

Hearts and minds: the military, movies & gaming

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TIPPING POINT NORTH SOUTH

A co-operative that supports and initiates creative, campaign-driven projects that advance the global social justice agenda

BACKGROUND¹

For many, war gaming is a major form of pleasurable 'consumption'.

THE USA AND GLOBALLY

In the USA, video games are played in 68 per cent of households and 60 per cent of these players are men (2010). Most of these games will be violent - 'first-person shooters', such as 'Halo', 'Call of Duty', 'Medal of Honor' regularly top the best-selling game lists. While two-thirds of American boys aged between twelve and seventeen play first-person shooters, only 17 per cent of girls of similar age play them.

Globally, the games industry is bigger than cinema and music put together, and popular video games routinely overtake film releases. The global games market, including console, PC and smartphone titles, hit revenues of \$66bn in 2013, and this figure is expected to grow to \$79bn in 2017. By comparison, global box office revenues for the movie industry were at \$35.9bn in 2013; the global music industry stood at \$15bn in 2013. In the 21st century, the first-person shooter is the most commercially viable video game genre, as well as being the genre that has taken more market share of any other genre in the gaming industry.

The 'fetishization of the real', or an obsessive attention to 'authenticity', distinguishes twenty-first-century war games from earlier incarnations. Achieving this level of authenticity necessitates considerable cooperation with the military. Military consultants and immersion experiences have become de rigueur for gaming production teams. In creating the *Medal of Honor* series, Steven Spielberg found expert advice indispensable: he employed Captain Dale Dye (a retired combat Marine Corps veteran) and other military experts as consultants. He even insisted that the design team undergo boot camp. In *America's Army*, novice players are required to go through basic training in barracks and pitches that have been painstakingly created as exact replicas of the US Army post at Fort Benning. As a result of this emphasis on accuracy, gamers are required to digest a vast amount of technical knowledge about weapons and ballistics.

This pursuit of 'authenticity' has also been greatly helped by the symbiosis between games and cinematic productions. The technologies used in the emotionally raw combat scenes at the opening of Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) were also exploited in war games. Indeed, players increasingly expect their games to mirror the production standards and tropes of cinematic representations: war films are the 'gold standard' by which combat in computer games as well as 'real combat' is judged.

War games — and especially first-person shooters have become important yet inexpensive training devices in all branches of the military. While dome-based simulators with 'motion-base and full wrap-around imagery' cost between 5,000 and 10,000 dollars an hour to operate, PC-based ones using the internet costs only 25 cents an hour. British and American militaries are currently seeking to recruit keen video-gamers, on the grounds that their skills at the console will be useful in controlling unmanned planes and 'killer robots'. Military 'toys', such as the Dragon Runner robot, are guided by a six-button keypad deliberately modelled after Sony's PlayStation 2 controller. A 2005 study of the effect

¹ This background and the subsequent rationale are heavily based on Joanna Bourke's book *Wounding the World* (2014), David Gee's *Spectacle Reality Resistance - Confronting a culture of militarism* (2014) and ForcesWatch's research.

on 413 people playing first-person shooters found that the games were very important in developing skills that could be transferred to real-life situations in the military. In the words of one cadet, 'My attention to detail when under stress has increased, and my target-acquisition skills have increased.'

America's Army is widely regarded as the most influential military-themed game in the world. It won Guinness World Records for its popularity, having been downloaded more than 42 million times. In 2009 alone, it was the most downloaded video game, the largest virtual army, the game with the most hours spent playing a free online shooter, the earliest military website to support a video game and the largest travelling game simulator. The game is rated 'T', deemed suitable for teenagers (13+). In fact, most players are aged between 13 and 21. It costs the US government \$2.5 million annually and welcomes 60,000 visitors daily. Currently there are over 10 million registered users.

Through this computer game the military could put itself at the forefront of the minds of teenage boys at precisely the age when they were making career decisions. It was a top priority, then, to ensure that the game was as realistic as possible. As Wardynski, David Lyle and Michael Colarusso noted in their article in the Officer's Corps Strategy Series in 2010, *America's Army*

places the Army squarely inside youth popular culture. It allows players to test-drive the Army . . . *America's Army* exposes users to the organizational values, opportunities, and requirements of military service with sufficient vividness to separate the gist of serving in today's Army from the gist of service conveyed by the media or Hollywood. It embodies teamwork and draws upon realistic mission scenarios, teaching young adults lessons about Army culture within an engaging pop culture format that resonates with them."

According to the writer Nick Turse, *America's Army*, has been more effective in marketing military life than all other US army communications combined, with around a third of young Americans aware of it. Because of the game, the army saves between \$700 million and \$4 billion a year in recruitment costs. People logging on can click through to the recruiting website goarmy.com: 28 per cent of visitors do so. In 2008, a survey by the MIT found that nearly a third of all Americans aged between 16 and 24 years expressed a more positive impression of the army because of the game. In another survey, 4 per cent of new recruits claimed to have joined specifically as a result of playing *America's Army*, while another 60 per cent of new recruits had played the game more than five times in the week prior to enlisting. Young men who played *America's Army* at US army recruitment fairs were 30 per cent more likely than adolescents who never played the game to consider the army as a possible career option.

War games come heavily freighted with ideological messages. Gamers and their virtual worlds are always embedded in a political space. In the case of war games, this political space is remarkably sanitized: games rarely mention politics, hint about the legitimacy of killing, or admit to 'collateral damage'. They are saturated with talk of 'our troops', habituating civilians with an armed version of themselves. Combat legitimacy is resolutely jettisoned for player proficiency. Crucially, players do not shoot at generic 'people': they shoot at specific types of people. They shoot at the 'enemy'. These opponents are often highly racialised, and occupy worlds that mirror imperial environments.

The player of first-person shooters is required to align him- or herself with the military. Furthermore, they teach a particular kind of war: war is perpetual, indeterminate, it erodes all civil rights and is banal. This is a war of 'no surrender'. As *Conflict: Desert Storm* (2002) announces on its cover: 'No Diplomats. No Negotiations. No Surrender' .

In fact, playing these games is a form of participating in war. Promotional materials often claim that gaming is a type of volunteering. For example, the *America's Army* website boasts that the game 'provides civilians with an inside perspective and a virtual role in today's premier land force: the US Army'. Or, in the words of Chris Chambers, a retired army major who was *America's Army* deputy director in 2005,

We don't expect that a young person is going to play the game and run out and join the Army . . . That was never the point. We want the game to help us form a more long-term connection with the young person.

Games also teach real soldiers how to make war more game-like. Real soldiers attempt to make their experiences in combat resemble those in the games and vice versa. It reduced the men's inhibition. As David Bartlett, former chief of operations at the Defense Modelling and Simulation Office and the creator of *Marine Doom*, explained, when the time came to kill in real life

he was ready to do that. . . His experience leading up to that time, through on-the-ground training and playing 'Halo' and whatever else, enabled him to execute. His situation awareness was up. He knew what he had to do. He had done it before — or something like it up to that point.

UNITED KINGDOM

'[It's a] joy for me because I'm one of these people that love playing PlayStation and Xbox, so with my thumbs I like to think that I'm probably quite useful. You can ask the guys, I thrash them at Fifa the whole time.'

Prince Harry

The United Kingdom is Europe's largest video game market and the third largest in the world. The first-person shooter games, even though is just one genre out of many and played predominantly by young males, has disproportional influence on the whole gaming industry. 20% of all video games sold in the US in 2013 were shooter games. There is no corresponding figure available for the UK, but globally in 2014, 26% of gamers listed first-person shooters as their favourite type of games.

Despite relatively few number of first-person shooter title released each year, this genre over-represented every year in the lists of winners and nominees of the British Academy Games Award for Best Game. Since its inception in 2004, nearly half of the winners so far are first-person shooters and nearly three-quarters can be considered violent.

For the younger intake of British soldiers, games like *Call of Duty* and *Gears of War* are among the main influences on their motives to enlist; they told researchers that firing guns was the best thing about the gameplay. 'It's great when you play a game and you get to use things like sniper rifles,' said an infantry trainee, 'that's what I want to do.'

Virtual Battlespace 2, the British army's training game for soldiers, is an adapted version of the commercial first-person shooter, *Armed Assault*, programmed for scenarios in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Defence branded version is freely downloadable and also handed out by recruiters for young people asking what the army is like.

Following the example of *America's Army*, the British army commissioned the ad agency, Publicis, to produce its own recruitment game in 2009, aimed mainly at getting working-class teenagers to join the

undermanned infantry. The resulting *Start Thinking Soldier* combined computer graphics with first-person-perspective film footage of sanitised, mock war scenes filmed from a helmet camera - an 'immersive gaming recruitment experience' that was 'wholly believable,' according to Katie Smith of Publicis.

As with *Americas Army*, users were invited to register their details when accessing *Start Thinking Soldier*. Their game performance was then sent to recruiters, who would 'start a dialogue with them', Katie Smith explained, and gamers could click through to recruiters at any point for a live online chat. Special game features and access to the 'hi-score leader-board' were only offered to those who provided more personal details, which gave recruiters more contact options. The game also recommended specific army jobs to match the user's performance.

According to the ad agencies, half a million people had a go at the first mission and 1.7 million people used the site during the campaign. 80,000 users registered fully with their contact details - twice the target figure - and of these, more than a third said they intended to apply for an army job as a result of the game. Helped along by the recession, the army met its recruitment targets for once. Nevertheless, in the year following the campaign the number of drop-outs among army trainees that jumped, corresponds approximately with those who would have applied to enlist while *Start Thinking Soldier* was online. We will never know the full long-term impact of this 4.6 million project because the official evaluation has mysteriously disappeared. The army has since taken the full game offline and removed the links from its jobs website.

RATIONALE FOR INCLUDING VIOLENT GAMING AS PART OF OUR FIVE PERCENT

There is a vast amount of research exploring the relationship between war games, aggression and increased testosterone in young males. There is also a strong tendency for the society to link specific acts of violence to the perpetrators' history of play war games. As Professor Bourke argued in her book *Wounding the World*, "attempting to find a direct link between war-play and personal aggression is misguided". For one thing, the social-scientific evidence is patchy, but most importantly the problem is much deeper and bigger.

Humans are playing animals. Illusion, imagination and feigning terror as well as pleasure occupy central positions within our culture. This is why fun can also be 'political'. Rather than simply just exploring the psychological make-up of individual perpetrators, we should also be paying attention to *structural* sources of violence and pervasive militarism in our modern society. This is why we should be wary when powerful institutions such as the military invest billions of dollars in entertaining us.

By blurring entertainment and war — 'militainment' as it is often described — citizens can come to expect war without end. Entertainment has become a way of creating militarized citizens. The war is digested for easy consumption. We are all turned into citizen-soldiers, no longer viewing the war but embedded in it, albeit virtually. In the 'war without end' that has been initiated by the 'war on terror', the development of war games is part and parcel of the larger war effort.

Both in terms of the game and its meanings, players are required to have a material, ideologically situated body that is engaged in killing. Gaming enthusiasts fastidiously follow the latest trends in weapon development and their journals are packed with real-life applications. Many popular video games are produced by the military (often for military training purposes) and then adapted for general release. Boundaries are increasingly blurred as, on the one hand, games become more realistic and, on the other, live warfare grows ever more remote through the use of sophisticated long-range ballistic

weaponry and drones. In other words, developments in gaming and weaponry inspire, inform and validate one another. Access to combat is open to anyone with an internet connection and a computer, and it proving a popular way of participating in the war without end. As retired Marine Colonel Gary W Anderson, former chief of staff of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, argued, the twenty-first-century soldiers are 'new Spartans':

Remember the days of the old Sparta, when everything they did was towards war? ... In many ways, the soldiers of this video game generation have replicated that, and that's something to think about

THE FIVE PERCENT CAMPAIGN AND THE MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL-ENTERTAINMENT COMPLEX

The military and the defence industry are no longer the only main driver of militarism. The entertainment industry - especially the game industry - because of the technology advance and closer integration/relation with the military has vastly increased the reach and influence of militarism on the wider society. The violent games are so technological advanced and psychological engaging to young males (mainly), it is now arguably the most potent cultural medium of the military-industrial complex.

Militarism, like dangerously high military spending, is a product of never-ending 'creation' of obscene amount of new 'wealth' by the vested interests - the military, the arms industry, the entertainment-gaming industry. Tackling the issues of military spending and militarism without 'following the militainment/economy story is to fail to appreciate the wider social and cultural context within which military policy making and spending is placed. It is merely treating the symptoms without getting rid of one of the key causes of the 'illness'. Therefore, the Five Percent Campaign argues that we need to raise the level of debate in order to make the necessary - large scale - cultural and economic changes that these issues present and which stand in the way of enabling arguments for major reductions in military spending. As with other exploitative industries (slavery to child labour) , we must make the military-industrial-entertainment business model socially, culturally and economically unviable.

The intertwined relation between the military (politicians) and the defence contractors has achieved some degree of public exposure as a result of tireless campaigning by organisations like CAAT and War on Want (in the UK), and this remains one of The Five Percent Campaign's key focuses. On the other hand, the entertainment-gaming industry has almost been completely ignored. Since the world, especially the West is on the cusp of becoming accustomed to the state of 'war without end', we need now more than ever to give a huge dose of hugely deserved publicity to the violent gaming industry on its integral role in the military-industry-entertainment complex.

The Five Percent Campaign recognises that violent games

- are a key driver of militarism and its acceptance in all aspects of society by its players
- together with the entertainment industry at large, including mass media, are a key enablers of the 'war without end' society
- are a key selection mechanism (right mindset and skills) and recruitment (positive willingness) tool for the military

- promote the obsession with advanced and expensive high-tech weaponry, particularly those that demonstrates overwhelming and disproportionate power
- overemphasise the effectiveness and usefulness of force over other peaceful means in resolving issues
- are now and integral part of the arms industry. The realistic modelling of the armaments in games provides familiarity so that a gamer can readily transform into a user. The futuristic weaponry coming out of game makers' and gamers' imagination often inspire s arms maker.
- spread a narrow view of the world that looks at every issue/situation as a survival game between 'us and them' - 'the strong and the barbaric'.

In order to create the wider recognition and acceptance of the need to cut down the military spending and divert it to more socially useful and economically productive use (eg the green economy), these aspects of the violent games must be tackled.

POPULAR CULTURE AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES

Radical policies will not be pushed forward without strong political will, which in turn is encouraged and sustained by popular support. Popular culture can be an effective way to put a difficult and complex issue on the agenda and gradually make it accepted into the mainstream consciousness. BBC's documentary series *The Men Who Made Us Fat* (2012) and *The Truth About...* (including *Calories, Sugar and Fat*. 2015), for example, have play no small part in making the public question the roles fat and sugar play in the obesity epidemic and whether the Government's guidelines have been more politics/business than science. The Government is now deciding whether to change official dietary guidance.

Another good example is tax justice. Films such as *We're Not Broke*, *The UK Gold*, and documentaries like *Panorama - The Bank of Tax Cheats* and *The Super-Rich and Us* has brought tax justice to the mainstream audience, which historically was an issue very difficult to any traction on. The effect is significant. Take the example of the peculiar and archaic 'non-dom' tax avoidance loophole, shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown expressed Labour Party's desire to end the discriminatory special treatment, but once elected into the Government, the pledge was forgotten amid the public's indifference to the issue. In contrast, Labour leader Ed Miliband recently pledged to end the 'non-dom' rule once elected, the pledge may well turn out to be an election game-changer. One poll showed that four fifth of voters support scrapping the rule and Labour's election polls have soared after prolonged stagnation.

By using the unique combined experience and expertise in both social justice campaigning (NGO partnerships, events) and the entertainment industry (documentaries, films) of Tipping Point North South and Film Fund, The Five Percent Campaign aims to

- make NGOs and civil society realise the military-industrial-entertainment complex is a critical component that underpins the structural nature of the military spending issue
- 'follow the money' – contribute to the effort to expose the military-industrial-entertainment business model
- Work with others to make the military-industrial-entertainment business model socially, culturally and economically unviable in a modern civilised society

- Help to educate the wider public about the harm and danger of the military-industrial-entertainment complex
- Join others to push for reform of the game industry
- Join others to push for regulation of the military's involvement with the game industry
- Join others to push for regulation of the partnership/integration of the arms industry with the game industry.

The
5%
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