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Beyond the shadow of 9/11? videogames 20 years after 9/11

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Introduction

Played by billions, videogames have become perhaps the pre-eminent way in which the public experience, engage with, and encounter the war on terror and its legacies. As Stahl argues, 9/11 and 'the ensuing wars … ushered in a boom in sales of war-themed video games for the commercial market' (Stahl 2006, 118). Stahl's work is reflective of the dominant position in the literature, namely that videogames have been profoundly influenced by 9/11 and its wars. Commentators argue that military videogames were widely played by citizens who found solace in 'spectacular war', becoming 'bedazzled' (McInnes 2002) and willing participants - what Stahl (2006, 125) terms 'virtual citizen soldiers' - in highly 'orientalist' representations of conflict (Höglund 2008; Šisler 2008). Initially, at least, these concerns seemed well founded, with military shooters such as *Call of Duty* and counter terrorism games such as *Splinter Cell*, selling tens of millions annually.

Given the central role that representations take in contemporary world politics, combined with the sheer scale of the videogames industry, the importance of videogames is clear. It is frequently seen as the largest popular cultural industry in the world, with estimates of over 3bn players worldwide and total revenues of $175.8bn in 2021 (Newzoo 2021, 18-19). More importantly, videogames offer 'persuasive possibilities' due to their interactive qualities. Bogost (2007) writes of their potential to offer 'procedural rhetoric' which refers to the capacity to use interactive gameplay, visuals, and narratives in concert to communicate persuasively about issues such as terrorism and counter terrorism. While not all games do this, those which do so include rules that can either restrict or enable behaviour, so allowing for the exploration of the rules that underpin society enabling games to be instrumental to social critique and reflective learning. Thus, the fact that games actively engage with themes inspired by the war on terror, are widely played, and offer spaces for politically meaningful messaging, all point to their crucial implications for making sense of the 9/11 attacks and their legacy in the twenty years that have now passed. In the following, I illustrate this through consideration of the changing nature of representations,

evolving patterns of resistance and the role of critical citizenry within this medium. Overall, I reflect anew on the nexus between temporality and war to demonstrate not just the continuing shadow of 9/11, but also an industry that is increasingly escaping that shadow.

Represented Time.

From the perspective of 2021, we can identify increasing numbers of games set outside of the contemporary (9/11-infused) period, with the majority of war games set either in the past (e.g. WW2) or future. While this may seem a positive development, it actually demonstrates a failure to confront the legacy of the 9/11 wars such that this 'step out of the shadow' of 9/11 can be characterised as an effacement of history through a desire to seek succour in wars in which righteousness was assured (e.g. WW2) - what Weber (2006) terms 'who we think we were/are'. This is symptomatic of a shift to a 'politics of nostalgia' in which pleasure is found in the enjoyment of wars in which friends and enemies were clear, moral certainty for action was assured, and outcomes were certain. Yet in so doing, it points to a broader failure to critique the legacy of the 9/11 wars which are increasingly seen as intractable, unwinnable and ethically fraught (Robinson 2019, 19-21). Military games which engage with future war similarly work to efface the legacy of 9/11, legitimating the continuation of military preparedness and societal militarisation. Time thus takes on a 'plasticity' in which past, present and future are collapsed into a pattern of permanent war in which the USA and its enemies can only be vanquished through overwhelming military force (Jarvis and Robinson 2021, 201). Yet for all of that, there have also been important changes which suggest an increasingly reflexivity (indeed nascent criticality) within the mainstream videogames industry.

Enemies, Place and Time

While there remain examples of Middle Eastern, Chinese and Russian enemies (*Call of Duty Modern Warfare* (2019); *Call of Duty Cold War*) with games set in the present and past, recent games set in the near future also offer an increasing variety of enemies, with antagonists from Singapore, Africa (*Call of Duty:*

Black Ops III), Bolivia (*Ghost Recon: Wildlands*) and South America (*Call of Duty Ghosts*), joining the longstanding tradition of intergalactic alien enemies.

Within contemporary settings, games developers have begun to create enemies which reflect changing real world anxieties – demonstrating, perhaps, an increasing willingness to take risks in terms of in-game representation. For example, *Far Cry 5; The Division 2*; *Wolfenstein: The New Colossus* all contain neo-fascist enemies who have gained power within the USA, while the *Hitman*, *Call of Duty Modern Warfare*, *Splinter Cell* and *Assassins Creed* series all expose shady forces within government which are complicit in war and domestic instability, creating enemies which reflect contemporary preoccupations with conspiracy theories. Yet the industry has been reluctant to trumpet the political intent behind such framings, instead emphasising these games as apolitical arenas for exciting gameplay.

Perhaps more radically still, the games industry has begun to explore the consequences of the 9/11 wars for soldiers and civilians. *Spec Ops: The Line*, for example, adopts the conventions of mainstream shooters to demonstrate that war is highly damaging to combatants and can induce PTSD: the player is shown to damage their own avatar as they rush headlong into conflict. Similarly, the activist game *September 12th* - produced as a direct riposte to the militarised response to 9/11 - also uses gameplay to explore the counter productivity of remote (drone-based) warfare: played from above, the game represents the delays between ordering a drone strike and its execution so modelling almost inevitable civilian collateral damage and death. *This War of Mine* tasks the player with keeping a group of civilians alive who have become trapped in a war zone. Civilians suffer grief, depression, hunger and severe deprivation as they are often forced into stealing from one another to survive. The legacy of 9/11 is thus not a source of pleasure for players, but is instead a source of anxiety and stress which invokes thinking. The trend towards critique is confined to a minority (albeit a growing one) of smaller developers and there remains a general reluctance/lack of confidence within the mainstream games industry to talk politically about their work. This matters as historically artists and their art have often been at the vanguard of anti-war sentiment/critique (Danchev 2017).

Reflexive Players/Critical Citizens.

Finally, there remains a remarkable failure in most scholarship to problematise the continuing assumption that players are somehow militarised through playing games: that through the act of game playing they are complicit in acquiescence and/or support for war and its violences. The growth of gamification and gaming-based recruitment, allied with concerns about spreading militarism and the role of popular culture in what is widely termed 'militainment', would suggest such concerns are not without foundation. Yet what limited research we do have suggests players remain highly reflexive about what they are playing and critical of real-world war (Festl, Scharkow, and Quandt 2013). We also need to remain mindful of Sicart's (2009) important distinction between players as 'player subjects' and 'real world subjects' - violence and war performed within a game is understood as what is needed to be done to 'win' in that environment and is not reflective of support for state sanctioned violence or growing societal militarism. Thus, as we reflect on time, the shadow of 9/11, and our consumption of militaristic popular culture, we can see evidence both of a long and lingering shadow – but one that is fading in the light.

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