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Militarism and opposition in the living room: the case of military videogames

Nick Robinson *

School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

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This article explores the importance of videogames and their associated promotional media for both militarism and the resulting opposition. It focuses on the games *Medal of Honor* and *Medal of Honor Warfighter* – two mainstream, commercially successful military combat games which purport to offer an ‘authentic’ experience of post 9/11 military action to the player – to develop a framework to explore the role of videogames in this area. First, in terms of the military industrial and military entertainment complex, it shows the close association between the game developers and the military, with the military providing consultancy services, access to military hardware and openly celebrating their mutual associations. Second, these associations take on an important spatial dimension with the developers and weapons makers producing promotional materials which literally show both parties ‘enjoying one another’s company’ in the same physical space; games also ‘transport the player’ into the virtual battlefield and allow them to embody the soldier. Finally, gendered militarism is shown in the gameplay and narratives within these games, alongside their associated promotional materials, all of which place significant emphasis on the links between militaristic values and masculinity. In both games, the celebration of militarism was highly controversial, prompting heated debate and active opposition – albeit varying in the two cases – from the military, politicians and players on the appropriateness of using videogames for militaristic entertainment. This suggests that there are limits to society’s acquiescence in militarism and a continuing capacity to critique militaristic popular culture.

Keywords: military video games; militarisation and militarism; gender; military entertainment complex; spatiality and geography of militarism; political controversy and opposition

Introduction

Post 9/11, concern has grown over the rise of both militarisation and militarism. While both militarism (here, ‘the prevalence of warlike values in society’) and militarisation (here, ‘the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organises itself for the production of violence’) significantly predate 9/11 (Gillis 1989, 1; see also; Berghahn 1981; Enloe 1988), they have arguably taken on a more pronounced aspect since then. As Bacevich (2005, 1) argues, ‘[t]oday as never before in their history Americans are enthralled with military power’. While much of the recent scholarship is focused on the USA, tensions over the legitimate role for the military, the extent to which society is being militarised and the acceptability of the promotion of warlike values are preoccupying

*Email: N.Robinson@leeds.ac.uk

security scholars (see, for example, Stavrianakis and Selby 2013 for a highly useful collection).

Concurrent with these developments has been an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of the interrelationship between popular culture and the military and the consequences for militarism and militarisation (see, for example, Boggs and Pollard 2006, 2007; Der Derian 2009). Davies and Philpott's (2012) discussion of militarisation *and* popular culture is particularly important, providing a comprehensive analysis which teases out the different roles popular culture performs and presenting a call for further research. Here, I distinguish between two potential roles of popular culture: as a vehicle for militarism (militarism *through* popular culture) and as contributor to militarisation (militarisation *by* popular culture). The focus of this article is on militarism *through* popular culture; thus it does not explicitly engage with analysis of the contribution of popular culture to the militarisation process.

Davies and Philpott also alert us to the importance of political contestation: 'the analysis of militarization is politically incomplete – and wrong – if it neglects the contradictions and dissent it produces in popular culture and the possibilities for contestation and demilitarization it enables through popular culture' (2012, 43). Reflecting their call, this article seeks to demonstrate that popular culture can offer critiques of militarisation and/or militarism. Shapiro (2009, 37), for example, talks of 'cinema's increasingly political and anti-militarization impetus', emphasising that Hollywood and independent film makers have produced a number of films which explicitly critique the growth of militarised violence. Whilst seldom mainstream, the production of videogames designed to critique war can also be seen, for example in *September 12th*, *This War of Mine*, and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Robinson 2012, 515–519). Citizens and activists, too, have made critical interventions targeted against militaristic popular culture, evidenced by Haynes's and Delappe's political activism against the US military's recruitment-focused videogame *America's Army* (Haynes 2006; on Delappe see Chan 2010. See Robinson 2012, 513–519 for the scope of these interventions) and Crowe's (2011) analysis of player behaviour in online games which examines how players conform to or resist the rules of the game, so challenging militarism.

This article offers a specific focus on the contribution of military videogames to militarism and the ensuing opposition to militarism. Videogames are particularly appropriate for this task as contemporary war games are played by millions of people in Europe, North America and Australasia: five of the last six games in the *Call of Duty* series have each sold approximately 25–30m copies, grossing revenues of over \$1bn each.¹ As Stahl (2006, 118) identified, these are not isolated cases: 'September 11, 2001 and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq ushered in a boom in sales of war-themed video games for the commercial market'. Such games offer strongly militaristic messages to their players (and hence contribute to militarism). Chan (2005), Höglund (2008), Šisler (2008), Huntemann and Payne (2009), Mantello (2012), Schulzke (2013) and Robinson (2015) all examined the messages within military games, demonstrating how these games differentiate between the allies of the player and the enemy, often offering Orientalist depictions which position the latter as a 'rogue state' beyond the boundaries of reason and diplomacy so legitimating the use of overwhelming force.

This article explores the interrelationship between videogames, militarism and opposition through discussion of two recent first-person shooter games, *Medal of Honor* and *Medal of Honor Warfighter*. These were chosen in part because they are typical of the genre, with the player acting as a serving US military operative fighting in the contemporary War on Terror. Yet, they also place a very particular emphasis on offering an

‘authentic’ experience of that war and openly celebrate their collaborations with the military, so allowing for exploration of how this manifests itself in terms of militarism.

Medal of Honor (MoH) was released in October 2010, selling approximately 5.9m copies across PS3, Xbox 360 and PC (data from <http://www.vgchartz.com>). The narrative of *MoH* centres on the initial phase of the war in Afghanistan in late 2001. Originally the developers had proposed to use the game to tell a ‘real story’ based on the Afghan conflict. However, given sensitivities surrounding this, and following discussion with the Special Operations personnel who were acting as advisers to the developers, a decision was taken to change the setting from one which was ‘accurate and realistic’ to one which was ‘authentic and plausible’ (Suellentrop 2010). In the single player story, the player plays four different characters – two Special Ops (‘Tier 1’) personnel, one US Army Ranger, and one Apache helicopter gun pilot. The story focuses primarily on the Special Ops missions and centres on their insertion to perform reconnaissance of enemy positions based on information supplied by an Afghan informant. Due to the poor direction from Washington-based officials, the operation goes wrong, resulting in two Tier 1 operatives becoming stranded. The subsequent rescue mission reveals that the Tier 1 personnel have been captured and are being tortured, with the US Army Rangers arriving only in time to save one of them – one of the key playable characters (‘Rabbit’) dies while awaiting extraction.

Medal of Honor Warfighter (MoHW), was released 2 years after *MoH* in October 2012. Unlike the previous game it is generally seen as a commercial and critical failure, with combined sales of only 2.8m units across Xbox 360, PS3 and PC and a metacritic aggregated rating in the mid-low 50s across all three formats.² *MoHW* is set soon after events in the first game yet it takes a very different tack – rather than engaging in the contemporary Afghan war, the player undertakes a series of covert operations within countries such as Somalia, the Philippines and Pakistan to foil a terrorist threat. In the single player campaign, the player is primarily cast as a Tier 1 operative codenamed ‘Preacher’ who works covertly alongside a variety of national Special Forces operatives to trace the source of a large quantity of a highly explosive compound called PETN. This leads them eventually to a Saudi Arabian banker named Hassan (aka ‘the Cleric’) who is the leader of a Jihadist network based in Pakistan. While ‘Preacher’ and his colleagues ultimately succeed in killing Hassan and his associates so averting the terrorist threat it comes at a terrible price – ‘Mother’ (also featured in *MoH*) is captured and tortured to death by one of Hassan’s accomplices.

In the context of the increasing acknowledgement of the importance of popular culture for world politics, this article argues that a focus on military videogames – exemplified by these two games – opens up key insights for our understanding of militarism and opposition to militarism. It shows this through the development of a three-part framework based on the military-entertainment complex; the spatial dimension of militarism, and gendered militarism, which together demonstrate how these games aim to offer an ‘authentic’ experience to the player and contribute to militarism.³ However, the article also highlights that the search for authenticity was not uncontroversial, with the games prompting heated debate from the military, politicians and players on the appropriateness of using videogames for military entertainment.

Analytical framework

Militarism and militarisation – definition and overview

Differentiating between militarism and militarisation is essential to this article. As Gillis (1989, 1) states, ‘Militarism is the older concept, usually defined as either the dominance

of the military over civilian authority, or, more generally, as the prevalence of warlike values in society'. Stavrianakis and Selby (2013, 3) point out that militarism is surprisingly understudied within politics and IR: 'sustained research and reflection has largely disappeared since the 1990s'. To address this shortfall, they offer a five-fold typology of militarism which covers: ideology (the celebration and glorification of war); behavioural (the use of force to resolve disputes); military build-ups (measuring the growth of military budgets, equipment or personnel); institutional conceptions (the links between the military and government), and sociological understandings (the embeddedness of militarism within society). Offering a preference for a sociological approach, which they argue can in principle capture all of these other elements, they emphasise the importance of further work to study militarism (Stavrianakis and Selby 2013, 14–15).

This article, with its focus on the politics of military videogames, explicitly speaks to this agenda. In particular, it explores at least three facets of Stavrianakis and Selby's typology: ideology (these games glorify war); behavioural (force is essential within these games to 'win'); and institutional conceptions (shown by the formal links between the videogame producers and the military). Militarism is thus observable through both the structural power of the military and also in the active promotion of militaristic solutions to political problems (see also Bacevich 2005, 227).

In deconstructing militarism, Enloe's work is particularly useful in indicating 'those distinctively militaristic core beliefs', among which she identifies:

- (a) that armed force is the ultimate resolver of tensions;
- (b) that human nature is prone to conflict;
- (c) that having enemies is a natural condition;
- (d) that hierarchical relations produce effective action;
- (e) that a state without a military is naive, scarcely modern and barely legitimate;
- (f) that in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection;
- (g) that in times of crisis any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his own status as a manly man. (2004, 219. For an expanded list building on Enloe see; Bernazzoli and Flint 2009, 400–402)

Such beliefs are occasionally 'put under public scrutiny and examined; often, though, they are left unproblematized, as if they were "natural". Whatever one treats as "natural" is close to the core of one's own ideology' (Enloe 2004, 219).

The desire to understand how militarism becomes 'natural' is central to militarisation, which is seen as the process by which militarism secures social and political penetration. Enloe makes the contrast with militarism particularly clear: 'Militarism is an ideology. Militarization, by contrast, is a sociopolitical process. Militarization is the multitracked process by which the roots of militarism are driven deep down into the soil of a society – or of a non-governmental organization, a governmental department, an ethnic group, or an international agency' (Enloe 2004, 219–220). Sherry (1995, xi) also places a strong emphasis on process, with militarisation 'the process by which war and national security became consuming anxieties and provided the memories, models and metaphors that shaped broad areas of national life' (see also Geyer 1989, 79).

This brief review of the literature serves to reaffirm the importance of a separation between militarism and militarisation. This article does not make any claims about how games contribute to the militarisation process, instead focusing exclusively on militarism. It aims to emphasise the crucial contribution which popular culture makes to militarism

and expose the importance of ‘open, visible and conscious’ displays of militaristic ideology which military videogames provide (Åhäll 2015, 68).

Militarism, popular culture and videogames: an analytical framework

it is important to recognize that the specific content of a militaristic ideology, and the processes of militarization that produce militaristic societies, are multi-faceted. Hence, there are many ways that militarism can be, or fail to be, embedded within society. (Bernazzoli and Flint 2010, 158)

As Bernazzoli and Flint make clear, the potential sources of militarism and militarisation are numerous. Here, I build a framework – encapsulating the military-industrial and military-entertainment complexes, spatial aspects of militarism and gendered militarism – which is utilised throughout the remainder of the article to demonstrate the importance of popular culture, and in particular videogames, to militarism (see Table 1 for an overview).

The military-entertainment complex provides the first element of the analytical framework developed here. The MEC is derived from the military-industrial complex which came to prominence in 1961 when President Eisenhower warned in his ‘Farewell Address to the Nation’ of the dangers to American liberty from ‘the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex’. Such concerns are reflected in Mills’ (1958, 32–33) earlier conceptualisation of a ‘power elite’, which saw American power concentrated within a triangle between political, military and industrial institutions so making America ‘a permanent war economy’: ‘Virtually all

Table 1. Militarism and videogames – an analytical framework.

Indicators of militarism	Key aspect	Videogame-based example
Military-entertainment complex.	Power located in a symbiotic relationship between political, military and industrial/popular cultural industries for mutual gain.	Use of military as consultants and licensing of weapons in the development of military games; story-lines written in close collaboration with military
Spatial analysis	Physical proximity of military industry/services sector results in shared interests with local populace; popular culture developed in close collaboration with the military	Promotional films which demonstrate that weapons manufactures and game developers are closely working together; story-line and gameplay presents the player ‘in-game’ as a member of the US military actively participating in the War on Terror.
Gendered militarism	Violence seen as the ‘normal’ way to resolve conflict; violence seen as masculine; power structured to promote male authority whereas women seen as needing protection; discourses of strong nuclear families seen as crucial to domestic stability in the War on Terror.	Militarised masculinities present both within the promotional material for the games and the in-game narrative and gameplay.

political and economic actions are now judged in terms of military definitions of reality' (see also Turse 2008; Der Derian 2009).

Building on this work, a number of popular culture scholars have identified the importance of what is generally termed the 'military-entertainment complex', identifying a symbiotic relationship between the military, academic institutions and industry, with research funded and driven by military priorities and extensive labour mobility between them (Lenoir 2000, 292–298; Lenoir and Lowood 2000). Der Derian (2009, xxxvi), for example, maps out the close affinities between the military and popular cultural industries, arguing that in the contemporary era 'the production, representation and execution of war' have merged seamlessly, with war becoming increasingly technology driven and mediated to its citizens through TV news coverage as a form of virtual spectacle (see also McInnes 2002; Debrix 2008). While the implications of the military-entertainment complex are made clear in analysis of Hollywood's production of films that are strongly supportive of the military, containing hyper-masculine heroes and celebrating techno-fetishism (Boggs and Pollard 2006, 2007. See Robb 2004; Turse 2008, 103–112 for a list of the films supported by the Pentagon), since the early 1980s this symbiotic relationship has also been visible in increasing collaborations between the military and the games industry. While the military initially developed much of the technology that drove the industry (Herz 1997, 201–205), by the mid-1990s the position had reversed, with the military commissioning adaptations to commercial videogames such as tank and helicopter simulators (e.g. *Battlezone* and *Apache*, respectively) and military combat games (e.g. *Doom*) for military use (Herz 1997, 209–211; Lenoir and Lowood 2000, 26–28; Robinson 2012, 507–510).

Work from within political geography also offers important insights into the spatial dimension, emphasising distinctions between militarisation and militarism – this forms the second key element of the analytical framework offered here (on militarisation, see for example, Bernazzoli and Flint 2010). Scholarship on popular culture emphasises the way in which spatiality is integral to the production of militaristic content (militarism). For example, research on the Institute for Creative Technologies, situated in close proximity to Hollywood film makers, demonstrates the symbiotic link between the military, entertainment and university sectors, reflecting what Shapiro has termed 'the tertiary spatialization of terrorism' (Shapiro 2009, 30). Similarly, Herz (1997) emphasised that the flourishing of links between the military and videogame makers was contingent on their physical location. For example, Interactive Magic, developers of the 1994 helicopter simulator game *Apache*, were located 'right down the road from Fort Bragg' (Herz 1997, 209). Production of the game drew extensively on links to McDonnell Douglas (makers of the Apache Longbow helicopter) who allowed the developers access to the helicopter's technical specifications in order to enhance its realism. Of arguably greater importance, however, were the links which the developers had to helicopter pilots based at Fort Bragg. As Interactive Magic's then spokeswoman put it: 'They had about twenty-five of their Apache pilots stationed across the road from our offices here . . . they came over and flew the aircraft and said how cool it was. They loved the game. In fact, they're trying to get the army to use *Apache* to train some of their pilots, as an initial weeding-out tool, because it's a lot cheaper to have these guys play the computer game than fly the helicopters' (cited in Herz 1997, 210).

Finally, feminist scholarship contains a strong commitment to interrogating the development of militarism, forming the third element of the framework developed here in order to explain the role of videogames in militarism. This scholarship is particularly clear in terms of identifying indicators of militarism, as personified by

Enloe's work (see above) with its focus on identifying 'those distinctively militaristic core beliefs' such as 'that armed force is the ultimate resolver of tensions' and 'that in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection' (2004, 219). Hunt and Rygiel similarly examine post 9/11 official war stories as 'told by Coalition leaders, governing and business elites, and the mass media' to show how they have been gendered 'in order to legitimise and gain consent for the war on terror' (2007, 4). In particular, they emphasise discourses centred on waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan 'to protect women's rights and liberate Muslim and Arab women' by 'hyper-masculine rescuers' (9) alongside discourses centred on the protection of the West against those who seek to destroy Western values (13). Both mask malevolent motives for militarised violence. Goldstein (2001) similarly differentiates between the portrayals of men and women, particularly with reference to group interactions and military heroism – the latter seen as a strongly masculine trait.

Feminist scholarship also provides useful models for engagement with popular culture. Shepherd, for example, offers a framework which encompasses spoken language (i.e. textual engagement with the script, song lyrics, captions and graphics etc.), body language (i.e. the physical performance of each character and the framing of the on screen images and characters) and non-linguistic signifiers (i.e. visual tropes, the built environment, lighting, music etc.) (2013, 7–11). Her book thus clearly delineates what she is looking at, and how she is seeing and hearing, when she watches a collection of TV series to demonstrate that 'gender and violence are mutually constitutive of identities, relationships, (world) politics, and each other' (Shepherd 2013, x. See also Rowley 2010, 314–318). Such thinking is reflective of work on militarism and popular culture: Åhäll (2012, 287), for example, looks at film and media depictions of female heroines to explore how 'female agency in political violence is enabled through gender' showing that these stories 'involve a tension between life-giving [e.g. giving birth] and life-taking identities, and that agency is only enabled if this tension is removed [e.g. through a miscarriage] or overcome [e.g. through a return to motherhood]'.

Military videogames and militarism

Through discussion of the two *Medal of Honor* videogames, the remainder of this article explores the contribution of videogames to militarism and shows the importance of their militaristic messages based on insights offered by the above framework. It demonstrates that military videogames contribute in important ways to militarism (militarised messages from popular culture), yet also shows that there remains a powerful space for critical reaction to, and rejection of, militaristic popular culture.

The military-entertainment complex

The military-entertainment complex is manifest in the links between the videogame developers, serving military personnel and the military equipment and weapons manufacturers. The developers of both *MoH* and *MoHW* made explicit reference to the access which they enjoyed to serving military personnel (here, in the shape of the Special Forces community and US Marine Corps). In relation to *MoH*, the claims for the games' credibility were strongly rooted in the 'authenticity' of the gameplay and story which stemmed from a combination of its Afghanistan setting, its rescue-based narrative and the access which the development team enjoyed to both 'Tier 1' operatives and the US Army's Public Affairs Office:

It has been pretty unprecedented the amount of access we have had to these guys and how they have helped us define and help us find our narrative – the soul of this game. They do have editorial control . . . They knew we were going to tell this story and this is their chance to make sure we are doing it right with the right tone; the right intent. (*MoH* Executive Producer Greg Goodrich in GameSpot 2010)

A series of eight films (*The Medal of Honor Tier 1 Interview Series*), released on YouTube and other social media platforms as part of the promotional campaign for the game – each lasting 2–3 minutes and made with the Tier 1 operatives – were designed to demonstrate the authenticity of the game and the closeness of the links of the developers to those operatives. With over 1m views on the games' official YouTube channel, these films clearly demonstrate the developer's desire to offer an authentic experience of contemporary war through the game.⁴ Cumulatively, they purported to offer the player inside knowledge of the nature of Tier 1 activities, provide some psychological insight into that 'community' and through that insight, enhance the empathy between the player and the military.

A strong theme of these videos, the associated promotional campaign, and the game itself was respect for the military and the Tier 1 personnel in particular, with the game claiming to be telling the soldiers' story. *MoH* is thus not only demonstrative of the military-entertainment complex because of the close access which the developers had to the military but also celebrates those links as central to the game's capacity to deliver a 'positive' and 'authentic' experience to the player.

The second game (*MoHW*) similarly emphasised that links to the military were central to the delivery of a 'positive' and 'authentic' experience to the player. The developers again commissioned a series of films made in collaboration with the Special Forces community to promote the games (*The Seal Team Six Series*) which were hosted on YouTube and have been watched nearly 1m times. The developers emphasised that they had had even greater access to these personnel in writing the story:

This story in this game is actually written by the Tier 1 operators while they were deployed overseas. We had about a dozen on the last game helping us craft that narrative, in this game we have got twice that many . . . everything from the dialogue to the chatter to the environments to the character – the best traits of all the guys are all infused into this product. (Gametrailers.com 2012: timings 0.24–0.56)

Thus, while the story may appear to be largely fantastical, given the globe trotting, counter-terrorist narrative, the developers emphasise their strong desire to present an authentic story throughout. Aside from the Tier 1 links, the plot reaffirms the commonly held view within both popular culture and the media of an organised network of terrorists who are willing (and able) to acquire significant quantities of deadly explosives which pose an imminent threat to the USA and its allies: 'The line between reality and fiction is, especially in the case of this game, it is sometimes hard to tell which side of the line you are on' (Interview, Greg Goodrich, executive producer of *MoHW* in Gametrailers.com 2012: timings 3.27–3.36).

In a notable and significant addition to the promotional campaign, the game developers also made a series of 2–3 minute films announcing official partnerships between the developers of the game and weapons and military equipment manufacturers. Starting on 7 March 2012 (6 months before the game's release), the films were released, generally on a weekly basis, with 'partners' such as London Bridge Partnership (7 March 2012, who 'make the best tactical nylon gear, harnesses, backpacks and protective gear on the planet'

(EA 2012a, 1)), Mechanix (14 March 2012, protective gloves), McMillan (21 March 2012, Sniper Rifles), SureFire (29 March 2012, weapons technology), LaRue Tactical (19 April 2012, optimised battle rifles) and US Optics (26 April 2012, long range sniper optics/scopes).⁵

Each film contained interviews between Greg Goodrich and senior personnel within the featured company in which they described the functionality of their equipment and formally endorsed their involvement with the game: they were thus key to the claims for the game's authenticity. Openly celebrating and making explicit the links between the game and the manufacturers of military weapons, these films provide compelling evidence of the contribution of military games in producing pro-military messages (militarism). This association with the weapons companies was also highly gendered, and it resulted in significant political controversy, as discussed below.

Spatial/representational dimensions of militarism

Militaristic popular culture is also evidenced through the spatial and representational aspects of militarism. The promotional videos for *MoHW* demonstrate that the symbiotic relationship between the game developers and the military had a crucially important spatial dimension: in capturing the partnerships with the weapons and equipment manufacturers on film, the videos emphasised that the developer (in the form of Executive Producer Greg Goodrich) and senior staff within the military equipment and weapons companies were within 'touching distance' of one another. In these films, Goodrich is presented as enjoying a very familiar relationship with the military partners, conversing with them in a natural way and utilising their equipment/weapons alongside them. By placing Goodrich and the corporate partners together on film – and subsequently placing their weapons and equipment directly within the game – the films and game thus create a powerful political geography of militarism. The game, and the associated promotional films, emphasise that spatiality and proximity are integral to the credibility of the game.

The political geography of militarism (i.e. the militaristic messages within the games) also contains important representational dimensions. Both games portray the player as a serving US military operative and the story and gameplay emphasise the 'soldier's eye view', with a strong celebration of the soldier on the battlefield. This occurs through four inter-related themes:

- (a) the *story of the game*. In *MoH*, the game's rescue narrative is linked to a strong sense of camaraderie between the 'heroic' troops. The Tier 1 operatives/US Army Rangers are willing to take great personal risk to rescue their 'buddies'. This theme of respect for the soldier is also promoted within the narrative cut scenes which show the battlefield commander (Colonel Drucker) willing to risk the wrath of 'Washington' (represented by the figure of General Flagg) to rescue his captured personnel;
- (b) the *narratives* which occur between the soldiers during the gameplay sequences and within the cut-scenes which advance the story. Both games engage explicitly with the theme of loss and sacrifice, showing a number of cases of soldiers killed in action, including two of the playable Spec Ops characters, 'Rabbit' and 'Mother';
- (c) the *first person perspective* of the game which aims to enhance the immersion of the player;

- (d) *battlefield authenticity and realism* – shown through ‘realistic’ radio chatter; extensive visceral battlefield action; the setting of the game within the contemporary War on Terror, and the strong desire to replicate the weapons and tactics of battlefield personnel.

Spatiality takes on a particular aesthetic quality, as the player embodies the role of a member of the military (inhabits the world of the soldier) and ‘partakes’ in the War on Terror. When combined, these demonstrate the importance and affective power of the pro-military messages within these games (militarism) through their capacity to place the player in a scenario and environment in which they gain some capacity to understand the realities confronting contemporary soldiers: the player shares the same physical terrain and, increasingly, the same empathetic space of the playable Special Forces operative. In the case of *MoH*, as discussed below, such representation resulted in significant opposition to militarism centred on the appropriateness or otherwise of representing the Afghan conflict in a game, and the question of whether or not the player should be able to play as the Taliban – and hence kill US soldiers – within the multiplayer element of a contemporary military combat game.

Gendered militarism

Gendered militarism, which is also extremely important to this analysis, was manifest in both the promotional campaign for these games and their stories and gameplay, in which masculine soldiers were clearly demarcated from the feminine. The contributions from individual Special Forces personnel to the Tier 1 interview series produced to accompany *MoH* set out the attributes required to achieve Tier 1 status, emphasising physical fitness, resourcefulness and intelligence. These were juxtaposed with insights into the sacrifices made to achieve this position, which were framed in strongly masculine terms, as the following example demonstrates:

I wish that the public in general could have an understanding of what guys do. Not just what they do operationally, but what they sacrifice for years and years and years in order to be the guy who is at the tip of a spear. For me, I am not a very sociable person – to be quite honest, ask my wife – I don’t consider a lot of people friends, but if you are any innocent person that’s in harms way, we wanted to be the guys that came and tried to do their best to stop the bully. (Medal of Honor 2010: timings 2.03–2.38)

The films associated with *MoHW*, in particular, those which announced the collaborations between the developers and equipment manufacturers, similarly demonstrated an aesthetic and narrative interaction which was strongly gendered:

At first, we didn’t think a video game company could ‘get it’, but we were wrong. Once we discovered their genuine support for the Warfighter, respect for the folks in uniform, and their excruciating attention to detail – we had to get involved. Their passion to get things right is infectious, and it shows in everything they do. Not only can these guys design amazing games, Greg is merciless on actual steel targets at 400 meters with the 5.56 and 7.62 OBRs [Optimised Battle Rifle]. Saw it with my own eyes. We can’t wait for folks to see what they’ve got planned. It’s going to be epic! (Mark Fingar, Marketing Director, LaRue Tactical in EA 2012b, 1)

The above example, which is typical, is focused on an interview between the games’ executive producer Greg Goodrich and senior male staff from the respective company

(here, weapons manufacturer LaRue Tactical). No women feature in any of these films. The films all demonstrate considerable enthusiasm for the collaboration, display a highly relaxed inter-personal style of communication and openly celebrate militarism.

In terms of the games themselves, there are however striking differences between the two narratives. In the case of *MoH* – which is typical of the military shooter genre – the game has little explicitly to say about the interaction between participation within war (a ‘masculine act’) and the maintenance of stable family life (a ‘feminine act’). Gendered militarism is thus confined to the battlefield and is seen in the ‘realistic’ representations of battlefield life.

The one female character who is represented in the game (call sign Gunfighter 11) appears in a single mission (mission 6: Gunfighters) and is an Apache helicopter pilot rather than an elite Tier 1 operative (US Special Forces were until recently exclusively male). The player takes on the role of Captain Hawkins, the male gunner who is in the accompanying helicopter (call sign Gunfighter 6). The in-game narratives within this mission do not objectify the female pilot in anyway, instead taking the form of battlefield tactical interaction and hence mutual respect. Yet, in positioning the woman as a non-playable character – and one whose helicopter is damaged by enemy fire so she can only provide reconnaissance while you (the player) destroys the enemy – the game communicates the message that it is the actions of men that are central to the winning of the War on Terror. The player, who takes the role of the male gunner, is responsible for destroying the enemies in the game and thus for progressing the story.

In contrast, *MoHW* is unusual within the military shooter genre as its counter-terrorist storyline centres on the consequences which military service has for family life in the homeland, emphasising that US Special Forces (and troops more generally) make huge sacrifices for their country that resonate within their families. What is perhaps most striking is the way in which sacrifice is given a profoundly personal and gendered perspective. Much of the gameplay is linked by cut-scenes involving conversations between ‘Preacher’ (the main playable character) and his wife which explore the incompatibility of his lifestyle as a serving member of Special Forces with maintaining his marriage and the relationship that he has with his daughter. This comes to a head when he arrives at a metro station in Madrid to collect his wife and daughter – his marriage already under significant strain – and a terrorist bomb destroys their train, suggesting that the whole family was killed in the blast. As Preacher awakens in hospital it becomes clear that his wife and daughter missed their scheduled train and so are both alive. Prior to the bomb blast, Preacher had been considering leaving the military to save his marriage but he is persuaded by his wife whilst recovering in hospital that his ‘service’ in fighting the war on terror is more important than their relationship – this is a sacrifice that the family is willing for him to take given the importance of his role as a soldier.

The theme of sacrifice is literally brought home in *MoHW* as the character of ‘Mother’ (Preacher’s best friend and brother-in-law) is captured and tortured to death towards the end of the game. The game ends with a two and a half minute long cut-scene centred on Mother’s military funeral in which Preacher, his wife, her sister (Mother’s wife) and Preacher’s daughter are at the grave side as Mother’s heroism is commemorated.⁶ Thus, *MoHW* 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. The story thus directly reflects the comments made in a number of the Tier 1 films used to accompany the release of the earlier *MoH* game which emphasised the personal cost of service.

We can thus identify clear evidence of all of the inter-related facets of militarism set out in the framework above in both games: these aspects come together in the promotion

and playing of the games to produce militarism within the living rooms of North America, Europe and Australasia.

The controversies and opposition to military videogames

The final part of this article discusses the ways in which the militaristic popular culture embodied in these games resulted in two particularly important controversies. The first – centred on the game *Medal of Honor (MoH)* – stemmed from the representational aspect of militarism in terms of the political geographies accessible to the player; the second – centred on *Medal of Honor Warfighter (MoHW)* – resulted from the explicit exposure and celebration of the military-entertainment complex. This article articulates the nature of these political controversies and associated opposition, captured through public statements of politicians, media reports and the commentary of military and videogame industry spokespeople. In addition, it also reflects on the importance of players for opposition, demonstrated through their contributions to social media forums which actively opened up spaces for discussion and sites of opposition to these controversies: it was here that players interacted with, and commented upon, the political controversy as mediated to them through mainstream media and videogaming websites. The research process involved reading all of these webposts in full; here I offer a qualitatively-focused yet representative sample which captures the nature of the positions taken by videogame players.

In using social media content, comments and interactions to support the analysis, this article contributes to a growing array of work within critical security studies and IR which similarly uses social media. As Carpenter and Drezner argue, ‘Web 2.0 data can provide a rich data source from which to draw’ (2010, 261) and social media research can offer ‘targeted research of specific communities’ (2010, 260). As they further state, ‘...it is imperative that IR scholarship begin to take the new media’s impact on world events seriously as a subject of research in its own right. There is a growing debate in the social sciences about the role these technologies play in the facilitation of “smart mobs” and other forms of transnational civic activism’ (2010, 260). With its focus on capturing political contestation within social media, this article responds to this call. As Ksiazek, Peer, and Lessard (2014, 3) argue ‘comments, as well as replies from other users to already posted comments, can be seen as representative of high-level interactive engagement between the user and content and between the users themselves, respectively’.

The controversy and opposition to Medal of Honor

In the run-up to its release *MoH* met with considerable opposition within both the UK and the USA. The game was widely condemned due to its multiplayer mode in which it was originally envisaged that players would be able to fight as both American forces and the Taliban. Opposition involved politicians, representatives of military families and the retail sector – the role of players was relatively limited, being overwhelmingly supportive of the developers and broadly hostile to the political controversy.

In the USA, opposition developed over the appropriateness of making a game based on an ongoing conflict, with criticism from US military personnel, victims’ families and the retail sector: GameStop, in particular, refused to stock the game at any of its 49 shops on military or airforce bases (Kotaku 2010). In the UK, the then Defence Secretary called for a ban, stating that he was ‘disgusted’ by the game: it is ‘shocking that someone would think it acceptable to recreate the acts of the Taliban against British soldiers... At the hands of the Taliban, children have lost fathers and wives have lost husbands’ (BBC

2010). These comments were made in spite of the fact that British troops are not represented in either the multiplayer or single player elements of the game (BBC 2010).

The game's publishers, Electronic Arts, initially defended the game on the grounds of its sensitive depiction of the realities of contemporary conflict and on the basis that the game simply reflected norms typical of children's play. 'Most of us have been doing this since we were seven – if someone's the cop, someone's gotta be the robber, someone's gotta be the pirate and someone's gotta be the alien', Amanda Taggart, senior PR manager for EA, told AOL News. 'In *Medal of Honour* multiplayer, someone's gotta be the Taliban' (Their 2010). Yet, EA backtracked in response to the controversy before the game's release, announcing an alteration to the game that renamed the Taliban as Opposing Force (OP-FOR) in the multiplayer element of the game. While this was enough to defuse much of the immediate opposition, it did not result in a reversal of the sales ban on GameStop military bases and led to additional criticism of the industry's immaturity due to its inability to tackle controversial subjects (Parkin 2010). Certainly, while the controversy preoccupied members of the political establishment and certain sectors of the military, the videogaming community was largely unmoved, with some sections actively hostile to the criticism.

The general view among players was that the media and politicians had overreacted. *MoH* was 'just a game':

You don't hear people complaining when you play Nazis, Russians or Vietcong because they were the 'bad guys' at some point. If people think that because I play Taliban in a game it'll make me want to go blow myself up, that's like saying i can fly because i drank redbull. The Taliban are a fighting force and an 'army' in their own right and the sooner people realise this the better.

A small minority of contributors in fact suggested that they would prefer to play as the Taliban, either because they welcomed the possibility of shooting at American troops or because they thought the Taliban's AK-47 weapons would be more effective in the multiplayer mode. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such posts frequently provoked hostile debate about the merits and effectiveness of American action in Afghanistan.

Later posts, capturing the reaction from within the gaming community to EA's decision to replace the Taliban with 'OP-FOR', were overwhelmingly hostile, accusing EA of abandoning the pursuit of authenticity, failing to uphold free speech and kowtowing to the media and critics:

We're not fighting over names. EA claims this game to be authentic. It's no longer authentic. Coalition troops in Afghanistan don't fight 'OpFor' they fight Talibans and Insurgents. BIG Thanks to EA for being political ass kissers for some people that can't handle the truth about who they're fighting in this wannabe war.

Fuck you EA! How can you remove the Taliban from online? Grow some fucking balls. Whatever happened to free speech?

However, a minority of commentators did support the elite-level view that on balance the removal of the ability to play as the Taliban was the right decision if respect for the combat troops was EA's objective:

when you've been over there and have not returned with some of your buddies. . .the last thing you want to do is play a game playing Taliban shooting american troops. Medal of Honor made this game to be authentic and impress Operators and Military troops alike. Not disrespect them.

The opposition/controversy over Medal of Honor Warfighter⁷



Here is a photo of me performing a full auto mag dump last Friday with a SureFire suppressed MK HP7A1. If you can't get your hands on a select fire suppressed submachine gun head over to the SureFire website and pick yourself up the incredible 800 lumen UB3T Invictus™ Ultra-High Variable-Output LED flashlight and light someone up! (Executive Producer of MoHW Greg Goodrich in Eurogamer.net 2012a)

MoHW was also embroiled in significant controversy in the run up to its release, with the game being widely condemned for its partnerships with the weapons manufacturers. In spite of the fact that, as discussed above, the developers had been releasing near weekly videos promoting the partnerships from March 2012, it was not until August 2012 that the videogaming media picked up on the story.

The story broke with an article on the gaming website The Gameological Society (2012) which reported the formal links between the game and its weapon and equipment partners. It also reported that EA's website allowed direct click-throughs to partners such as McMillan and LaRue Tactical allowing the purchase of sniper rifles and submachine guns via a sponsored link. Finally, the article reported EA's intention to allow for the purchase of a *MoH* sponsored tomahawk from 'SOG Knives and Tools' for \$75 (overall length 12.56" with a 3.5" 'extended cutting head').

Initially, EA attempted to justify the links on the basis of authenticity and the fact that the financial benefits were being channelled into a charity ('Project Honor') set up by EA to provide financial support to families of severely wounded Special Operations personnel. As Greg Goodrich argued in an interview:

...we've been working with these partners because we wanted to be authentic, and we wanted to give back to the communities ... Every one of those partners, none of them paid a dime for product placement – all the money generated went to Project Honor. (Edge Online 2012)

However, the story rapidly spread to other gaming media and within 48 hours EA had removed the links between the game's website and the weapons partners and had cancelled the licensed tomahawk (Eurogamer.net 2012b). What is particularly striking is that the controversy was almost totally limited to debate within the videogaming community, encompassing players, gaming journalists and bloggers. Politicians and other political actors played no role, and it was only after the debate had played out within the gaming community and EA had taken down the links from the games to the weapons companies websites that the mainstream media offered any analysis/comment on it, prompted in particular by the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in December 2012 which left 26 dead in the USA and which reopened debates about the links between videogame and real world violence (e.g. New York Times 2012; The Hollywood Reporter 2012).

In considering the gaming community's reactions to these partnerships between the weapons manufacturers and *MoHW* it is possible to identify two distinct positions. On the one hand, the posts which directly engaged with the articles tended to condemn the links, rejecting any suggestion of charitable benefit and arguing that this was a PR disaster in the making:

Making a modern military shooter and including links to real life weapons manufacturers seems to be saying 'Now you, too, can do the awesome things you just did in this game!' That is downright deplorable. I don't think most players are going to take up the offer. I don't think it will lead to some significant increase in violence. But I absolutely cannot stomach the idea.

The general tenor of opinion is well illustrated by the following posts which emphasised that whilst the link between weapons manufacturers and military games may be inferred, to actively promote associations with inter-linked websites is a step too far:

This is infuriating. I've been completely on the side of 'violent video games don't cause violence any more than violent books or movies'. But to directly link people to a website that allows you to purchase the weapons you use in a game? Sorry, that's crossing the line.

Totally agreed. And I'm even a firearms enthusiast. I HAVE bought firearms I've enjoyed from videogames. But a link right to the site? Yea... that crosses a line for me too.

On the other hand, while EA's actions were seen as overstepping the mark, licensing *per se* was unproblematic. The following examples from the discussion, 'Does EA's partnership (and direct linking) to gun manufacturers bother you?' at Giant Bomb (2012) yielded 148 posts of which the following are typical:

Gun companies make deals with publishers all the time, simply to license the guns. It's not a big deal at all.

It's no different than any product placement deal. Racing games using real cars, for example.

Analysis of these two controversies thus suggests that whilst representational aspects can be managed by the industry, the explicit and 'over celebration' of militarism, particularly when so clearly linked to the military-industrial complex, is a step too far.

However, in discussing the controversies and opposition prompted by these games, it is also important to highlight the absence of controversy prompted by either the gendered militarism which is so explicit in the advertising and gameplay or the explicit relationships between the producers and the military personnel who worked alongside them to produce the game. What does the silence over gender in terms of the controversies tell us about its importance? On the surface, it may undermine its significance. But instead I suggest that the lack of controversy suggests precisely the opposite: that gender has become imbued as a form of *un*-politics to such an extent that it remains un-problematized and unchallenged. This is perhaps an unsurprising finding to those scholars of gender who frequently emphasise the static nature of gendered militaristic representations within popular culture.

In relation to the closeness between the games producers and the military, most of the videogames industry and players seem rather to reward or celebrate that as a legitimate part of authentication of videogames which makes them more desirable rather than less. But while the soldiers themselves are seen as 'good, natural and necessary' in Jackson's

(2012) terms, the fate of the *Medal of Honor* series suggests that the gaming public remain hostile to the explicit celebration of the military-industrial complex.

Conclusion: issues for future research

This article began with the claim that much popular culture is increasingly militaristic and that this plays an important part in militarism. It emphasised that videogames, as a now pre-eminent form of popular culture, have been under-examined from the point of view of scholars of international security. Building a framework for such analysis, the article argued that in relation to videogames, militarism can be identified through a combination of the military-entertainment complex, through spatial and representational aspects captured through the 'political geography of militarism', and finally through gendered militarism.

Utilising that framework, the article developed an analysis of the military videogames *Medal of Honor* and *Medal of Honor Warfighter*, and explored how they resulted in controversy. *MoH* became controversial when the game suggested allowing representation that was potentially not of an American or British soldier but rather of a Taliban fighter; in the case of *MoHW*, the open celebration of the closeness between the games' developers and the military-industrial complex made visible in the promotional videos and website allowing click-through purchase of real military equipment, caused considerable unease amongst gamers and games journalists.⁸ Videogames – and the discourse around them – thus provide both an insight into militaristic popular culture and a potential space for questioning that.

Furthermore, the role of videogames in the broader process of militarisation is potentially critical. Stahl (2010) (amongst others) has captured the way in which militarised entertainment has become almost ubiquitous (particularly in the USA) stretching from army recruitment, militarised media, sports and 'reality' TV coverage and popular culture including military videogames. He describes what he terms the 'virtual citizen soldier', arguing that *Militainment Inc.* has served to change the citizen from a 'critical social subject' to one who through their participation actively demonstrates their support for war (2010, 21–30, 41–48). McInnes (2002) similarly emphasises the importance of 'spectatorship' as an analogy to show the impact on citizens of the move towards TV mediated war as visual spectacle. Such work suggests that military videogames are potentially integral to citizen transformations and are integral to the process of militarisation. If true, this is critical to future research.

Disaggregating process (integral to militarisation) is of course a thorny methodological challenge. One way forward may be to actively seek better understanding of how the audience is affected by military videogames, building on existing work within the fields of cultural anthropology and popular culture and what may be termed the 'sociology of gaming'. DeVane and Squire (2008), for example, look specifically at how socio-cultural factors (in particular race, age and socio-economic background) affect the mediated understandings that male players have of the games that they play. Galloway (2006) has looked specifically at military games, similarly arguing that how such games are understood by players depends on who the player is: a game in which the player takes on the role of a member of the US military fighting in a war in the Middle East has a potentially quite different meaning to an American citizen supportive of military action in Iraq and Afghanistan than to a Palestinian youth who may be hostile to such action (Galloway 2006, 78–84). Yet, precisely how they are affected, the messages players internalise, and the extent to which military games impact on values are surprisingly understudied.

A specific focus on players as audience could be utilised within the context of a framework such as that offered by Moore and Farands (2013, 227) who in a discussion of visual security argue that analysis of the meaning of ‘texts’ such as photographs (or indeed videogames) requires a multi-faceted approach which seeks to understand the links between the viewer/player and the photograph/game, the photograph/game and its producer/creator, and finally between the context within which the photograph/game was produced and the context within which it is being seen/played by the viewer/player. Such a multi-faceted framework could build on the focus offered here on gender and link this to work on race and ethnicity to build a more comprehensive discussion based on intersectionality.

Overall, this article has identified a clear case of military videogames promoting militaristic messages. Yet, it also shows that ‘excessive’ celebration of militarism can result in backlash and active opposition. To those concerned about creeping militarism and militarisation this may prove some source of comfort – how much comfort, of course, will come through further research.

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Notes

1. The data are compiled on the basis of the author’s calculations using <http://www.vgchartz.com>. The only game with under 25m sales is *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014) with reported sales of 19.44m as of 3 November 2015.
2. Sales data are compiled from <http://www.vgchartz.com>. Metacritic ratings are at: <http://www.metacritic.com>.
3. A focus on gender does not preclude analysis of other social relations of power such as race and ethnicity. Much of the existing literature on military videogames does precisely identify that Orientalist depictions are widespread; perhaps surprisingly, gender is understudied within this work.
4. Estimates for the total views of these films and those associated with *MoHW* are extremely conservative. They are hosted on multiple YouTube channels such as general gaming platforms (e.g. IGN and Gamespot), which frequently attract more views than the official channels.
5. This content has now been removed from the internet by the publisher EA. Opposition to the links with the military partners is discussed later in this article.
6. The aspect of sacrifice is also emphasised in promotional material produced through formal links between the game’s makers and the band Linkin Park. The promotional video to the band’s song ‘Castle of Glass’ (which has over 130m hits on YouTube) tells a story which intersperses footage from the band, actors portraying a story of the trauma military families go through when following the death of a loved one, and gameplay footage. The band’s promo video was thus based on a mutual relationship with the game, providing a summary of the story contained within the game (Linkin Park 2012. YouTube: 71,552 comments; 138,730,825 views; 845,328 likes as of 17 November 2015).

7. A further controversy emerged in relation to this game over the role of the Tier 1 operatives who were criticised for getting too close to the developers and giving too much advice. Seven Navy Seals were exposed and fined by the army for giving too much information to the game developers (Mail Online 2012).
8. In reflecting on the consequences of these different forms of opposition, perhaps surprisingly the impact of the *MOHW* case was arguably greater: whereas the opposition to *MoH* involved the ‘political establishment’, it had no discernible impact on sales of the game; yet the opposition to *MoHW* which was primarily confined to the videogaming community had a significant impact on sales, ultimately resulting in the cancellation of future *MoH* games.

Notes on contributor

Nick Robinson is Associate Professor in Politics and International Studies, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK. His research focuses on the militarisation of social media and the politics of videogames, with specific focus on military games. His recent publications in this area have appeared in *Political Studies*, *Political Quarterly* and *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*. He is presently working on a book for the Popular Culture and World Politics book series (Routledge) on *Videogames and War*. His research is funded by a four-year Framework Grant from The Swedish Research Council entitled, ‘Militarization 2.0: Militarization’s Social Media Footprint Through a Gendered Lens’.

ORCID

Nick Robinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2283-3022>

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