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Empathy

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In our increasingly visual age, the public overwhelmingly experiences war through television news coverage, popular culture and entertainment. All of these centre on visual spectacles, on what Roger Stahl (2010) calls "Militainment." Central to this dynamic are military videogames, played by tens of millions of people around the world. Spurred by this success videogame-based campaigns have increasingly been used to recruit soldiers. Even terrorist organisations, like Islamic State, base their visual campaigns on videogames.

I examine military video games from a counter-intuitive perspective: by focusing on how they project and enable empathy. Videogames seem, at first sight, an unlikely vehicle for such a discussion. Military war games even less so. They have frequently been criticised both for promoting violence and for offering inappropriate racist depictions of stereotypical 'enemies.' I counter this form of caricature and show how videogames – even war videogames – can play an important role in generating empathy. I define empathy as allowing a person to feel what someone else feels from their perspective.

Videogames are a highly visual medium. They offer depictions of often fantastical worlds with ever increasing levels of sophistication and realism. I focus on how visuals interact with what is called the 'possibility space' of 'gameplay:' the constraints related to what the player can and cannot do (Bogost 2007). Here I argue that empathy is experienced by players based on what they are allowed to do, and how and what they are allowed to see.

I trace the move towards empathy in war-based videogames along the following lines: from games in which players are meant to emphasise with the US as a victim following 9/11; to games that give players the chance to feel what it is like to be a soldier; to games that allow players to take on the role of victims of war. The variety of these empathetic connections point to the political significance of videogames but also offer challenges for understanding the relationship between player and games.

Feeling for the USA?

Archetypal military shooter videogame are typically set in a contemporary conflict in which the player represents a member of the US military or its allies. The player is engaged in war against uniformed soldiers from an enemy clearly identified with a particular state, most frequently Russia, China, North Korea, or a country in the Middle East. The only method of success is through shooting and destroying the enemy.

Empathy seems at first sight absent from such a simulated militarised world. And yet, mainstream military games frequently encourage the player to make an empathetic connection with both the soldier and his homeland: the USA is portrayed as an innocent victim of violence.

Typical of the genre is Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007), which begins with US marines drawn into conflict in the Middle East following a coup *d'état* in an unspecified Middle Eastern country. Thirty thousand American troops are subsequently killed by a nuclear bomb which is detonated by the coup leader. As a first person shooter, the player is literally thrust into the role of one of the soldiers who witnesses the mushroom cloud which graphically signifies the bomb's detonation. The soldier then crawls through the post-nuclear wreckage before dying of radiation poisoning. The USA is thus depicted as moral and righteous; it is the victim of 'barbaric' forces who are beyond negotiation.

Mainstream military shooters thus present the USA and its soldiers as co-constitutive: the empathetic connection between player and character is assumed and uncomplicated. Frequently played in first person so that the player literally comes to 'embody the soldier,' the player sees through the eyes of a soldier with the dominant view being along the barrel of a gun. Visually the screen also presents strategic information such as a direction indicator to their next objective, and levels of health and ammo. Action is near continuous, such that by the game's end, the player has killed literally hundreds (perhaps thousands) of enemies to return the US to a state of stability.

The emotional response sought in the player is one of heroic complicity in fighting the war on terror. The hyper-stylised visuals of these games, which contain frequent explosions and intense, rapid battlefield action are matched by their narrative, music, and sound, all working together as the soldier/player utilises high-tech, cutting-edge weaponry to perpetrate "clean"

and "virtuous war" (see Der Derian 2009). Such war resists any empathy with the enemy, scripting out the impact of the player's actions through the absence of both civilians (there are no civilian casualties in these wars) and any portrayals of post-conflict instability. The player thus both identifies and suffers with the US as a victim and an agent who seek just retribution and vengeance for unjustified wrongs inflicted upon it.

Feeling for Soldiers?

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that mainstream military videogames lack any critical capacity. There are ambiguities at the heart of a number of mainstream games that suggest a more complex potential set of empathetic responses. For example, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009) exposes rogue military forces at the heart of government that are complicit in driving the onset of global war. Similarly, Splinter Cell Conviction (2010), Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (2014), and Army of Two (2008) all reveal Private Military Corporations working alongside malevolent government forces to mobilise the state for war (Robinson 2015: 468). The US government is thus exposed as co-complicit in the very war that is being fought by the player. Yet any sense that the US as a whole is implicated in causing contemporary war is immediately closed off as the player's actions are crucial in exposing and destroying these malevolent forces. Justice is wrought on rogue government agents not through the judicial system but through the barrel of a gun. Thus the empathetic connection between the player and the soldier character remains clear: the games never challenge the motives or actions of the soldier. Any moral complexity here is caused by the actions of political and military elites, not the soldiers who fight in their name, caught up in a political game over which they have no control.

Soldiers as blameless; families as victims

The message that soldiers are blameless victims is captured in a number of games in which one of the main playable characters is killed (e.g. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series, Battlefield 3), underlining the ultimate cost of war on combatants and pulling powerfully on the empathetic connection between player and soldier. When the player's character is killed, a striking visual contrast is drawn between their death – often depicted in close-up, with death a slow and intimate affair in which the action comes to a halt – and that of the enemy, in which death is routine and normalised, distant and near instantaneous.

The game Medal of Honor Warfighter (2012) is highly unusual within the military shooter genre in that it explicitly seeks to demonstrate the cost of war for soldier's families: cut-scenes woven through the game (based on the conventions of naturalistic TV drama) portray conversations between the soldier/player and his wife centred on the sacrifices they are making as a family for the 'greater good.' Towards the end of the game, one of the lead characters (Mother) is captured and graphically and needlessly tortured to death by the terrorist antagonists. The game ends with a two and a half minute long cut-scene centred on Mother's military funeral in which the player's family and comrades are at the graveside as Mother's heroism is commemorated. Thus, the game takes the theme of sacrifice into a very personal place, demonstrating the consequences for those left in the homeland of fighting the War on Terror.

Critical empathy: the reflective soldier

Spec Ops: The Line (2012) is perhaps the first game explicitly designed to force the player to reflect on the efficacies of war and on the consequences of war for the player/soldier. Taking inspiration from Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the game places the player in the role of Captain Walker, the leader of a three-man squad of US Special Forces, charged with undertaking a rescue mission designed both to reconnect with US military soldiers trapped following a sandstorm in Dubai – whose leader, 'Konrad,' is slowly revealed as a parallel figure to Kurtz in Conrad's book – and to rescue civilians.

Essential to Spec Ops: The *Line's* empathetic capacity is its synergy between visuals and gameplay. The setting of the game is crucial, providing an allegorical representation which juxtaposes Dubai's prior opulence and wealth with the devastation which has been wrought upon it by the sandstorm, shown in the depictions of skyscrapers and luxury hotels which have now fallen into ruin.

Marking a further crucial difference between this game and the 'first-person' games discussed above, Spec Ops: The Line is a 'third-person' game in which the player's character is fully visible at all times. At the beginning of the game, the player's character (Captain Walker) is presented as a virtuous military archetype: clean cut, courteous to his colleagues, and respectful of the rules of military engagement. Yet as the game unfolds, it forces the player into an increasingly morally ambiguous series of actions including killing US soldiers

and local civilians – the devastating impact being made visually manifest in the battering and scarring of Walker's body.

Central to the empathetic power of the game is the critical position which it takes on the role of military technology. While in the 'virtuous war' of most military shooters, military technology is universally 'clean,' allowing the player to kill overwhelming numbers of enemies with minimal collateral damage and no risk to civilians, in Spec Ops: The Line technology has a devastating effect. Perhaps the most infamous example occurs about half-way through the game in the mission 'The Gate' in which Walker utilises a hi-tech mortar containing white phosphorous in order to overcome a heavily fortified enemy encampment. While this is ostensibly a choice (in a cut-scene Walker and his colleagues argue over whether to deploy the weapon) the game's structure requires the use of the mortar to advance the story.

But where other games script out consequences, Spec-Ops: The Line makes them all too clear for both character and player. In a highly graphic and visually unsettling scene, Walker and his colleagues are forced to walk through the carnage they have created. Initially, they encounter the burning bodies of soldiers, screaming in agony – legitimate targets, the characters rationalise. But as they continue, the characters and player are confronted with a horrifying truth: the soldiers were protecting civilians and both groups burnt to death in the white phosphorous attack.

The power of the game thus comes from the synergy of visual representations and the deliberate limits which it places on the scope of what the player can do: the player is forced into the unfamiliar role of perpetrating acts of violence against both US soldiers and innocent civilians which the player is then forced to experience. The consequences of this are seen by the player as their character is increasingly battered and physically scarred – an allegory for the violence they have unleashed on others. Yet, Walker also descends into madness as a result of these conflicting pressures. As the game ends, Walker's loss of reason is complete. He is confronted with a series of hallucinations of people he has killed, with Konrad's voice, inescapably taunting, locked inside his head: Why did you do what you did? Why have you perpetrated acts of indiscriminate violence?

All of us who play military shooters have killed thousands of people. Walker's character forces us to ask the question – who is evil? The enemy, Walker or the player? Spec Ops: The Line thus represents the possibility of deploying the empathetic connection between player and character in a different, critical way.

Victims/Civilians

I have considered the potentials and challenges of the empathetic connections between players and their soldier characters in mainstream military videogames, where civilian victims are usually absent or graphically, passively dead. Two recent games – Sunset (2015) and This War of Mine (2014) – work differently: they place the player in the position of the civilian victim, using the empathetic connection between player and character to enable a different understanding of the effects of war.

Consider This War of Mine, which is loosely based on the siege of Sarajevo during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. Paweł Miechowski (cited in Reynolds, 2014), one of the game's senior writers, explicitly argues for the power of the game environment to create empathetic understanding of war: "if you think about it, in movies such as The Pianist or Saving Private Ryan or many other war movies, you're always the spectator. In games, you're in the middle of the experience or the story, so it can be the perfect way to cover a serious topic."

Played from a sideways-on point of view, the game tasks the player with trying to keep multiple civilian protagonists alive, initially taking control of three civilians caught up in the conflict who have been forced to take refuge in a war-damaged house.

Insert Figure 1

This War of Mine, 'Civilians confront the hopelessness and horrors of survival in a warzone.'

Visually, the game uses a predominantly monochrome colour scheme offering representations of war-damaged urban buildings such as houses, churches, and supermarkets – its deliberate darkness seeking to invoke a sense of depression in the player given the

hopelessness of the plight confronting the civilians represented in the game. The game is separated in a day-night cycle, with the day taken up by cooking, sleeping and building objects such as a bed or radio to improve the civilians physical and mental well-being, while the night is taken up by scavenging for ever scarcer resources.

The in-game rules make the game extremely difficult. First, the game provides no instructions of the most effective strategies for survival. Players have to figure things out for themselves as they work through the game, and frequent missteps makes death inevitable. Second, the game deliberately limits the player's resources: he or she is thus forced to take risks and leave the shelter of their house to scavenge for resources at night. Yet scavenging confronts the player with a series of ethical and moral dilemmas: valuable objects such as medicine and food, which are essential to your survival, will frequently be 'owned' by other civilians. Stealing them may result in violent confrontation and death to you or the other civilians. Even when conflict is avoided, stealing results in your characters becoming depressed as they reflect on the costs of their actions on their victims. Even those items which are not owned, such as wood or scrap metal, have to be carefully chosen as characters have limited capacity to carry items each night.

The difficulty of the game is further enhanced by the fact that scavengers may also steal your resources at night whilst you are away. Whilst you can leave house members to defend your property, allocating them to guard duty carries costs in terms of their lack of sleep and the fact that they may become injured by other scavengers. Valuable resources can be used to board up your property to make it more secure but this also comes at a cost – these resources cannot be used for heating or cooking, for example.

In a third person game, in which players care for civilians, the power of the game comes from its ability to make the player understand both the very real consequences of living through war: the horrible moral choices to be made and the impact they have on the lives and mental well-being of civilians.

The Visual Politics of Video Games

Videogames - played by millions of players around the world - are important sites of visual global politics and offer valuable insights into the role of empathy in understanding and

experiencing such politics. Players (and their characters) are challenged by games to think, feel, and experience multiple perspectives on war and its consequences. Whereas much past criticism perhaps understandably suggested that the focus within mainstream war games was exclusively on the heroic celebration of the soldier (clearly demarcated from an enemy 'other'), military videogames have always been more complex than that. Even the mainstream invokes spaces that allow a more complex set of potential emotional connections. Like films, games have exposed the military-entertainment complex and questioned bureaucratic incompetence to ask why states and their soldiers are involved in conflict. Games such as Medal of Honor Warfighter reveal the consequences for soldiers killed in action and their families. Yet arguably all of these games subsume the critical intent of their narratives and stories by the action-centric pattern of play which places a premium on relentless action which serves to celebrate conflict and restricts space for reflective empathy.

More recent games have sought to synthesise visuals, message, narrative, and action to create empathetic connections between player and character. Spec Ops: The Line explicitly engages the consequences of military violence for both soldier and civilians. Games such as This War of Mine connect players with the harrowing consequences of war by forcing them to care for civilian victims. The growth of this new genre of critical war game marks a significant moment not only for the games industry but also for a form of politics that forges more critical and empathetic pathways towards understanding of war.