Video Games and the Militarisation of Society: Towards a Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. This paper outlines the relationship between military themed or oriented video and computer games and the process of *militarisation*. A theoretical and analytical framework which draws on elements of sociology, cultural studies and media analysis is required to help to understand the complex interplay between entertainment in the form of playable media, the military and the maintenance of *Empire*. At one level games can be described as simple forms of entertainment designed to engage players in a pleasurable fun activity. However, any form of media, whether playable or not, contains within it a set of ideological and political structures, meanings and ways of depicting the world. For the purpose of this paper playable media with a military theme or orientation will be described as political tools helping to shape the mental framework of players through the extension of a form of "*military habitus*". Playable media with a military theme or orientation such as the *Call of Duty* series promote and facilitate the extension of the process of *militarisation* and impact on how players view the world. This worldview can have consequences for national security in promoting pro-war sentiments.

Keywords: empire, militarisation, video game

1   Introduction

> *"This game actually makes me flash back and think about the war and the aftermath.... But that's not necessarily bad. Being that I will be going back to Iraq for a 3rd tour, I'll say that it's much better fighting from my PC behind a desk then actually slinging lead at each other."* SGT from HHC 1/64 Armor, 3rd Infantry Division(M). [36]

The relationship between entertainment and war has been the subject of much research, analysis and critique. So too has the emerging nexus between the military and what authors such as Der Derian [1] and others [2-4] have described as the *Media-Entertainment-Industrial complex*. This relationship has been given added influence by the popularity of video and computer games, which contain military themes and content such as the *Call of Duty* series or *Halo*. Military themed video and computer games serve a particular ideological and cultural function within Western societies. These forms of playable media have been harnessed in support of the "*militarisation*"

of society [5-7] and the maintenance and extension of what Hardt and Negri have described as the "Empire" [8].

Within this paper a number of theoretical constructs will be examined in order to highlight the socio-cultural and political role that war themed computer and video games play in the process of *militarisation*. Reference will be made to the fields of sociology and politics in order to comprehend the complex interaction between video and computer games, the military and war. A broad approach to the theme of information and communicaton technology (ICT) and critical infrastructures will be adopted within this paper. The extent to which military themed video and computer games influence how players view the world will be examined.

2   War, Entertainment and the Ideology of "Empire"

The image of President Obama (figure 1) and his war cabinet huddled around a monitor and laptops' observing in real-time the attack on the Bin Laden compound is reminiscent of a group of teenagers playing *Call of Duty* or *Halo* in their lounge room. The image below of the "War Cabinet" is emblematic of the blurring that has occurred in advanced societies between gaming, simulation and the conduct of war. The growing reliance on remote, and or "drone' technologies to engage in intelligence gathering, target acquisition and combat has become a distinguishing feature of the current era [9-11]. So too is the image of a civilian operator controlling a remote drone from a trailer in the American south-west as if he or she were playing a computer game whilst the drone under their control is engaged in the deadly business of modern warfare [11]. We are witnessing a blurring between the boundaries of war, entertainment and the ideology of "Empire" – as an outcome of a powerful socio-political process we can refer to as the *"militarisation of society"* [5], [12].

Fig. 1. Target Bin Laden: President Obama watches images from the raid on the Bin Laden compound in Pakistan, May 1, 2011 [37].

The concept of "*Empire*" used in this paper is drawn in part from the work of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in the book published in 2000, *Empire* [8]. According to Negri and Hardt, we are witness to the birth of a planetary wide political, econom-

ic, communicative and military structure. This form of *Empire* differs from other historical imperial structures such as that of Ancient Rome or the British empire in that there is "no outside" – the entire planet is part of this imperial system [8]. The modern form of empire as described by Hardt and Negri is governed by a "world market" – dominated by a number of global corporations (Apple, Microsoft, and Nike etc.) and supra-state agencies (the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and the United Nations). The individual is drawn into the orbit of *Empire* at a range of levels, as a consumer (through marketing), as a labourer (through the exploitation of labour power) and as a learner (through the education system) [8].

3   The Militarisation Thesis

Militarism is a political form which has as its central characteristic the privileging of the military within society and the political dominance of a military caste or clique [6]. Militarism is also characterised by the existence within certain societies of what Gillis has described as 'warlike values' [6]. Militarism in the twentieth century was at the core of particular state formations and political ideologies, such as National Socialism in Germany and Italian Fascism [13]. John Gillis in his book *The Militarisation of the Western World* distinguishes between the terms *militarism* and *militarisation* in the following manner:

> "...(m)ilitarism 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 a society" [5].

"*Militarisation*" refers to a more complex and subtle phenomenon than militarism and does not require formal control or dominance by the military. The American historian Michael Geyer has argued that *militarisation* can be understood as "the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organises itself for the production of violence" [6]. This process does not require the outward signs of military control or dominance one could identify in the military dictatorships of twentieth century Latin America or the Fascist regime of the Spanish dictator Franco. In contrast to the overt and often openly brutal nature of militarist societies, *militarisation* is a social and political process which operates more subtly and at a number of levels within advanced society [12-14].

The feminist writer Cynthia Enloe [15] has defined *militarisation* as:

> "... a step-by-step process by which a person or a thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas" [15].

3.1   The Garrison State

Underpinning the process of *militarisation* has been a phenomenon that emerged in the mid-twentieth century, which the political scientist Lasswell [16] has described as the 'garrison state'. According to Lasswell from the mid-twentieth century the world has steadily moved:

> *"... toward ...(the creation)... of "garrison states" – a world in which the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society"* [16].

The social and political importance placed on the specialist in violence that Lasswell first identified last century has not abated. It could be argued that the heightened level of security that has been in place since 9/11 has helped to elevate the role of the specialist in violence through an era of almost continuous war. The twenty-first century has been characterised by Paul Virilio [17] in *Pure War* as representing the emergence of " asymmetrical and *trans-political war*". According to Virilio:

> *"... (w)hen you've called a war asymmetrical and trans-political, it means that there's a total imbalance between national armies, international armies, world-war armies, and militias of all sorts that practice asymmetrical war. These could be little groups, neighborhood or city gangs, or "paramilitaries", as they're called; Mafioso of all types, without meaning Al Qaeda terrorists, or others. This is what happened in Africa, with countries that have fallen apart"* [17].

It is in the context of the emergence of continuous asymmetrical and *trans-political war* that the process of militarisation has emerged as a defining characteristic of modern society. In the remainder of this paper we will examine the complex interplay between video games and the ongoing process of militarisation.

4   Video Games and the Militarisation of Society

The process of *militarisation* reflects a weakening of the boundaries "between military and civilian institutions, activities and aims" [12]. Computer and video games with a military theme act in a manner which extends the process of boundary weakening [12] between military and civilian institutions and activities. Military themed computer and video games such as the first person "Military Shooter" (for example *Doom* or the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* game series) enhance the already potent cultural tools that modern political regimes have at their disposal for propaganda purposes through the mass mediums of print, television, film and radio. Video games and their online support communities and websites add another layer of political enculturation to the needs and interests of what Negri and Hardt have described as the "Empire" [8, 18]. In the twenty-first century *militarisation* as a socio-cultural force has at its disposal the product of over four decades of close alignment between the military and the *media-entertainment industries* – the video game.

4.1   Playable Media

The importance of the military in American culture as portrayed in literature, films, television, comics, the press and news media for over a century has been pivotal in this process of boundary weakening. Recent developments in the media and entertainment field – advances in computer and video games, as well as the growth of new forms of the Internet and social media – have meant that the existing conduits for *militarisation* through traditional media and cultural channels have been amplified.

The emergence of powerful new forms of media and the growing sophistication of playable media technologies such as computer and video games has added to the existing array of mechanisms that facilitate the process of *militarisation*. Social media and applications have been harnessed to promote United States (US) values and objectives through the shaping of public opinion [19].

4.2   The "Military Shooter"

Modern computer and video console games with a military theme or with military content use software that has its origins in, or is convertible to, a battle simulator. The inventor of an early arcade video game *Battlezone* describes the process of adapting his game to the requirements of the US military as follows:

> *"... we were not modeling some fantasy tank, we were modeling an infantry-fighting vehicle that had a turret that could rotate independently of the tank. It had a choice of guns to use. Instead of a gravity-free cannon, you had ballistics to configure. You had to have identifiable targets because they wanted to train gunners to recognise the difference between friendly and enemy vehicles"* [20].

The use of games for training and simulation purposes has extended beyond the tank warfare simulation of *Battlezone* to the more complex infantry focused Military Shooter. A Military Shooter is a military themed variant of the First Person Shooter (FPS) style of computer gaming. A FPS game is " played in the subjective, or first person, perspective and therefore…(is)…the visual progeny of subjective camera techniques in the cinema. But perhaps equally essential to the FPS genre is the players *weapon*, which generally appears in the right foreground of the frame" [21].

This genre of gaming gained a wide audience in the early 1990s with the release of the World War II based *Wolfenstein* (1992) and the science fiction inspired *Doom* (1993) [4]. FPS games such as these have as their defining characteristic a lone hero armed to the teeth and up against hordes of Nazis in *Wolfenstein*, or trans-dimensional demons in *Doom*. *Doom* underwent a military make-over in the 1990s when the US military modified it to become *Marine Doom* which has since been used as an official military training tool [22]. Military Shooters differ from these early games in that they are often realistic in their use of plot, location and weaponry. Military Shooters can also incorporate squad-based tactics as in *Full Spectrum Warrior*.

What distinguishes the modern Military Shooter from early examples of the FPS genre is the attention to realism in the content, the authenticity of weapons, the realistic application of physics and the adherence to narrative and interactivity. The technology behind today's Military Shooters enables program designers to reproduce realistic war settings complete with sights and sounds and the ability to interact with others in an accurate, though virtual war zone. Using today's high capacity computing technology, gamers are able to immerse themselves within a synthetic war zone and use a range of accurate representations of weaponry in settings where the atmospherics of war, wind, light, and terrain etc., are as important within the game as they would be in the real world. This in many ways lifts the modern Military Shooter out of the world of gaming and into the world of simulation and training.

The Military Shooter relies on technology that creates an authentic simulation within which the player is able to interact with autonomous and realistic synthetic agents (humans) within a dynamic narrative framework. The technology underpinning this capacity is the product of a close working relationship between technologists and the military and the goal of enhancing the training effectiveness of simulation technology [1], [23], [24]. One of the key institutions driving the design of the technologies at the core of the modern FPS is the Institute of Creative Technologies located at the University of California. The Institute was funded by the US Army as part of its program to apply new digital technologies to its array of training and simulation tools. The Institute combined the technology of the emergent gaming and simulation fields with the narrative skills of "Hollywood" to produce accurate and engaging simulation and gaming technologies [25].

According to the Institute of Creative Technologies web page, the organisation leads "an international effort to develop virtual humans who think and behave like real people. We create tools and immersive environments to experientially transport participants to other places." [25]. The technology developed by the Institute of Creative Technologies has helped enhance the realism now possible within the Military Shooter genre of gaming. Technologies developed in places such as the Institute of Creative Technologies to help prepare soldiers for the complex task of navigating the modern battle space have been augmented by game designers into a fun activity – complete with "leader-boards" and "kill/death" ratio statistics.

The impact of these games on young people is open to debate, and no clear evidence exists that playing these games turns someone into a killer or the perfect soldier. The issue requires a more nuanced approach than that often engaged in by the mass media, academic critics and supporters. Military themed or oriented games such as *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* amplify the already powerful process of *militarisation*. Games desensitise the player to the use and consequences of violence. It is enough that the player becomes habituated to the idea that the use of violence should not be questioned and follows the model of classical conditioning. As the imagery of the television advertisement (Fig. 2) for *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* attests anyone (the "Noob" or the novice player) can, through playing the game, bring out the soldier within.

Further, the socio-cultural process of *militarisation* has been enhanced through the materialisation of technological capacity and the popularity of Military Shooter games and other forms of military themed gaming. This coalescence has meant that the increased availability of advanced consumer technology (hardware and software) has provided a mechanism through which the mental framework of young people – "the players" has been shaped by what has been referred to earlier as a military habitus – militarist language, values and practices. This is due in no small part to the level of engagement possible when playing these games. Their scenarios and supporting infrastructure (tally-boards, websites, online forums, and books etc.) enable players to envelope themselves within a world in which they are significant actors amongst a global community of like-minded individuals and "clans".

Fig. 2. "The Vet and the Noob". Image from a Television Advertisement for Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 [38].

5 Video Games and the Habitus

In the sections below, the sociological tools needed to help us make sense of how video and computer games and, in particular, the Military Shooter function as mechanisms for the extension of the *militarisation* process will be examined.

5.1 Habitus

The concept of *habitus* is derived from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu [26], who describes *habitus* as representing "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' that is, as principles of the generation…and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively 'regulated' and 'regular' without any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them" [26]. In educational settings *habitus* helps reinforce the social and cultural capital that the middle-class arriving at school already possesses. For the middle-class, educational institutions from the architecture, to the curriculum, the staff and the resources at their disposal reinforce and help strengthen a middle-class disposition and way of being in the world.

The application of our understanding of *habitus* is not restricted to analysing institutions such as schools or other educational settings. The concept of *habitus* has been deployed to help understand a range of settings or fields as Bourdieu describes them; in particular sports and sports training have been the focus of significant work [27]. For example the work of one of Bourdieu's students Loïc Wacquant [27], [28] on boxing and the *pugilistic habitus* highlights the significance of this idea for our understanding of how power and culture become embodied. The analysis of sport and the sporting *habitus* [27] can help us to make sense of an evolving ludic based *military habitus*.

5.2 Military Habitus

Preparation for war has traditionally involved soldiers engaging in endless drill, marching in formation, following commands, target practice and the completion of obstacle courses. Modern warfare requires a different set of skills and characteristics. On the modern battlefield the soldier needs to be a thinker, a problem solver and a specialist in applying the necessary level of violence [29]. The Military Shooter has found a niche as a "training" tool for the military, enabling military personnel to realistically simulate complex battle scenarios in order to rehearse the intricacies of modern combat in diverse settings [30-32]. The language, game play (multi-player, head shots and kill points), high-tech weapons and gear (armour, uniforms and insignia) and other military elements of this form of gaming extend and amplify the process of militarisation and helps constitute a ludic based *military habitus*.

This emergent *military habitus* coupled with the immersive and realistic war simulation at the heart of the Military Shooter helps construct a foundation upon which entry into and effective participation within military organisations becomes easier to facilitate. We can begin to understand how this process takes shape by referring to the concept of 'anticipatory socialisation'. Neil Stott describes 'anticipatory socialisation' [33] as a process through which young people are able to rehearse and test future roles and occupations. In this context, playable media such as the *Call of Duty* series become more of a simulation than a form of entertainment and assist in the extension of the process of *militarisation*.

The concept of *habitus* enables us to understand how games help to shape or pattern the mental framework of young people in order to create particular dispositions or ways of looking at and interacting with the world. These dispositions and ways of interacting with, and looking at, the world are neither benign nor value free. Military Shooter and other military themed or oriented video and computer games are ideological tools and artefacts. The Military Shooter and other military themed or oriented video and computer games have political and cultural meaning, and significance [4], [34], [35]. They can be interpreted as more than simple entertainment and, when examined from the position of what Hardt and Negri have described as the "Empire" [8], [18], they can be interpreted as serving a powerful ideological function.

6 "Empire" at War

Gaming has been harnessed in the post-9/11 era to promote a set of values, practices and dispositions which support the ideological and political framework described by Negri and Hardt as "Empire" [8], [18]. Entertainment with a military theme complements the already powerful social, political and cultural forces at work in American society, as well as in other Western societies which position and privilege the military as one of, if not the most influential institutions within those societies. This process has been identified as representing the *militarisation* of society. In Western societies *militarisation* has led to the creation and maintenance of a strong military establishment – which has the ability to engage in continuous geographically dispersed asymmetrical warfare, in support of the politics of Empire [8], [18].

7 Conclusion

The role played by new media such as video and computer gaming in the process of *militarisation* warrants further detailed study and critique. The argument that these forms of playable media are simply harmless diversions ignores the role played by the military in facilitating the development of technology and content, which make these games both realistic and entertaining. Computer and video games such as the *Call of Duty* series have the effect of reinforcing a particular view of the world amongst players. This is a view, which encourages both war as a political tool but also as a form of entertainment. Computer and video games such as the Military Shooters have in effect become part of the fabric of military ICT infrastructure.

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