On the Virtual Frontlines:
Video Games and the War on Terror

Thomas Riegler

Abstract
This contribution explores the continuing “virtualization” of the War on Terror by concentrating on the political subtext and aesthetics of relevant games. The main thesis is that these cultural products teach a simple lesson: violence is the preferred, usually the only, answer to human conflict. Furthermore the games reinforce cultural stereotypes and “myths” about the ongoing conflict – mainly by depoliticising the War on Terror into a purely military confrontation that can be won by eliminating “targets” and by “blowing stuff up”. In doing so, these games exert profound influence on how today’s conflict is perceived by the public.

Key Words: Terrorism, War on Terror, Computer Games, Popular Culture.

1. Introduction: The Military-Entertainment Complex

In a 2002 online article for “Salon” James Wagner Au welcomed very special “weapons of mass distraction”, by which he meant a new breed of computer games that would teach today’s teenagers “how to wage, and win, the war against terror”. Au clearly envisioned the digital recruits, grown up with computer games, as real-life soldiers destined to end the “unfinished business of 1945”:

“You can see them in the field, in subsequent years, dedicated young men and women, their weapons merged into an information network that enables them to cut out with surgical precision the cancer that threatens us all – heat-packing humanitarians who leave the innocent unscathed, and full of renewed hope. In their wake, democracy, literacy and an Arab world restored to full flower, as it deserves to be, an equal in a burgeoning global culture, defended on all fronts by the best of the digital generation.”

The columnist did not exaggerate: In the years since George W. Bush’s declaration the War on Terror has become increasingly digitalised and virtual. Journalist Ed Halter quotes artist Eddo Stern on the sudden popularity of terrorists as villains in video games since 2001, reflecting an ideological climate in which terrorism and war were not vague fantasies anymore:

“After 9/11, specificity hit hard. People suddenly knew about terrorists. They know about the terrorist list [and] within that rhetoric a very clear enemy had been created, which is, at this time, very political correct to kill … The political climate shifted radically, and the game industry responded. Now you play games where everything is specific and neat, and you can go to Iraq and kill a lot of Iraqis, and hey, it is on TV, why couldn’t we do it?”

Computer games are indeed at the forefront when it comes to the depiction of terrorism/counterterrorism in popular culture: One can re-play the campaigns of Iraq and Afghanistan (Kuma War), destroy terrorist networks (War on Terror, Terrorist Takedown, Black), or morph into a futuristic commando (Ghost Recon). As a SWAT team member (Counter-Strike, Rainbow Six), an intelligence agent (Splinter Cell), or a soldier of fortune undermining the leftist government of Venezuela (Mercenaries), the player is immersed into a culture of “militainment”.

This virtualization of war and conflict comes with strategy: Since the early days of video games the Pentagon had been actively engaged in the development of simulation and the construction of game space. It was involved in the creation of Magnavox Odyssey (1972) – the first home video game system – which was developed by Sanders Associates, a Defence Department contractor. In 1980 the Pentagon cooperated with Atari to modify Battlezone for training purposes. This strategic usage of electronic simulations to train tactical and operational decision making was further reinforced in the 1990s. Under the supervision of Marine General Krulak the first person shooter Doom was modified in such a way that players could train the freeing of hostages under “realistic” conditions.

These largely unplanned crossovers between the military and the entertainment industry became systematic with the founding of the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California in 1999, which was financed with a $45 million grant by the Pentagon. Under the direction of Richard Lindheim, a former Paramount producer, experts from

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Hollywood and Silicon Valley are not only designing “intelligent” uniforms, but also virtual training grounds for “shoot/don’t shoot” decision making, marksmanship, and collective squad tactics. One version of this simulation was commercialised in 2003: In *Full Spectrum Warrior* the player has to take charge over a squad in an urban war zone, where he has to observe the instructions of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) and the doctrine’s principles: “Surprise, Security, Simplicity, Speed, Decisiveness of Action.”

Even before this in 2002, the Pentagon’s own Moves Institute (Modelling, Virtual Environments and Simulations) in Monterey had designed the online game *America’s Army* to offer potential recruits a “realistic” simulation of Army life:

“Nobody knows military simulations like the world's premier land force, the United States Army. […] The developers crawled through obstacle courses, fired weapons, observed paratrooper instruction, and participated in a variety of training exercises with elite combat units, all so that you could virtually experience Soldiering in the most realistic way possible.”

In the first part of *America’s Army*, which could be downloaded for free on the US Army homepage, the player has to pass a virtual boot camp. Once players have graduated they can partake in operations in part II: In one scenario they have to defend the Alaskan Pipeline with the 172nd Brigade or go on a rescue mission with the 10th Mountain Division to free a soldier taken hostage by terrorists. According to the “Los Angeles Times” the game’s message was “Uncle ‘Sim’ Wants You”:

“War may be hell, but this is not the message the Army wants to send. Instead, the games depict an Army that is precise, organised and technically advanced. Tactical missions and advanced weaponry are the focus of the game’s missions, not violence.”

In 2005 Ubisoft released a commercialised *America’s Army: True Soldiers* for the XBOX 360 that thrusts the player into the battlefields of Afghanistan shortly after the US invasion of 2001. The scenario was further

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5 N Shachtman, Shoot ‘Em Up and Join the Army, in *Wired*, 4 July 2002.  
actualised with the 2006 advancement *America’s Army: Special Forces (Overmatch)*, in which players adopt the roles of Special Forces in the War on Terror and engage terrorists both in Europe and in the Middle East.

According to Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood the emergence of the military’s video games demonstrates that the military-industrial complex did not vanish with the end of the Cold War, but transformed itself into a “military-entertainment complex” with far reaching consequences:

“It has simply reorganized itself. In fact, it is more efficiently organized than ever before. Indeed, a cynic might argue that whereas the military-industrial complex was more or less visible and identifiable during the Cold War, today it is invisibly everywhere, permeating our daily lives. The military-industrial complex has become the military-entertainment complex. The entertainment industry is both a major source of innovative ideas and technology, and the training ground for what might be called post-human warfare.”

The video game industry is uniquely suited to disseminate this warlike culture. It is the fastest growing market in the entertainment sector: In 2003 Americans spent more money on video games ($10.2 billion) than on box office releases ($9.5 billion) for the first time.

Furthermore video games are truly unique in their modes of representation: Players are immersed physically, intellectually, and emotionally into game, resulting in the participants reacting to virtual experiences as if they were real. It is this interactivity that makes playing a game much more involving than watching a movie, where the spectator is passive and not part of the action. Thus David Leonard has argued that video games are one of the most influential conveyors of discourse and ideology in contemporary American society: “video games - more so than schools, religion, or other forms of popular culture – are teaching Americans about race, gender, sexuality, class, and national identity.” Because of this electronic games are “sophisticated vehicles inhabiting and disseminating ideologies of hegemonies.”

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9 D Leonard, Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex – Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace, in *Media and Information Literacy Education* 4(4),
Meaning in video games is conveyed visually, textually, and sonically through narrative. Therefore this contribution aims to explore the virtual representation of the War on Terror by focusing on the political and ideological subtext of the games, while neglecting their aesthetic, formal, and technical aspects. The following section provides an overview over key narratives expressed in the games and how this relates to the current discourse on terrorism/counterterrorism as well as to larger questions regarding the role of the US in international relations.

2. The “War on Terror” in game space - key narratives:

2.1 “The games dramatise the War on Terror as defined by George W. Bush after 9/11.” Who is the enemy? Why do we fight? Games are quite eager to answer these critical questions and provide context for the scenarios. The enemy is depicted mostly as shadowy, determined, ruthless, and above all worthy to be eliminated. He acts out of hatred for the West and its values, targets civilians and critical infrastructure, and is perceived as a threat to global stability and security. Often terrorist, guerrillas, etc. are simply pawns used by a third party: A rogue state that aims for domination and uses surrogates to advance its goals. North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela are especially singled out. Therefore preemptive strikes against these rogues and regime change in Middle Eastern nations are the only options for keeping America safe.

This interpretation implies that terrorism does not stem from political or social causes. It is either an evil ideology with no basis in reality or surrogate warfare used by dictators, warlords, and guerrillas against the West. The ideology behind the Bush administrations’ War on Terror – preventing the acquisition of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) by terrorists, preemptive strikes against “sponsors” and “transformation” of the Middle East – is affirmed and propagandised with support from the US defence apparatus, who also conducts its own virtual mobilisation.

Games adapted very quickly to the official lineage: In Command and Conquer 2: Generals (2002) the terrorist enemy is powerful enough to enter a global contest between America and China. Whereas the US fights a high tech war, the Chinese deploy crude mass, and the National Global Liberation Army uses unconventional tactics like suicide bombers, sleeper cells, and hidden chemical weapons.

Even before the start of the Iraq war, gamers were able to topple Saddam Hussein: In Gotham Games’ Conflict: Desert Storm (2002) the player operates as a member of a SAS team behind enemy lines: “No Diplomats. No Negotiation. No Surrender!” Set in the 1991 Desert Storm
campaign, the mission is to sabotage Scud missiles with C4 and snipe at a
certain General “Aziz” (who looks very much like the Iraqi dictator). To add
“realism” the former SAS member Cameron Spence had been hired as
advisor during development.

The sequel Conflict: Desert Storm II: Back to Baghdad (2003) was
promoted with lines referring to Saddam Hussein’s “chemical arms, secret
weapons and hidden arsenals, which continue to threaten the gulf.” Thus the
mission was clear: “Lock and load, and get ready to GO LOUD.”

This way of addressing the recent war in Iraq indirectly via analogy
to a past conflict was set to change with the planned release of Six Days in
Fallujah in 2010. The game was based on 2004 battle in the Iraqi town that
left 38 US troops and an estimated 1,200 insurgents dead. The idea for the
game came from veterans of the battle, who approached developer Atomic
Games that produces combat simulations for the military. “The soldiers
wanted to tell their stories through a game because that’s what they grew up
playing”, said a brand manager for Six Days in Fallujah.11 In addition to the
game, Atomic – which is owned by In-Q-Tel, a CIA-financed firm, besides
other investors – will use some of the material to create a combat simulation
for the military. The “Wall Street Journal” reported:

“To develop the game, Atomic is working with more than three
dozen soldiers who were in Fallujah, consulting thousands of
photographs (some of which were mailed on memory cards from
Camp Fallujah), and looking into classified satellite imaginary to
ensure that the game’s appearance is faithful to the actual
location.”12

Only days after this article appeared and only months ahead of the
scheduled release the publisher – the Japanese firm Konami – pulled the plug
on Six Days in Fallujah, mainly because of protests from Iraq war veterans
and relatives on both sides of the Atlantic. Obviously the public was not
ready for a re-enactment-style game based on an unresolved armed conflict in
which casualties still continue to mount.13

10 Halter, pp. 246-247.
11 A Pham, Konami announces Six Days in Fallujah, based on 2004 Iraq
battle, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com, 6 April 2009, viewed 11 April 2009,
ml>.
12 J Brophy-Warren, Iraq, the Videogame, in The Wall Street Journal, 6 April
2009.
But a notable “incursion” into this mined territory had already happened before: Starting in February 2004 the New Yorker firm Kuma Reality Games came up with a novel idea: Under the motto “play the News” subscribers to their online Kuma War-series can replay “highlights” of the War on Terror: The killing of Saddam Hussein’s sons, the capture of the Iraqi dictator, the assault on the insurgent stronghold Fallujah, and battles for the control of Iraqi towns like Mosul, Najaf, and Ramadi. Kuma’s publicity kept its promise: „Wherever the war takes our forces, we will put you there.”

But there are also revisionist scenarios that deliberately mix fact with fiction and produce an alternate “history”. In these ‘wishful thinking’ missions US forces are victorious, terrorist leaders are apprehended, and there are no frustrating setbacks. For example in Mission 7 the player rescues the hostages from Teheran in a daring raid on the compound, while in fact the commando raid in 1980 went horribly wrong and resulted in a humbling defeat for the Carter administration. Mission 31 offers the capture of Osama Bin Laden in the cave complexes of Tora Bora in Eastern Afghanistan, and an aborted assault on his compound in the 1990s is actually successfully executed (Mission 26: Osama 1998).

Kuma War also features scenarios which further underline the Bush administrations’ talking points about the “axis of evil” and the dangers of state support for terrorists. The most controversial product in this regard was Mission 58 (Assault on Iran) – an “extremely plausible” scenario that brought a long held Neocon fantasy to life: Destroying Iran’s threatening nuclear capabilities with limited strikes against key installations. As a member of a Special Forces Team the player has to infiltrate the nuclear facility at Natanz. The mission is a virtual preventive strike:

“Infiltrate the base, secure evidence of illegal uranium enrichment, rescue your man on the inside, and destroy the centrifuges that promise to take Iran into the nuclear age. Never before has so much hung in the balance... millions of lives, and the very future of democracy could be at stake.”

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13 K Stuart, Konami pulls Six Days in Fallujah, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), viewed on 7 May 2009,
14 F Rötzer, Die “Höhepunkte“ des Kriegs noch einmal als Computerspiel, [www.telepolis.de](http://www.telepolis.de), viewed on 30 March 2009,
15 Kuma War Mission List, [www.kumawar.com](http://www.kumawar.com), viewed on 7 April 2009,
Again the official legitimisation of the War on Terror is reinforced, while alternative diplomatic measures by European countries are ridiculed as being “doggedly”:

“The War on Terror is not about retribution for the attacks of 9/11 or taking out dictators who brutalize the innocent. It’s about keeping weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of the rogue states and non-state organizations most likely to use them...and the risk here couldn’t be clearer.” 16

The background story of already mentioned ICT creation Full Spectrum Warrior tells of a wave of terrorist attacks in Europe and Southeast Asia, particularly targeting US and UK interests. The source of the attacks leads to the tiny fictional Middle Eastern nation of Zekistan, where dictator Mohammad Jabbour Al-Afad provides safe haven for Al Qaeda terrorists and their training centers, while promoting the cleansing of the ethnic Zeki population. After several failed diplomatic initiatives NATO invades Zekistan to dispose of Al-Afad. The US-led forces converge on the capital Zafarra and its capture is the objective of Full Spectrum Warrior. 17 The game ends with the dictator being killed in a US airstrike. In epilogue missions the player has to further defeat the “Black Brigade” headed by one of Al-Afads sons – until the younger of the two, who was assumed dead, takes control and installs democracy.

Full Spectrum Warrior essentially conjures an imaginary Middle East that encourages and legitimizes the Bush administrations’ policies towards the region. Zafarra, which has to be taken by utilizing the urban warfare doctrine, is depicted in a classic “orientalistic” way: It is an urban maze that has to be reorganized by Western military power. Steve O’Hagan has commented on this aspect in the “Guardian”:

“With its minarets, dusty streets and rusty cars, Zekistan conforms to trailer-park perceptions in being some kind of Afghanistan/Iran/Iraq composite. That Al-Afad’s ‘hatred of the western world is well-known’ should convince some that the cause is just. If not, when they hear his country is “a haven for terrorists and extremists”, in particular ‘Taliban and Iraqi

loyalists’, who will blame the army for reaching for that industrial-sized can of whoop-ass?”

The enemy, who is usually bearded and fierce looking, remains totally anonymous, apart from his Islamic otherness being clearly shaped out. But it is only the virtual GIs having detailed personal profile: In a political correct manor the team consists of three Caucasians, two Afro-Americans, one Latino, one Asian, and one Arab-American. The games’ homepage even features some letters home in which for example Pfc. Shimenski tells his wife that the mission is to carve a better future for the “Zekis”.19

In summary a game like Full Spectrum Warrior is a perfect simulation of a working Bush doctrine: The US pre-emptively deposes of a tyrant with connections to terrorists and transforms Zekistan into a Western style democracy.

2.2 “In order to defeat terrorism, one has to fight ‘dirty’: Torture, counter terror, targeted assassination. Force alone is the solution. Games celebrate ‘black’ warfare that aims for the annihilation of the enemy.”

Since the evolution of asymmetric warfare and unconventional strategies like terrorism, there exists an argument, which calls for the imitation of the enemy as the best way to defeat him – and it is up to specially equipped and highly trained forces to employ “unconventional” warfare to finish the job. Such “Men in Black”, SWAT-Teams, Delta Force operators, and Army Commandos are populating countless scenarios: It is all about dramatising their heroic actions – they have to free hostages, disarm bombs, and engage terrorist, drug gangsters and mercenaries on a worldwide scale. Problematic aspects like accountability, lacking civilian oversight, and illegal activities are blended out in this process. Instead media and popular culture often celebrate a morbid cult. There is an obvious fascination with “black” warfare, which seems to derive from a pre-modern emphasis on annihilation of a demonised enemy.

Counterterrorism forces were at the forefront of public interest since the early days of the action games related to Terrorism/Counterterrorism. It started with the online action game Counter-Strike (1999), which pits counterterrorist team against a group of terrorists in a series of rounds. Each is won by either completing a mission or eliminating the opposing force.

While the enemy remains just a faceless target in Counter-Strike, he gets contextualised in Ubisoft’s Rainbow series, based on the bestselling Tom Clancy novels: It begins with Eco-terrorists, who want to protect “mother

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nature” by wiping out humankind with a stolen virus (Rainbow Six, 1999). Then Neo-Fascists attack Southern American oil interests and European financial institutions (Raven Shield, 2003). The following threat comes from “Global Liberation Front”, which unites various leftist anarchist, and third world liberation forces against the West (Rainbow Six: Lockdown, 2005). Finally international terrorist Irena Morales leads a mercenary army into the gambling capital of the US (Vegas, 2006).

In Stealth Force – The War on Terror (2005) the player is dropped behind enemy lines to prevent the “Elizar Organisation” from achieving their sinister objectives: He has to rescue hostages, destroy ammo dumps and seize illegal uranium stores. Above all the enemy has to be decapitated: “Hunt down and eliminate the leaders of the terror network, from arms dealers to nuclear scientists and finally Elizar’s leader himself.”

The goal of Fugitive Hunter: The War on Terror (2003) is simply to capture terrorists and evildoers around the world, leading up to Osama Bin Laden in person. When killing an enemy Agent Seaver from the Criminal Interdiction Recovery Task Force comments “gotcha” or “he won’t be coming back”.20

In Monte Cristo’s PC-game War on Terror (2006) a terrorist network called “The Order” is planning atrocities in major capitals around the globe. It is the player’s mission to rid the world of this evil threat once and for all:

“At the dawn of a new century, peace is now only a distant dream. Many terrorist groups have joined their forces to launch terrible attacks on the world’s great urban areas. Their ultimate goal remains unknown, but their attacks are of unprecedented violence. Your mission: reveal the conspiracy and bring peace back to the world. […] Your goal is to free the world of the scourge of terrorism.”21

Similarly Terrorist Takedown (2004) makes the confrontation appear as an arcade style shootout in Middle Eastern countries, where the bad guys seem especially eager to take cover behind highly explosive oil barrels:

“Steeped in today’s headlines with realistic 3D environments and special effects, take control of Apache and Huey helicopters, operate Humvees, and fire heavy machine guns, rocket launchers

and more as you strike at known terrorists and their sponsors. In 16 heart-pounding missions, you must defeat the terrorists and protect our homeland.”

But terrorism not only has to be fought overseas, but also in major American cities that are threatened by catastrophic super terrorism. At this point the hero of the highly popular FOX-TV series 24, Jack Bauer, enters the virtual world. 24: The Game (2006). While making use of actor’s voice and likeness, the game features more than just one “ticking bomb” scenario in the span of just one day: It starts with a terrorist plot to release ricin into Los Angeles’ water supply. Shortly afterwards a LA metro station is attacked with Sarin gas – a diversion, which allows the perpetrators to overtake the CTU main building and steal confidential data. Next a major earthquake is caused by the detonation of explosives at focal points, where fault lines intersect. And finally weapons grade plutonium is stolen from Fort Lesker, a US military base at the epicentre of the earthquake. Ultimately Bauer can foil the attempt to smuggle out the uranium to the Middle East, and he kills the terrorist leader.

Confronted with apocalyptical dangers and monstrous conspiracies Jack Bauer is victorious because of his utter ruthlessness and disregard for laws and civil rights. To safeguard an ever endangered and fragile order, Bauer is prepared to use all means necessary, especially when it comes to interrogating uncooperative suspects withholding precious information.

At one point in 24: The Game the player has to interrogate the terrorist Robert Daniels, who has information about a planned attempt on the Vice President’s life. Bauer shoots Daniels in the stomach and ties the bleeding man to a chair. While a graphic on the sideline shows the person’s stress level in form of a sinus wave and the clock ticks, the player has to choose between acting aggressively, calmyingly or neutrally towards the suspect. Since Daniels is obviously in pain and promised medical aid only if he cooperates the whole procedure in fact constitutes an act of torture. 23 Mark Sample has analysed the game sequence in depth:

“Jack can either be ‘calm’ or ‘aggressive’ toward Daniels, and he can either attempt to ‘coax’ or ‘break’ him. The player decides which tactic to use -- and he may use several within the

space of a few seconds -- based on the current position of the cooperation zone. The stress graph is thus a biofeedback system, transforming internal psychological states into external data, which allows the player to hone his or her interrogation technique on the spot. The correct sequence of tactics culminates with Jack threatening Daniels with a gun aimed at his head, at which point Daniels ‘breaks’.

The information obtained in the interrogation is a key code that provides rooftop access for a sniping attack, nothing more. In presenting this outcome the game is “trivialising torture to the point where it becomes the answer to the most trifling of national security concerns.”

Like in the TV series Jack Bauer’s ethical position is consolidated: In a „time ticking“-case opting for the “lesser evil” like torture is not only permissible but morally commendable. Thus, torturing a suspect who might be in possession of the information necessary to detect a terrorist threat is done for the best of reasons. Causing one individual pain is balanced against the wellbeing of an entire nation and results in practical impunity for an aggressive counterterrorism approach.

Sometimes the biggest threat comes from a Frankenstein created by the system itself -- and he has to be dealt with extralegal and plausible deniability. *Black* (2006) by Criterion Games features Sergeant First Class Jack Kellar, an ill disciplined member of a CIA black ops group and a veteran of several conflicts including Guatemala, Colombia, Iran, and Croatia. He is after the leader of the terrorist group “Seventh Wave”, which operates out of desolate places in Western Russia. In fact the man he is hunting is a former colleague – the CIA operative William Lennox, who after faking his death apparently became the head of “Seventh Wave”. Kellar has to “neutralize” this threat, and although his mission is never officially endorsed, its outcome is welcomed:

“BLACK takes you deep into the world of the unsanctioned military: beyond the army, beyond the law, beyond consequence. Your mission: to hunt down those that no-one else can stop, by any means necessary. Let nothing stand in your way.”

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2.3 “A ‘transformed’ military – Stealth, technology, and firepower will rid us from evil.”

Since the early 1990s the US military was “transformed” from its Cold War outfit into a slimmed down 21\textsuperscript{st} century fighting force relying on smart weapons and highly trained Special Forces. Such a force was envisioned as means for a muscular foreign policy and a vital tool for power projection over key spheres of interest. Behind this was the vision of a "light, mobile, and deadly" military force to fight the “new”, asymmetric threats of the post Cold War era: terrorist networks, drug cartels, guerrillas, warlords, pirates, etc.

The game industry is on the forefront depicting this “transformed” military in action, its awesome high-tech capabilities combined with the professionalism of elite soldiers. Even more than average Hollywood blockbusters the games celebrate the military power of the United States in a way that amounts to war propaganda. This should not come as a surprise since almost all of the games in question received input or cooperation from the military itself.

Close Combat: First to Fight (2005) was designed with input from active-duty and retired Marines, who had taken part in the second battle of Fallujah in Iraq. As a Marine Corps Lance Corporal the player and his teammates are inserted into a crisis ridden Lebanon: When the country’s prime minister had to leave of his office temporarily, the radical “Atash” movement, led by fundamentalist cleric Tarik Qadan and aided by Syria and Iran, aims for takeover. Throughout the game the Marines have to engage Atash forces, Syrian troops, and Iranian special forces.\footnote{Close Combat: First to Fight, \url{www.pc.gamespy.com}, viewed on 14 April 2009. \url{<http://pc.gamespy.com/pc/close-combat-first-to-fight/619954p1.html>}.}

Similarly Zipper Interactive’s SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals, which started in 2002, was produced with the consultation of the US Navy Special Warfare Command, and this connection was marketed offensively: “Because of our association with Naval Special Warfare, the missions in SOCOM aren’t just a figment of some programmer’s imagination – they are portrayals of what actually could take place in the field”, SOCOM’s product manager told the Seattle Post-Intelligencer in 2003.\footnote{Halter, p. 260.} In the first part of the series twelve Navy Seals are sent on missions to Alaska, Thailand, Congo, and Turkmenistan, where they have to free hostages, retrieve intel, and eradicate infamous terrorist networks like the “Iron Brotherhood”, “The Riddah Rouge” and the radical Islamists of “Allah Sadikahu”.\footnote{In the first part of the series twelve Navy Seals are sent on missions to Alaska, Thailand, Congo, and Turkmenistan, where they have to free hostages, retrieve intel, and eradicate infamous terrorist networks like the “Iron Brotherhood”, “The Riddah Rouge” and the radical Islamists of “Allah Sadikahu”.}
Although Activision’s *Call of Duty* franchise is dedicated mostly to recreate epic battles of the Second World War, at least part four addressed current conflicts. The action in *Modern Warfare* (2007) spans from Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan to the Middle East. Commandos of the legendary British Special Air Service (SAS) and a US Marines detachment are called in to counter a plot between Khaled Al-Asad, commander of revolutionary forces in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, and a Russian ultra-nationalist, who threaten the US with ballistic missiles.

Both sides use violence ruthlessly in an undeclared war without rules: Adopting the perspective of the viewer the games’ trailer depicts the execution of an Arab ruler by Al-Asad’s forces. Later on the insurgent is first interrogated by the SAS men and then killed in cold blood.

Besides this celebration of “black” operations, *Modern Warfare* also praises the capacities of a “transformed” global strike force, especially when it comes to executing lightning strikes around the globe:

“Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare arms gamers with an arsenal of advanced and powerful modern day firepower and transports them to the most treacherous hotspots around the globe to take on a rogue enemy group threatening the world.”

While games like *First To Fight* and *Modern Warfare* market their claim of offering realistic entertainment, the myth of the omnipotent Special Forces is further embellished in games that cross the line into fantasy – producing the ultimate warriors of the 21st century. In Red Storm Entertainment’s *Ghost Recon* series the player is in charge of a fictional, newly created squad, known as “the Ghosts”. This highly classified and high tech equipped force has to operate in trouble spots worldwide: Foiling an ultra-nationalist plot to rebuild the Soviet Union (*Ghost Recon*, 2001), freeing a post-Castro Cuba from a drug cartel’s puppet regime (*Island Thunder*, 2003), defeating a renegade North Korean general (*Ghost Recon* 2, 2004), capturing a Pakistani warlord and arms dealer (*Summit Strike*, 2005).

Where there are super soldiers, a super spy has to be near: *Splinter Cell*’s super spy Sam Fisher – an operative of the ultra secret NSA black ops “Third Echelon” division – has to gather intelligence, capture, and eliminate terrorists and prevent the acquirement of WMDs. The series’ first part’s – *Splinter Cell* (2002) – objective is to assassinate the Georgian President, who wages a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Muslim population of neighbouring Azerbaijan. *Pandora Tomorrow* (2004) is a classic hostage

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scenario: The embassy in Dili (East Timor) has been seized by an anti-US terrorist groups and Fisher has to free the US citizens. In Chaos Theory (2005) the protagonist has to foil a plot by a Georgian industrialist and a Chinese general, who threaten world peace with stolen nuclear weapons. Double Agent (2006) places him in a precarious position – infiltrate terrorist organisations to get “human intelligence”.

2.4 The world is a dangerous place: Global stability, security, and prosperity depend on a super power’s ability to intervene and quell chaos in “pockets of darkness”.

The subtext of many video games in regard to the current state of affairs is clear: Since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union the world has changed profoundly to the worst. In many regions state power is failing, warlordism is on the rise, and organised crime is a global player. This global jungle is in need of order: The military, super spies, or paramilitary forces have to be deployed and used to safeguard geopolitical interests and destroy enemy weapon capabilities that threaten Western superiority. Overt political undertones are most obvious in the case of Pandemic’s Mercenaries series. Part 1 features the search for the leader of a North Korean military coup who threatens the world with nuclear war. The mission for the player is simple: “As one of the top operatives for a private mercenaries company you have been called in to execute the general and his top military and scientific advisors.” The enemy in Mercenaries 2: World in Flames is yet another “evil state”, whose leader messes with America: “A power hungry tyrant messes with Venezuela’s oil supply, sparking an invasion that turns the country into a warzone.”

The fictional Caribbean island “San Esperito” in Just Cause is easily recognisable as communist Cuba: Although revolutionary slogans are branded everywhere, society seems static and oppressed into submission. Impersonating the CIA black ops agent Rico Rodriguez the player has to dispose of a dictator, who is “dreaming” of weapons of mass destruction: “Nobody knows what San Esperito’s military ambitions are but it doesn’t matter: regime change is the only option.”

In the wake of a related major blockbuster Novalogic’s *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* (2003) took on an episode from the US intervention in Somalia (1993): An ill-fated firelight in the capital Mogadishu, which began as an arrest operation and ended in the shoot down of two US helicopters and heavy casualties at the hands of Somali militiamen. The developers worked closely with former Rangers and Delta Force operators to recreate the missions more authentically. A share of the revenue was donated to a fund aiding relatives of killed US Special Forces. In the end the game’s fictitious interpretation of the events was classic revisionism: A humbling defeat was transformed into a “glorious defeat” against all odds. “As we’ve said, it wasn’t a failure. To a certain degree, it’s about setting the record straight”, Black Hawk Down’s publicist remarked in an interview.34 The last mission of the game “Aidid Takedown” – the killing of the prime architect of the US defeat – even offered satisfaction, which never took place since the warlord died in inter-clan fighting in 1996.

Anyhow, the game’s success started a franchise that reflects the popularity of Special Forces in the follow-up of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In *Delta Force: Team Sabre* (2004), *Delta Force: Xtreme* (2005), *Delta Force: Angel Falls* (2009) the settings are no longer connected to a certain historical event: Instead the player has to operate globally in the deserts of Iran, in the drug-producing areas of Colombia and Peru, as well as in guerrilla-infested Indonesia, war-torn Chad, and crumbling Uzbekistan.35 While all those exotic locations stand out as prime target areas of real overt and covert US operations, the video games mirrors the official concept of the enemy very clearly: The player has to take out a renegade Iranian general, battle an elusive Colombian drug lord, prevent drug shipments, and eliminate terrorist threats pre-emptively.

3. **Conclusion**

This contribution has analysed the dominating narratives expressed in video games which centre around the War on Terror. The following conclusions can be drawn:

1. The games discussed present war, terrorism, and global events exclusively from an American or British perspective, while especially the depiction of the Middle East is stereotypical and fits in the orientalistic discourse that encourages and legitimises Western domination of the region. The spatial depiction in the games, which are mapped from above, invokes a sense of American mastery and control: Although war torn and desolate these

34 Halter, p. 266
“pockets of darkness” are of geopolitical significance and therefore object to US intervention by highly mobile strike forces. The imaginary landscape is another key element that serves and reinforces the narrative: Uncivilised and primitive spaces have to be organized and homogenized into a unity, whether it is the chaotic urban mazes of the Middle East (Full Spectrum Warrior), Caribbean jungles (Just Cause), or crumbling Eastern Europe/Russia (Black). Invested with ideology but devoid of history, the artificial landscapes form the stage for the classic binary content of the games: the fight between good and evil.

To fit in this simple dichotomy the enemy other is represented in an essential way, with a fixed identity that poses a threat to the West and its value system, but which remains outside politics. In many ways it is a virtual re-enactment of the old frontier myth, in which white heroes have to ward off numerically superior savages.36

The gender perspective further underlines the notion of American invincibility transported by the games: Apart a few exceptions like Lara Croft-like soldier of fortune Jennifer Mui (Mercenaries 2) and the terrorist leader Irena Morales (Vegas) it is essentially a male world, dominated by militarised masculinity, competition, and notions of courage, discipline, patriotism, and mental strength.37

2. Although the games offer a simulated experience of warlike events, they are in fact escapism from the messy and ambiguous conflicts of the real world. The virtual War on Terror is instead a clear-cut moral endeavour to “free” and “liberate” foreign people, to destroy tyranny, and rid the world of truly evil threats. Contrary to the open-ended struggle proclaimed by the Bush administration, the simulations are full of wishful thinking and offer a cathartic experience: Western forces will eventually succeed and reach all objectives, which compensates for the real War of Terror’s lack of spectacular results.

Although the games may be realistic in the depiction of weapons, violence is sanitized: “They’re like Tom Clancy novels made into episodes of the A-Team. No blood. No exit wounds. No Screams.”38 And throughout the player is spared all disturbing aspects of real conflicts as Ed Halter has remarked:

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“None of these games offer representations much beyond the immediate experience of close combat, or at best, stealth operations leading up to the same. The geopolitical ramifications of war, the impact on civilians, the lingering ancillary casualties and long-term psychological effects play no part in video games— not at least because these aspects of war can’t really be made fun.”  

The message is that terrorists not only deserve to be “terrorised”, but counterterror is presented as the strategy most likely to succeed in defeating this enemy.

3. The games affirm the political and cultural status quo from which they originate: They reproduce, charge, and disseminate interpretations, ideologies and worldviews in contemporary society by constructing an imaginary space, where the hegemonic constants of the public discourse come to life: A fantastical Middle East that seems naturally inhabited by terrorists preying on the West with weapons of mass destruction; a military that is fit and capable of achieving practically everything; the perception that violence is not only a defining feature of human nature, but also a means to settle political conflicts; that “black” warfare, lethally and ruthlessly executed, is likely to defeat terrorism; etc.  

In the words of Ed Halter:

“These big-budget games remove all the vast complexity of war, and boil it down to a standardized narrative, far more simplistic than the average Hollywood film. Even if a game takes a gritty, ‘war is hell’ feel, all good guys must be good, the bad guys bad, so that no ethical quandaries trouble the player – or its subject matter experts.”

4. Video games are increasingly important parts in the formation of a culture of war. The cooperation between the military and the game industry has intensified to a certain degree, where training simulations for real soldiers are commercialised for a mass audience and the youth is targeted by digital recruitment. Thus games like America's Army and Full Spectrum Warrior

39 Halter, p. 276.
41 Halter, pp. 265-266.
fulfil an important function for the Pentagon, which is constantly in need of new recruits. But as Johan Höglund argues

“[…] their most important purpose is undoubtedly that they seek to produce a subject comfortable with the prosecution of a perpetual war. Ultimately, then, the Military Entertainment Complex functions to commodify the notion of perpetual war.”

Obviously video games elevate war and security to common sense by making armed conflict imaginable. In doing so scholar Abhinava Kumar has stated that games like America’s Army actually “produce” war:

“First, the game plays into a larger discourse which aims to remove humanity from the human by making warfighting almost a mechanical function. Second, America’s Army: Operations serves as a cyberdeterrent; it provides a space for war without the enemy and anticipates any enemies that may come to exist. And finally the game simulates security by removing the need to confront insecurity.”

In summary, when it comes to the representation of the War on Terror in popular culture, video games can no longer be overlooked: Because of their special nature – immersion, interactivity, and intertextuality – they are especially efficient in transmitting and disseminating hegemonic ideologies on the ongoing conflict.

This contribution has identified some of the key narratives that can be found in games relating to the War on Terror: the stereotypical representation of the enemy, gender, and foreign lands; the sanitisation of violence; the propagandisation of military strength and its high tech capabilities; the affirmation of the Bush administration’s definition of the War on Terror and the official myths regarding the existence of hidden WMD’s and links between Saddam Hussein and terrorism; the shaping of a militainment culture, which aims for digital recruitment, makes concern for security part of every day life, and erodes the public’s reluctance to use force in international relations.

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