facet to one's advantage. Not only are these the best ways to be successful (i.e. enjoying the game by dominating within it), the way in which “success” is quantified means that each player's abilities and actions are always on constant display: stats are posted after every round, career statistics are publicly available, visual replays record every kill (and death), and many players also maintain recordings of rounds for a variety of purposes. “Heroism” is meaningless; proficiency is all. It is, in fact, a gender performance that is well suited to the changing nature of a technologized military. This is a hegemonic masculine performance which is disciplined, ultimately, by what his and others' knowledge of the combat zone tells him is the correct course of action.

These findings have important ramifications for scholarship in game studies. For the most part, game studies scholars have either replicated the paradigmatic divide found in much of

media studies—the power of the medium versus the agency of the audience/users—or emphasize the determinative power of the source code: the extent to which player actions and interpretations are ultimately bound by game rules. This study does not move beyond these rubrics entirely, yet it does suggest ways of getting at these fundamental problematics akin to the emphasis Galloway (2006) and Apperley (2010) place on the relation to and impact of local contexts on gameplay—where the “configurative resonance or dissonance” of counterplay (Apperley, 2010: 135) is an important consideration when discerning the meaning and meaning-making that transpires at the embodied site of gameplay.

However, my findings here indicate that there are limits to counterplay, insofar as localized adaptations and/or global “gamer” understandings which may run contrary to the preferred movement or reading of the text are still ultimately grounded in whether or not one is “good at” the game; that is, ultimately even creative exploitation and adaptation is bound to gamic success or failure. To this end, the very notion that there are some aspects to the meaning and understandings of gaming which transcend the local suggests that there is a universality to gaming as process and/or phenomenology, and this is exerted by gamic fidelity. Therefore while the gaming apparatus is not determinating as such, it does at least seem to *delineate* player performances—channeling their activity in specific ways which find purchase among players *as* players, and therefore resonating with respect to a subculture that values gaming virtuosity.

The findings wrought by my analytic framework demonstrate the utility of implementing a tripartite method of examining games and gameplay, where game content, gamic structures, and player’s social worlds can be understood relationally—and without which, there would appear to be a mysterious disconnect between content and action/understandings which could be

misread as a form of agency that would appear far more empowering and “organic” than I believe it to be. Moving forward, the key issue here would be to break this down formally and render a more complete picture of the dialectics of cognition, affect, and culture.

This also raises an important question. Why is it that the content of the game appears to have less purchase, less *resonance*, than the ludic requirements? Is it that players have various reactions to this content and are merely able to “put it up on the shelf” and ignore it, preferring instead to focus on other gratifications and affordances of the game? Or rather, is it that these players have already internalized the dominant ideology represented in the game, finding the politics so normative that this is in fact (ironically) the hidden (or rather, invisible) gateway into gamic and gamer fidelity? That is, have I gotten it backwards, and in fact the game’s social fidelity is *so* resonant that this is what ultimately frames gamic and gamer fidelity, such that players’ fixation on getting better at the game, on the game’s terms, is ultimately in order to fulfill the instilled need to be a soldier and/or to enact a masculinity of purpose? If this is the case then the *specific* content matters little so long as it adheres to the *general* context of hegemonic military masculinity and a hegemonic iteration of the American state—that is, whether the game adheres to genre, in terms of both media genre and *ideological* genre.

These questions strike at the heart of the larger issue of ideology and the power of media, but with an eye toward a technological apparatus—the videogame—which is inert until it is enacted by the player, and requires a process—play—which is as yet under-theorized with respect to concepts such as ideology and governmentality. In fact, it would seem that gameplay may provide a means through which governmentality can operate not as bodily or discursive

discipline per se, but simulative discipline—enacted through a virtual performance which nonetheless leaves its mark on the embodied subject.

While the findings of this study are limited to the specific sphere of gaming which is the object of my research, there are significant ramifications if this particular masculinity has any resonance beyond the sphere of combat-oriented videogames. As a number of scholars argue, the way in which masculinity is conceptualized—its qualities, its operations, its predominance—has a deep impact on how we conceive of the state, as well as how we wage war (cf. Brady, 2003; Hannah, 2008; Jeffords, 1989, 1994; Nelson, 1998). In short, what this project demonstrates is that to some extent critics of the MEC are incorrect about the effect of these games; but what *matters* about this project is how my findings may give us some insight into the MEC's impact on military masculinity, and ultimately the conduct of warfare in the near future—a point which is ultimately the subject of future research, but which I would like to briefly touch on here.

If games such as COD4 inculcate this kind of performance in gamespace (i.e., a particular understanding of what makes for a “good soldier” in tandem with the way in which one demonstrates masculinity in gamespace), then this has significant ramifications for the performance of “real life” military masculinity, especially given that nearly all males play videogames, the vast majority play games of this nature, and such games are said to closely resemble actual combat training simulators. Indeed, at first glance we can immediately see a number of similarities between understandings of “gamer” masculinity (i.e. masculine performance in the sphere of gaming) and a broader understanding of military masculinity (i.e. those qualities which define military masculinity) using this analytical framework: in a

surveilled battlefield space, utilizing and relying on an advanced technological and logistical network, it is imperative that each soldier learns to act in a way that demonstrates his martial abilities with respect to the tasks of combat; moreover, each soldier knows his performance is under constant scrutiny.

The skill set of the ultimate soldier, therefore, is not limited to, nor perhaps even primarily centered on, muscle and grit in a foxhole. Rather, it must include multi-tasking and navigating in the virtual, making use of extra-sensory, digital information so as to be a more effective killing machine. Contemporary soldiers are already equipped with fairly extensive communications equipment and train on digital simulators; in the very near future, combat goggles will feature integrated heads up displays with map overlays and other information, mobile command centers will manage battlefield data, soldiers will operate, direct, and utilize information from battlefield-deployed robots, and some soldiers will even be equipped with what amount to cloaking devices and exoskeletons. If young men a generation ago might have wanted to model their performance on the gritty, neolithic improvisation of Arnold Schwarzenegger's character Dutch from *Predator* (1987), millennials may be better off mimicking his Terminator: a ruthlessly efficient cyborg with technologically enhanced perception and lethality. It is a form of military masculinity that, while still drawing to some extent on very old tropes, must also deal with brand new realities of the way in which wars are fought—mediated, virtual, cybernetically and informationally enhanced—which presents a new definition of military masculinity.

In a sense this notion underscores the extent to which “militarization of society” is left largely undefined, a syllogism which stands in for a worldview that is present but not particularly resonant in this game. Perhaps critics are right that society is being militarized—that could be

one way of interpreting this. But this “militarization” is not necessarily one that extolls the virtues of American military power or the role and status of the American soldier—in fact it appears that such ideological notions are rendered unimportant. What does resonate among these players is instead something which is potentially far more insidious: learning to think like a soldier in terms of maximizing one’s lethality, dehumanizing targets as mere gamic obstacles, a singular focus on self-performance, and ultimately the valorization of a masculinity of purpose which is tied to martial potency—not sacrifice, honor, nobility, etc., but instead dominance of the battlefield.

To this end it is not only that videogames look more and more like war; it is also that war increasingly looks (feels? plays?) like a videogame. The issue is not that gamers learn to become warriors, it is that the military’s warriors may have arrived in boot camp as gamers, and gamer fidelity carries the baggage of utilitarian virtuosity that may serve to overly decontextualize both the mission and the targets: where people in the soldier’s scope are mere gamic obstacles, where the mission is merely a level, and where performance in combat affords not the prestige that comes with courage under fire, but rather the prestige that comes with the quantified outcomes expected of the gamer.

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