# Military Videogames and the Future of Ideological Warfare

Abstract: Military videogames play an important role in violent actors’ media strategies, and while scholars have attempted to theorize their significance, too much attention is devoted to characterizing games as an ideological distortion that must be unmasked to reveal a more authentic view of war. I offer an alternative perspective on these games and their political import. Relying on a conception of ideology as an inescapable constitutive part of politics, rather than ideology as a form of deception, I highlight three salient characteristics of these games. First, regardless of what strategic interests they are designed to advance, videogames’ meanings are open to contestation and reconfiguration, making games a site of conflict in themselves. Second, videogames grant insight into violent actors’ goals and self-conceptions. Third, because videogames are designed as closed systems built from mutually reinforcing ontological and epistemological assumptions, they introduce opportunities for normative critique based on testing ideologies’ coherence.

# Introduction

“Much of politics involves battles over how a campaign, a problem, or an issue should be understood” (Druckman 2001, 235), which makes control over the media that are used to shape understandings of issues and events a central political consideration. From politicians reaching out to voters (Schulzke, 2012), to state military forces attempting to attract recruits (Allen, 2011; Salter, 2011), to non-state actors challenging the narratives propagated in mainstream media outlets (Galloway 2004; Šisler 2008, 2009; Schulzke 2014), videogames have an important role in efforts to construct issues in domestic and international politics. They “have been invoked by presidents to justify foreign policy decisions, by social psychologists and media watchdog groups to explain increases in youth violence, by senators to revivify questions of censorship, and by the armed forces to recruit and train soldiers” (Ruggill and McAllister 2011, 3-4). Videogames are particularly important when they simulate real conflicts or fictional conflicts involving real actors that engage in political violence, such as state military forces and insurgent groups. Such games comment on some of the most important processes in international politics, conveying information about what war is like, providing opportunities for violent actors to communicate with audiences, and creating new possibilities for peace activism. The closer one looks at military videogames, the more the line between real war and simulated war dissolves to reveal a new ideological battleground.

Military videogames have attracted considerable attention from scholars in politics and international relations (Power 2007; Delwiche 2007; Salter 2011; Mantello 2012; Robinson 2012b; Schulzke 2013, 2014, Ciută, 2016; Valeriano and Habel, 2016). This literature displays a struggle to come to terms with a new form of political communication, and in particular, the challenge of understanding what makes videogames a unique medium when it comes to representing conflicts. Many studies of military videogames attempt to demonstrate that games are responsible for some type of ideological manipulation, such as promoting military service, legitimizing war, or trivializing violence (Power 2007; Delwiche 2007; Mantello 2012; Robinson 2012b). From this perspective, videogames appear to be a particularly potent form of propaganda that grants violent organizations greater power over audiences than they would have when using film, television, or print media. Even when studies discuss anti-war games or those presenting non-Western perspectives, they remain within this framing by describing these games as alternatives to those laden with propaganda (Galloway 2004, Šisler 2009, Robinson 2012b).

Although previous studies of military videogames yield important findings, I contend that they are too heavily focused on demonstrating that the ideologies embedded in games are incorrect or harmful. This is particularly true when it comes to videogames produced by real violent actors, which are my focus in this article. These games show an intersection between violent coercive power and the ideological weaponry that videogames provide, making them especially important from a political standpoint. I argue that the political import of military videogames can be better appreciated by taking a more nuanced perspective on how games express values and conceptions of war. Military videogames are not merely repositories of dominant ideologies, nor are anti-war games accurate characterizations of war as it really is. Rather, military videogames are complex texts that are best analyzed with attention to the diverse understandings of war they reveal and the insight they offer into violent organizations’ ideologies and media strategies. To demonstrate this, I draw heavily on theories of ideology as “imaginative maps” that are essential for orienting political action (Freeden, 1996, 2006) and explore three interrelated characteristics of military videogames that highlight different dimensions of their political significance.

First, military videogames are dynamic and amenable to endless contestation and reconfiguration. Games vary considerably in the extent to which they are linear or open-ended, with the latter being more malleable, yet because videogames are necessarily interactive they all presuppose some degree of player freedom. Even as videogames seem to be the ideal tool for elites to spread their ideas, they challenge the top-down model of propaganda, according to which elites create information for relatively passive mass audiences. Developers set the agenda in their games by deciding what events or issues will be featured, as well as by creating game worlds and the underlying logics, but developers can partially lose control of how these spaces are used because games are complex and open-ended environments that necessarily allow players to assert themselves. Game developers are therefore empowered by their agenda setting role while also opening themselves to attempts at subversion enacted through their games.

Second, videogames make it possible to engage in a distinctive form of ideological expression. Game developers not only present information about real political institutions and events but actually create working virtual models of them. For example, a recruitment video can tell viewers about a military’s values and its goals, while a videogame can show what those values and goals look like when they are enacted in practice. Modeling institutions and their activities provides an excellent perspective on how violent organizations see themselves and how they would like to be seen. These models should not be studied as mere deceptions that hide an underlying reality of war but rather as artifacts that can offer greater insight into some of the key actors in contemporary conflicts and how they understand their own identities. This is why I will describe these games as being sociologically important, regardless of their content.

Third, videogames merge ontology and epistemology. They are designed according to rules that impose a particular logic onto the virtual spaces that players experience. Assumptions about how conflict processes operate are embodied in every aspect of a game world, and experiences of the game world confirm those underlying assumptions. Videogames are therefore unavoidably structured according to ideological presuppositions that are then substantiated by the gameplay. Whereas ideological controversies surrounding conflicts are typically disputes over matters of fact (such as who attacked first or who committed an atrocity) or over concepts (such as what it means to wage a just war or who qualifies as a terrorist), videogames make it possible to model the world in an effort to assert control over mutually constituting facts and concepts, which are typically presented as ‘realistic’ representations of war (Payne, 2012). Analyzing games reveals violent actors sense of what underlying rules they see as governing international politics, and conflict processes in particular. Looking for tensions in the logic used to model wars makes it possible to sustain normative critiques of these games even while showing a deeper sociological appreciation for their ideational content.

# The Many Faces of Military Videogames

Images provide information, factual and affective, about how wars are waged, how combatants conduct themselves, and what effects violence has (Weber, 2006). Images of Iraqis toppling the statue of Saddam Hussein affirmed the Iraq War’s legitimacy at a time when support for it was weak. Images later undermined the occupation when they showed the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the bodies of civilians who were killed in the Haditha massacre (Mitchell 2011; Griffin 2004, 2010). Policymakers, military elites, violent non-state actors,[[1]](#footnote-1) and civilian media companies recognize the importance of images, deploying them to fit into carefully crafted narratives (Bleiker, 2009; Shapiro, 2009). Recall George Bush's "Mission Accomplished" declaration on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, and the films produced by al Qaeda and IS, which show masked fighters firing weapons and practicing combat maneuvers. These images convey powerful messages to audiences and may even advance strategic goals. Images give the illusion of granting direct access into the reality of war, yet they are a form of mediated experience. They are not neutral but rather reflect ideological orientations in the way they present their subjects, the descriptions that accompany them, what they omit, and their juxtaposition alongside other images (Möller, 2007; O'Loughlin 2011).

The power of images and the usefulness of controlling them is confirmed by contemporary strategic discourses. Concepts like netwar, soft power, cyber power, public diplomacy, and strategic communication indicate the importance of managing information and securing ideological advantages by making the management of perceptions a central strategic consideration. As Takacs (2013, 177) points out, “visual media play an even more important role now that soft power has been embraced as a complement to war.” Communication is a new front of warfare insofar as it is not epiphenomenal or simply a means of achieving other objectives. It is an irreducible component of war. Thus, it is possible for some of the world’s most powerful armed forces, such as those of the United States and Israel, to have enormous military advantages over their opponents and yet to still struggle when attempting to promote their own narratives about conflicts (Gilboa 2008; Schleifer 2003). This creates a discrepancy between dominance on the physical battlefield and preeminence in the ideological contest over how conflicts are perceived and evaluated normatively.

Violent actors’ participation in the videogame industry show an effort to not only communicate information about war but to actually fight in a new way. Videogames are distinct from other media that are used to wage ideological warfare because they allow developers and users to inscribe the meaning of visual images in the medium itself. Visual images are typically not self-sufficient sources of information; their meaning depends on what interpretations they are given by other media or textual cues (O'Loughlin 2011, 81). A picture of a dead body, for example, may be ambiguous and have little power to shape a conflict until it is described as showing a civilian who was killed by enemy atrocities or a soldier who died heroically in combat. Videogames are unique because they not only present images but also construct the meaning of the images by situating them within interactive narratives. They are sources of contextualized visual experiences, making them attractive as tools of ‘strategic communication.’

A broad range of different actors are engaged in the production and distribution of military videogames, including state military forces, private military contractors, violent non-state actors, human rights organizations, and mainstream media companies. Part of what makes the medium so interesting from a political standpoint is that these different types of actors participate in the same industry, sometimes competing, sometimes collaborating, sometimes copying each other, and always collectively setting the genre’s standards for what simulations of war should be like (Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter, 2009).

Most of the existing research on military videogames looks at how games glorify violent actors, particular wars, or the activity of war itself. Commentators express concern that games are in some way harmful because of the manipulative ways they present information and the relations of production that are responsible for their development. From this perspective, military videogames are a new type of propaganda reproducing many of the same pro-war messages that are evident in other media, though in uniquely persuasive ways. As Delwiche (2007, 4) says, in a comment that encapsulates the general tone of the literature, “video-games have the potential to shape attitudes and behavior in ways that Goebbels could never have dreamed.” Similarly, Power (2007, 278) argues that “Digital war games put a friendly, hospitable face on the military, manufacturing consent and complicity among consumers for military programmes, missions and weapons.” Robinson contends that videogames focusing on the US military promote American exceptionalism because they “serve to position the player as a representative of the US state, upholding national values through the kinds of secret military action argued for by the Bush administration during that ‘war’” (Robinson, 2015,452). Sparrow et al. (2015) decline to answer whether games actually influence players in harmful ways, yet they contend that violent actors’ heavy reliance on the games suggests that they have this effect. “Either military organizations are wrong to think that digital games have the training power they assert they do, or some digital games do, in fact, have the power to influence the real-world behavior and dispositions of players in morally significant ways” (Sparrow et al., 2015,3). As these studies indicate, the research on military videogames generally characterizes these as showing malevolence on the part of the developers and potentially harmful shifts in players’ attitudes.

*America's Army* is one of the central targets in critiques of military videogames. Released by the US Army in 2002 and continually updated since with new additions and modifications it is a strategic communication tool that is freely available to players around the world and that shows them a favorable view of the Army and its missions (Allen, 2011; Schulzke, 2013). Despite consistently using the same title, *America's Army* is not a single game but rather an entire franchise consisting in four computer games, expansion packs, and games for other platforms, such as the Xbox and mobile phones (Anderson, 2013). It has even expanded into an intertextual public relations campaign that includes virtual reality simulations and dozens of Army products like hats and key chains. The franchise could hardly be more explicit in its persuasive intent. It is full of pro-Army rhetoric, such as profiles of real soldiers, links to the Army's webpage, and statements of the Army values (Allen, 2011; Schulzke, 2013). The developers are open about their goal of using the game to attract recruits and improve the Army's image. As one of the game manuals explains, “it is part of the Army's communications strategy designed to leverage the power of the Internet as a portal through which young adults can get a first-hand look at what it is like to be a Soldier” (FAQ). With 14 million people playing the game by 2015, the Army has described the franchise as being one of its most cost effective recruitment tools (Mezoff, 2015).

In his analysis of *America’s Army*, Salter (2011, 360) says that “War games represent a militaristic, masculinist, Western geopolitical frame of violence.” Allen (2009) argues that the game is designed to show that the Army is always a force for good, as it is impossible for players to see themselves as anything other than American soldiers. Mantello (2012, 511) says that “*America’s Army* is the most spectacular example of the militarisation of videogames and of this reprogramming of the citizen as a participant in Netwar.” He goes on to say that it and other military games “seek to advance an aggressive, neo-orientalist frontier logic that sees the horizons of globalization, the fringes of Western power, as a gamer-type utopia” (Mantello 2012, 511). Power (2007, 281) goes even further by describing it as a form of operant conditioning that “may suppress an aversion to killing” and desensitize players to violence. As these quotations illustrate, studies of *America’s Army* contend that it is a deeply concerning tool for presenting deceptive information about war.

A range of other violent actors have also attempted to communicate with civilian audiences through videogames. The infamous private military contractor organization Blackwater licensed an eponymous videogame in 2011. Its founder, Erik Prince, said that he wanted the game to give players a sense of what it was really like to be a contractor and that he “set the overall vision and mission areas” for the game (Gaudiosi 2011). It also fit with Blackwater’s broader branding strategy, which included baseball caps, shirts, and military equipment emblazoned with its bear paw logo (Prince, 2013, 82). Unlike *America's Army*, which sets gameplay in decontextualized multiplayer battles in dozens of fictional locations, *Blackwater* follows a narrative structure, leading players through a humanitarian mission in North Africa. The story humanizes the contractors and casts them as heroes by using what Prince characterizes as “timeless themes of courage, good vs. evil and war” (Gaudiosi 2011). Moreover, it shows violent actors borrowing from each other, as Prince says that he was influenced by *America's Army* and military training simulations.

 The game was especially important for Blackwater’s effort to rebuild its image in the aftermath of high profile instances of misconduct (see: Schahill, 2007). Although the group ultimately opted for a more substantial rebranding by becoming XE Services, then Academi, the game still served a broader strategic communications function by attempting to legitimize controversial private military contractors. The game was plagued by poor reviews and poor sales, yet it still offers valuable insight into how real violent actors attempt to manage public opinion by using videogames.

Although violent non-state actors lack the resources of state military forces and contractors, they are able to exploit videogames to disseminate their own ideologies – either by creating original games or by providing alternative ways of experiencing existing games (Galloway 2004; Šisler 2008, 2009; Schulzke 2014). Hezbollah demonstrated the former strategy by creating *Special Force* (2003) and *Special Force 2* (2006), which are modeled on *America's Army* and war games from civilian developers. These games cast players in the role of Hezbollah members fighting in Lebanon in 2000 and 2006. They allow players to take part in pitched battles against IDF soldiers and include memorials to real fighters who took part in the war (Galloway 2004; Šisler 2008, 2009; Schulzke 2014).

Research on games produced by violent non-state actors tends to be more sympathetic, often praising these for upsetting the influence of pro-Western military videogames. Šisler (2008) condemns *America’s Army* and similar mainstream war games, yet he finds something praiseworthy in Hezbollah’s games: their ability to present an identity that was previously absent. “For the first time the Middle-Eastern gamer is offered congruence between their political reality and its in-game mimesis” (Šisler 2008, 212). Robinson (2012b, 518) says that these games “seem to offer a radically alternative perspective to those . . . which work to reinforce the power of the Western military-entertainment complex.” Galloway (2004) says that “It takes a game like *Special Force*, with all of Hizbullah's terror in the background, to see the stark, gruesome reality of *America's Army* in the foreground.” In each case, these commentators recognize that Hezbollah’s games look like Western military videogames and perform similar roles in articulating the views of a real violent organization, yet they credit Hezbollah’s games with having redeeming benefits because of the perspectival diversity they introduce.

Islamic State demonstrates the strategy of appropriation, as it used the popular videogame *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* to produce recruiting videos that show simulated attacks on American police officers and civilians in domestic contexts (Tassi, 2014). Although not itself a military videogame, *GTA* is easily framed as a terrorism simulator because games in the series allow players to attack civilians and landmarks in major American cities that are modeled on New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. IS does not transform the game itself but rather cues sympathizers to see the game in a new way – something that is made possible by the game’s open world structure and the various different gameplay strategies it can support (Miller 2008). By redeploying gameplay footage for its own purposes IS simultaneously lowers the costs of its engagement with videogames and circumvents censorship by linking the organization’s ideology to a game that is already popular. Moreover, this effort comes after more than a decade of controversy over whether the *GTA* series promotes violence, thereby striking at the already sensitive issues of whether violent videogames inspire real attacks (Robinson, 2012a).

Many critics of military videogames, such as Galloway (2004), Robinson (2012b), and Payne (2014) recognize that games can have critical import, but they tend to label entire games as being militaristic or critical. This binary framing reinforces the view that most military videogames are merely propaganda and that they may even exert a harmful influence on players, while also raising the risk of overlooking some of the objectionable themes in ostensibly critical games. As Ciută (2016,197) points out, research on videogames in International Relations is currently limited by the disproportionate attention to how games can serve as propaganda and can be profitably reframed by looking for a more diverse range of political functions they may have. Over the following sections I aim to set out a broader research agenda along the lines he advocates by arguing that we can better understand the political import of military videogames by seeing them as complex assemblages of ideological themes that are always sociologically important and that can be critiqued without simply characterizing them as propaganda.

# Rethinking Ideological Expressions

As the preceding discussion illustrates, most military videogames produced by violent organizations, as well as many from civilian developers, are characterized as hiding or misrepresenting the realities of war. By contrast, games from non-Western sources generally receive praise for showing alternative perspectives. Framing research in terms of deceptive vs. authentic representations of war suggests that mainstream military videogames manipulate players by spreading false information and normalizing violence, while likewise assuming that there is a more authentic underlying reality of war that is being concealed. Many commentators even explicitly link military videogames to processes of de-democratization and civic disengagement (Delwich 2007; Stahl 2009; Mantello 2012; Power 2007; Robinson 2012b). This contributes to the sense that military videogames are potentially dangerous and have little cognitive value while underestimating the potential for non-Western games to engage in their own ideological distortions. It also hinders interpretations of games as political artifacts by suggesting that they function as relatively simple pro- or anti-war devices that uniformly reflect their creators’ intentions.

I argue that we can develop a more nuanced approach to the study of military videogames and come to a deeper appreciation of their political import by looking at the development of research on other ideological expressions. Early studies of ideology, especially work coming from Marx and his early followers, was preoccupied with the same kind of ideological unmasking that appears in research on military videogames (Marx 1999; Lukács 1972). Even some of the methods are the same. Just as Marx and many of his successors thought that the sources of ideology could be found in the material interests of various classes, investigations of ideology in military videogames devote considerable attention to how distortion arises from the material links between weapons manufacturers, the military, and videogame developers (Halter 2006; Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter 2009; Der Derian 2009). Although the Marxist tradition of analyzing ideology to expose deception and “false consciousness” has yielded extremely important insights, “it concentrates on the domination and control aspects of ideology at the expense of other features and functions” (Freeden, 1996, 15). Overcoming this perspective is therefore a first step towards discovering the other “features and functions” of military videogames to deepen our understanding of their political import.

There are strong grounds for rejecting the Marxist conception of ideology, as it rests on questionable psychological and epistemological assumptions. Treating ideology as a form of deception makes audiences seem like blank slates that uncritically receive information. This is inaccurate based on the considerable volume of research from political psychologists consistently showing that recipients of political messages actively interpret information based on a complex array of psychological processes, and who may therefore reject or reinterpret ideologically-charged messages (Lodge and Taber 2005; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2008). Efforts to unmask deception likewise underestimate audiences’ capacities to alter those messages for others through their engagement with media. Jenkins shows that audiences, especially those who organize themselves into the fan communities that often surround major videogame franchises, engage in a “process of negotiating over the meaning of the text” that he calls textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992, xxi). Work on audience reception likewise indicates that this is a complex process in which audiences participate in determining textual meaning (Fiske, 1991, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005). This makes it difficult (and perhaps even impossible) to issue definitive assertions about textual meaning, especially when it comes to fairly broad claims about how texts function as propaganda. We should therefore not assume that a text’s meaning for audiences will be identical to the developers’ intentions.

The Marxist conception of ideology as deception is particularly difficult to sustain when applied to videogames because these are heteropolar media in the sense that they are collective products that disrupt traditional producer-audience binaries (Kaempf 2013,587). This is a characteristic that videogames share with social media, though games are distinctive in how they upset the producer-audience relationship. First, *games are necessarily heteropolar*. As Ruggill and McAllister (2011,87) argue, “players must actively help create the narrative, thematic, and ideological structures that determine the artificial and medium-focused experience.” Similarly, Jones (2008,9-10) says that “Players make games meaningful, make their meanings, as they play them, talk about them, reconfigure them, and play them again.” Players must have some capacity to alter the course of simulated events, thereby remaking texts through their interaction with them. The degree to which games permit player freedom can vary considerably. Some games constrain players by forcing them along carefully designed linear paths. Others are set in open worlds that allow greater independence. Military videogames tend to follow the latter model by circumscribing freedom and forcing players through scripted action sequences, it is vital to be aware that heteropolarity comes in varying degrees. Nevertheless, even when games follow a linear path, players have opportunities for interaction that change the gameplay experience, ensuring that the player “is always behind the management of meaning” (McAllister, 2006,45).

Second, games facilitate heteropolarity by creating spaces within which players can attempt to perform their interpretations of the games. Multiplayer games are especially important in this respect, as the performances are witnessed by other players. One of the most famous examples of a subversive use of videogames was Joseph DeLappe's effort to protest the Iraq War from within America's Army. He joined multiplayer matches and used the game's text messaging system to post the names of soldiers who were killed in Iraq (Robinson, 2012b,513). This form of protest operated within the ideological space established by the Army, but used it to undermine the ideology embedded in the game. Of course, not all experiences of heteropolarity need to be so overtly politicized. Players routinely renegotiate the meaning of *America’s Army* via acts of juvenile misconduct, such as name calling and abuse of dead player avatars (Salter 2011,371). Even this type of deviance undermines the franchise’s effort to present American soldiers as ethical and professional warriors.

Islamic State's use of *Grand Theft Auto* demonstrates just how significant the subversive potential of heteropolarity is when analyzing military videogames. The organization showed that *GTA* can be played as a terrorist simulator without any modifications. All that is necessary is a perspectival shift in how players approach the game. This is a particularly powerful statement of the malleability of videogames, as the gameplay rules cannot prevent this interpretation from being enacted. The subversive gameplay strategy is made even easier by *GTA*’s open world design, which permits considerable player freedom. The use of *GTA* as a terrorism simulator fits with the efforts scholars have made to show that the game facilitates a broad range of interpretations (Miller, 2008), though while undermining the effort they make to recover more positive messages from the game and lending credence to the persistent fears that *GTA* may train players to act violently.

Heteropolarity increases the extent to which the ideological battlefield that is constituted by videogames and other communications technologies resembles a real battlefield. This is evident from the Taliban’s use of *America’s Army*. According to sources within the Army, members of the Taliban have taken part in multiplayer matches “for years” (Anderson 2013), using them as an opportunity to learn more about the Army and to test fighting skills in simulated battles. This use of the game as an insurgent simulator illustrates its openness to subversive gameplay strategies. However, Marsha Berry, the game’s chief developer, said that Taliban engagement with *America’s Army* may be advantageous insofar as it gives the Army a forum for communicating with these real opponents. According to one reporter, “Berry says there’s no concern that enemy fighters could be using the game as a training aid. But with the game’s positive messaging, she is hopeful they are learning something. ‘Maybe it’s exposed them to something they didn’t know about our troops, like how great it is to be an American soldier’” (Anderson 2013). In this instance a videogame serves as the setting for a type of ideological conflict that visually resembles real war and that opposing belligerents may incorporate into strategies for reaching both military and ideological objectives. There is subversive gameplay, then an effort to counter that subversive gameplay by reasserting the developer’s mission.

Games present ideological assumptions, yet their interactivity ensures that the ideologies are unfinished and susceptible to various strategies of critique or appropriation. And these challenges may come from such diverse sources as players casually harassing each other, to insurgents training for combat. Military videogames are best seen as open spaces of ideological conflict in which developers and players struggle for control over issues of meaning without producing any authoritative perspective. Thus, heteropolarity means that games lack the finality of meaning that is typically attributed to the ideologically-charged mass media that are classified as propaganda (Taylor, 1990).

# Ideological Maps and Struggles over Meaning

In light of the research on the diverse audience receptions and the heteropolar character of the medium, it is imperative to avoid linking the political importance of games to an ability to influence, indoctrinate, or deceive players. Yet this raises a problem: if we reject the view that games are propaganda, then how can we conceptualize them as politically meaningful expressions? What does it mean for violent organizations (as well as dozens of civilian media franchises) to address players as ‘virtual citizen soldiers’ (Stahl, 2009, 42) participating in simulated wars?

Studies of ideology have developed strategies for showing greater appreciation for ideologies while still overcoming the assumption that there is an authentic or non-ideological reality existing beneath propaganda. Following Freeden (1996, 2006), Vincent (2010), and Eagleton (1991), I contend that ideologies are not simply abject falsehoods that are used to deliberately conceal an underlying truth. Rather, they are “imaginative maps drawing together facts that themselves may be disputed. They are collectively produced and collectively consumed, though the latter happens in unpredictable ways, and that collective nature makes them public property” (Freeden 2006, 20). This understanding of ideology is particularly important when it comes to videogames because games allow “imaginative maps” to be manifest within virtual spaces, transforming ideological abstractions into more concrete experiences that are enacted by players.

Freeden advocates greater respect for the ways in which ideologies help people make sense of the world and organize political concepts. “The thinking encapsulated in ideologies deserves examination in its own right, not merely for what it masks” because “ideologies are forms of political thought that provide important direct access to comprehending the formation and nature of political theory” (Freeden 1996, 1). Vincent supports this, cautioning that “Occasionally some ideology looks like crude phrasemongering or propaganda. This is only a half-truth” because even the most objectionable or apparently vacuous ideas can still constitute political life (Vincent, 2010,18). Similarly, Eagleton argues that, “Those who oppose the idea of ideology as false consciousness are right to see that ideology is no baseless illusion but a solid reality, an active material force which must have at least enough cognitive content to help organize the practical lives of human beings” (Eagleton 1991, 26). He correctly recognizes that even the kinds of militaristic ideologies that often appear in videogames must have some cognitive content if they are able to provide a substantive reference point for the organizations producing them. Understanding how those organizations operate and conceptualize themselves requires a serious engagement with the ideas structuring them, not simply an effort to unmask illusions.

These insights are in line with some of the claims made about expressions of ideas in other types of popular culture, such as Grayson’s argument that “Popular culture artefacts can reveal the approaches, interpretations and assumptions that underpin understandings of politics and what we believe to be political in the first place” (Grayson 2013, 380). This approach can proceed, and is made more compelling, when we read games with a more concerted effort to treat the ideas they express as being constitutive of political orientations. Mead (2013, 77) also suggests this kind of strategy when she says that “People can see what they want to see in *America’s Army*—it can properly be regarded as both teen-focused propaganda that militarizes young minds and a striking example of military innovation.” This sensibility can be applied across the broad range of military videogames on the market and inform our understanding of how they participate in conflict processes. Moreover, we should go one step further by not only recognizing that games are open to myriad interpretations but also investigating how those interpretations arise, what interests they reflect, how they fit in with broader understandings of political violence, and how they participate in new modes of communicative warfare.

Military videogames are ideological maps allowing violent actors as diverse as the US Army, Blackwater, and Hezbollah to model themselves in an idealized form and to present perfect manifestations of the organizations as they would like to be seen. This reflects the image management that violent actors engage in to promote their own legitimacy and frame their activities (Joachim and Schneiker, 2012). Although these organizations can express themselves via multiple different media, videogames are unique in their capacity to produce digital worlds in which an organization and its history can be instantiated. They allow their creators to go beyond simply stating values and attitudes or narrating experiences of military life to simulate military service and war with the help of complex models of the world that are carefully constructed to physically embody a game’s underlying ideological assumptions. Videogames make it possible to experience ideologies not as static artifacts but as part of lived experiences, as evidenced by the intent of *America’s Army*:

the passage of time, elimination of the draft and reductions in the size of the Army have resulted in a marked decrease in the number of Americans who have served in the Army and from whom young adults can gain vicarious insights into the challenges and rewards of Soldiering and national service. Therefore, the game is designed to substitute virtual for vicarious experiences. (FAQ).

When playing games designed by violent actors one gets a strong sense of how these organizations understand themselves - a sense of what the world looks like when it is redesigned according to organizations’ ideological maps. The rules structuring gameplay impose some limits on the extent of digital self-creation, yet it is revealing how institutions operate within those constraints and the extent to which they try to overcome them by altering the gameplay mechanics. *America's Army* does not simply tell players that soldiers are not supposed to shoot civilians, as another type of ideologically charged text might; it punishes them for shooting civilians by subtracting honor points and sending them to a simulated prison. The rules of the game enact a zero tolerance policy for violence against civilians or fratricide, thereby making a claim about the organization's strict adherence to norms in the real combat activities that are being simulated. Similarly, the games produced by Hezbollah do not simply describe the importance of martyrdom – they create digital shrines to the organization's heroes (Šisler 2009,283, Schulzke 2014,635). And functionally these are as real as any physical memorials insofar as they serve as an enduring testament to fighters who lost their lives.

We can also gain a sense of organizations’ strategic orientations from how the game narratives are framed and how the games are marketed. *America's Army* is freely available to players around the world, designed to reach a teen audience, incorporates dozens of geographically distinct fictional locations, and is continually expanded with new battlegrounds. These are among the reasons why the franchise is so controversial, yet these characteristics are also signs of the Army's aspirations to be able to fight anywhere, and its goal of achieving universal legitimacy. Its creators say that players “need to know that the Army is engaged around the world to defeat terrorist forces bent on the destruction of America and our freedoms” (FAQ). By contrast, Hezbollah's games were released on a small scale and focus on specific events. This is evidence of more limited goals related to the ongoing struggle against Israel (Perry 2007). The usual approach to these games is to interpret these characteristics as being part of a manipulation strategy, though the games’ dissemination could be more productively seen as giving clues about what groups of people armed forces see as potential audiences or perhaps as being constraints imposed by the market.

Military videogames are not merely informational but also strive to have some influence. *America’s Army* in particular is explicitly framed as a recruitment tool. However, it is critical to remember that the desired influence is probably not meant to be based on deception and therefore not propaganda from the developer’s point of view. As Eagleton points out “Ideologies are often seen as not only expressing social interests, but also rationalizing them. This process is presenting an explanation that is logically and ethically consistent and acceptable. But this isn’t always the case because groups don’t always consider their motivations shameful” (Eagleton 1991, 51). Extrapolating from this, the developers of military videogames do not appear to see the game content or their own persuasive efforts as shameful. Ideological assumptions are embedded in these and other games by violent organizations, yet the ideologies do not need unmasking, as they rarely attempt to conceal their ideological character. The games issue clear statements of how violent organizations see themselves and what they aspire to do. The guide for *America’s Army 3* states that it “provides civilians with an inside perspective and a virtual role in today's premier land force: the U.S. Army. The game is designed to provide an accurate portrayal of Soldier experiences across a number of occupations” (FAQ). Similarly, a Hezbollah media relations officer said of *Special Force 2* that “Through this game the child can build an idea of some of ... the most prominent battles and the idea that this enemy can be defeated" (Perry 2007).

Rather than dismissing these ideological spaces as illusions we should instead attempt to understand how they are being used by violent organizations to advance their interests, how they mediate current events, how they function as sites of shared meaning, and what the games can reveal about the values of the organizations that create them. This is what I mean by looking at ideology from a sociological perspective. Doing this can improve accounts of how games function as political artifacts by showing that they are more than just attempts to deceive or influence players. Taking this perspective in turn raises the possibility that the games are efforts to present perspectives that the developers genuinely find compelling. Even if the ideologies in games are objectionable from the perspective of an academic commentator, the fact that they constitute a form of political expression (often coming from violent organizations themselves or with heavy influence from them) makes them invaluable for understanding how the world looks from the perspectives of the violent actors themselves.

# The Structure of Closed Worlds and the Possibility of Critique

There is something inherently valuable about ideologies as ways of relating to the world and structuring political orientations. Ideologies are also inescapable, and efforts at unmasking them come with their own ideological baggage (Freeden 1996). We inevitably read texts, videogames included, through the lens of our own values and interests even when we do this with critical intent. However, appreciating the sociological content of videogames should not be mistaken as a kind of apologism for violent organizations. It is important to retain the critical perspective that has been ably demonstrated in previous research on military videogames, especially when so many commentators are concerned that these could have a harmful influence on players. This raises the question of how to maintain some basis for normatively evaluating the ideologies embedded in military videogames without simply treating them as a form of deception.

Here again the literature on ideology is helpful. Whereas early Marxist work on ideology focused on uncovering deception with the goal of developing a more accurate view of the world, later work tended to pursue the strategy of immanent critique by calling attention to inconsistencies within ideologies (Antonio, 1981).[[2]](#footnote-2) As networks of interrelated beliefs, values, and attitudes that are continually being reconfigured and redefined, political ideologies invariably suffer from internal tensions. They are therefore susceptible to critique when these tensions are exposed. This goes beyond simply showing that videogames may present misleading visions of war to a deeper project of identifying the relationships between the various ideas that are reflected in games. Crucially, this makes critique possible without suggesting that there is any underlying reality of war being hidden by the games or assuming that other perspectives are neutral, and while still appreciating the role ideologies have in constituting violent actors’ identities.

For example, *America’s Army* reveals some of the problems associated with what Kahl (2007,8) labels the “‘annihilation-restraint paradox’: a commitment to the use of overwhelming but lawful force” that is characteristic of US military operations. The game embodies these contrary impulses by giving players the capacity to inflict enormous destruction but also penalizing them for any attacks that are misdirected against civilians or teammates. However, wrongful violence is so foreseeable that punishments like subtracting honor points and sending players to a virtual prison are embedded in the game mechanics. *America’s Army* tacitly acknowledges that misdirected attacks are certain to occur during armed conflicts and that it has limited power to exercise prior restraint over soldiers who may intentionally or unintentionally shoot innocent people. In other words, the gameplay design exposes the impossibility of the Army’s aspirations of waging cost-free wars, especially as it deploys the powerful advanced weaponry that is so often celebrated by games’ ‘technofetishism’ (Stahl 2009,28). From this perspective *America’s Army* exposes the problems with the Army’s contrary impulses of annihilating the enemy while still conforming to norms – a challenge that it continues to struggle with in its ongoing wars. Thus, without simply dismissing it as deceptive propaganda, critique of *America’s Army* and of the Army itself remains possible by exploring the inherent tensions in how a game models conflict processes.

Violent organizations’ games are likewise open to critique based on the organizations’ own ideological criteria. Hezbollah celebrates martyrdom, even to the extent that its games include tributes to members who have lost their lives (Šisler 2009,283, Schulzke 2014,635), yet the games ironically deprive players of the same opportunities. As in all videogames, players always have the ability to restart the game and must live to play through every moment until the closing credits. The logic of gameplay design excludes players themselves from the “celebration of martyrdom” that is central to the organization’s ideology (Harik, 2005,134), and this in turn suggests the unsustainability of martyrdom as a long-term strategy that could actually sustain the organization until the final battles represented in the games.

Games are particularly susceptible to immanent critique because of how the ideas they express are embodied with a simulated concreteness and claims of being realistic. Videogames unify ontology and epistemology. They are closed systems operating based on rules that set out the range of possible experiences that players may have (Juul 2005; Bogost 2006), with every experience of the game world confirming the embedded assumptions about how the real world operates. Everything that is potentially knowable in the game world reflects the underlying rules, and the underlying rules are in turn normalized by the game. Facts are framed to ensure that ideologically charged concepts are always correctly applied. Similarly, particular uses of concepts that may ordinarily be heavily contested within different ideological traditions are naturalized as they are embodied in simulated events.

The unique relationship between ontology and epistemology makes videogames a special type of text. Ideological disputes are generally waged over the meaning of contested concepts or over facts (Gallie, 1956). For example, two opposing belligerents and their supporters might dispute the meaning of the term "terrorism," which both attempt to apply to each other, or they may dispute whether the term "terrorism" can be properly applied to a particular attack. In the simulated conflicts of videogames, factual and conceptual debates need not arise. Simulated attacks attributed to the enemy can be molded ontologically to fit whatever the prevailing conception of terrorism is. This is especially powerful when the attacks are ostensibly based on real events, such as when Hezbollah’s games show Israeli atrocities against civilians. Or games can simply define contested concepts out of existence to make them meaningless within the game world. This is evident from *Blackwater*, which seeks to shed the negative image of the ‘mercenary’ label by creating a world in which that label simply does not pertain to the organization. The term and its negative connotations cease to have any referent when contractors are heroic benefactors who appear to resolve humanitarian crises without any expectations of payment.

Players may interact with a game in unexpected ways and may use many different gameplay strategies according to the logic of heteropolarity, yet their encounters with a game are invariably shaped by the rules that govern the virtual space. Developers retain control over framing games and designing their governing rules. Players must learn and adapt to these rules to progress, gaining an experiential understanding of the assumptions embedded in the game design (Wark, 2007,120-3). Military videogames generally purport to provide convincing experiences of combat (Payne, 2014), and doing this depends on modeling a logic of war in a way that provides entertainment while also capturing a sense of authenticity. Games are caught by the demands of being fun while also convincingly modeling processes that are extraordinarily complex and that are heavily contested by those with opposing accounts of why and how wars are fought. They must therefore simplify and systematize the logic of real conflicts. How violent actors create ‘authentic’ experiences while still being enjoyable for players betrays a great deal about how violent actors understand themselves and their operations. This embodiment of ideologies in simulated practice makes it possible to not only apply immanent critique in the sense of mapping out contradictions of ideas but also in the sense of uncovering the contradictions that would arise if the ideologies were the governing force behind real world conflict processes.

Immanent critique both reinforces and is reinforced by the sociological perspective of cultivating a respect for ideologies of all types. It becomes easier when systems of ideas are thoroughly mapped out with attention to the many ways in which they function (beyond deception alone). It also gains strength from recognizing that ideologies are not monolithic structures that represent militaristic or critical perspectives but rather diverse assemblages of ideas. The sociological perspective in turn becomes more substantive when ideological contradictions and reasons for them are brought to light. Problematic assumptions underlying military videogames have been contested in the existing literature. The technique of immanent critique is therefore partly established within the existing research. The problem is that it is with some of the related theoretical baggage related to thinking on deception and propaganda that can be profitably cut away in an effort to highlight the contributions that are possible via the immanent critique strategy. Assumptions embedded in the games are too often rejected as blatant attempts at dissimulation via the strategy of propaganda critique, we can just as effectively interrogate them and their inconsistencies if we take seriously the point that Eagleton (1991, 51) makes: that the authors of ideological texts may believe in this content and believe that it constitutes an accurate (rather than a deceptive) viewpoint. Thus, insights from previous work on videogames can be preserved even as the overall critical strategy shifts to one that is more cognizant of the value of ideologies and the impossibility of transcending them.

# Conclusion

Despite the scholarly interest in military videogames over the past decade, their political import remains under-theorized. Existing research has ably explored the various ways in which games may deceive or influence, but as Ciută (2016) points out, this understanding of games does not account for the other political roles they may play. As I have advocated, we can formulate more sophisticated theories of military videogames by moving beyond the traditional ideology-as-deception view and, borrowing on work coming from theories of ideology offered by Freeden (1996, 2006), Vincent (2010), and Eagleton (1991) among others, recognize that ideology is a constitutive part of political life.

Military videogames are complex political artifacts that require attention to their various layers of meaning. They form part of an ideological battlefield that exists alongside, and helps to construct the meaning of, other forms of combat. The heteropolarity of individual games complicates sociological and normative readings of the games, in addition to making it more difficult to attribute a particular meaning to games or to determine exactly what effects they may have on players. Nevertheless, heteropolarity politicizes the medium by making it easier for games to facilitate contestation and showing that the developer’s intended meaning is not conclusive.

From a sociological perspective, videogames provide us with idealized models of violent organizations and conflicts, which can provide much greater insight into ideological mapping than other media because of how games manifest ideas with simulated concreteness. From a normative perspective, these maps can be extremely useful when it comes to identifying how their components fit together and what inconsistencies arise in systems of ideas as they become the governing rules underlying virtual worlds. Thus, it is possible to deepen our appreciation for the ideas that military videogames present and to approach these not only as attempts to influence but also as genuine expressions of a diverse array of perspectives on war while preserving the critical edge that informs existing research on military videogames.

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1. I use this term to refer broadly to armed organizations that participate in wars, but that are not generally recognized as states. Terrorist organizations, insurgencies, and militias fit into this category. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Immanent critique was a central feature of Marx’s thought, but he focused on material processes while downplaying the role of ideas (Antonio, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)