

Targeting the Player

Computer Games as Propaganda for the Military-Industrial Complex

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Abstract

The historical roots of the technology and design of computer games can be found in Pentagon-supported research in 1960s. Many computer games had their origin as simulators and training equipment for the armed forces. It can be argued that the content of computer games concerning real wars reflects the ideological interest of the military-industrial complex or the military-entertainment complex, as Robin Andersen has redefined it. Selected games such as 'America's Army', 'Army of Two' and companies such as 'Kuma War' are analysed critically within the framework of the fight for ideological hegemony in the Global War on Terror. It is argued that when computer game are read as text, they can also be read as propaganda.

Keywords: computer games, military-industrial complex, Global War on Terror, propaganda.

Introduction

Since former president Eisenhower introduced his critical views on the military-industrial complex in 1960, the bonds between the political establishment and the military-industrial complex have become even closer ¹. Under the Bush administration and the so called Global War on Terror (GWT), the military-industrial complex has had more influence on civil society than ever before in history (Turse 2008). This affects media coverage of military affairs both directly and indirectly. In April 2008, the New York Times revealed that a group of retired military officers, who during the Iraq War appeared as independent expert commentators, were in fact a pool of loyal supporters of the Pentagon and the White House, organized, paid for and briefed by the Bush Administration (NYT, April 20 2008). Even the entertainment industry is influenced by the ideology of the military-industrial complex, and Robin Anderson has introduced the notion of the military-entertainment complex to explain the close links between the Pentagon and parts of the entertainment industry (Andersen 2006). To my mind, computer games could be used as a case study to show some aspects of the propagandistic nature of the military-entertainment complex.

My point of departure will be the Cold War, when a new generation of computer games emerged from research within the armed forces in order to develop training videos for military personnel (Held 2000, Lenoir 2000). I will draw the historical line

between research and development in the defence industry and see the development of new games as instruments for recruitment to the arms forces and as a tool in the global battle for hearts and minds in the GWT. As case studies, I will look closer at selected games such as 'America's Army', "Army of Two" and companies such as 'Kuma War'. The purpose of the case studies is to suggest a connection between the historical roots of the games of real wars and their adaptation to support the global ambitions of US interests in the GWT

Videogames as Text

I will not address issues concerned with what potential effects videogames might have on behaviour, etc. (Gombrich 1961, Greenfel 1984, Wright 2004). According to Faltin Karlsen, the social interaction between the players is more important than is the content of the games (Karlsen 1997: 84-85). Still, one should not underestimate the ideological influence of video games dealing with real wars. Avoiding the complex issue of cause and effect in game playing, I will primarily see videogames as texts (Mortensen 2006). Online computer games today must be regarded and analysed as mass culture. In the UK, a majority of 6- to 10-year-olds consider themselves as players, and close to 50 per cent of people in the age group 6-65 play games at least once a week (Mortensen 2006: 399-400).

In a globalized economy, the market and distribution of video games has a huge influence on everyday life. I will argue that media researchers must take video game culture more seriously as a part of everyday media use (Poole 2004: 6-8). Although my approach is critical of the content of computer and video games based on imagined and real wars, I have nothing against computer games as such. On the contrary, I support Toby Miller's warning against the moral panic that sometimes affects the debate about these new media – the same kind of panic that, historically, has struck other new media, whether books, theatres, the cinema, radio or television, when they first arrived (Miller 2006: 6-7).

Online games are the fastest growing niche in this computer game market. As Toril Mortensen points out, the online computer games of today have a very different and more important position in the youth culture than they did just a decade ago (Mortensen 2006: 398). Estimates from 2003 showed that sales from consoles and software reached 17 billion dollars in the United States and Europe alone. Figures from companies dealing with market analyses of games show that income from subscriptions to online games alone has increased from US\$500 million in 2002 to US\$2 billion in 2005, and the estimates are that this figure will increase to US\$6-8 billion by 2011. The newest trend is to buy characters and objects in the games for real money. The game 'Project Entropia' is linked through a figure of yourself to your own credit card. The most popular games, like 'Everquest' and 'World of Warcraft', are money machines (Stordal 2006). Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) offer a social, intellectual and technological way of life to many people and bring new people together, both virtually and in reality. As Norwegian media researcher Espen Aarseth has pointed out, this arena should be taken seriously as a social field, and there is no need to moralize over the technology just because some people misuse it (Aarseth 2001). Thus, games *can* be resources to provide pleasure, knowledge and skills (Mortensen 2003: 37-38). But it should also be noted that they can be used a tool for propaganda (Ottosen 2008).

The Cooperation Between the Military and the Entertainment Industry²

The origin of video games can be traced back to the Cold War, and the technology behind them can be traced back to the U.S. Government's nuclear research facility, the Brookhaven National Laboratory, and an engineer who had designed electronic devices for the Manhattan Project's atomic bomb (Herman 1997).

Another dimension in the relationship between entertainment and war coverage is the significance of the strategic cooperation between the military-industrial complex and the entertainment industry. In a 1996 policy paper, the U.S. National Research Council (NRC) acknowledged the importance of cooperation between the Department of Defence (DODD) and the entertainment industry on issues such as modelling and simulation technology. The report makes the following statement:

In the entertainment industry, such technology lies at the hearth of video games, theme park attractions and entertainment centres, and special effects for film production. For DODD, modelling and simulation technology provides a low-cost means of conducting joint training exercises, evaluating new doctrine and tactics, and studying the effectiveness of new weapon systems (quoted from Burston 2003: 163).

The Political Economy of the Game Industry

To understand the political and economical roots of the war game industry, I will draw upon the work of Tim Lenoir (2000). Lenoir's point of departure is that he is intrigued by the notion that we are on the verge of a new renaissance similar to that of the 14th and 15th centuries, deeply connected with a revolution in information technology. But unlike the renaissance of the 14th century, which fostered humanism as one of its achievements, the present renaissance is heralding a post-human era in which the human being is merged with the intelligent machine. As Lenoir puts it, "In the post-human state, there is no demarcation between bodily existence and computer simulation, between cybernetic mechanisms and biological organism" (Lenoir 2000: 290).

Lenoir links the technological revolution behind the computer game industry to research agencies such as the DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), several private companies such as Xerox Parc and research universities. Since 1996, the DARPA Smart Modules programme has been developing and demonstrating new ways of combining new technologies (such as microprocessors) and using lightweight, low power, module packages to simulate realistic battlefield situations (ibid.: 291). Lenoir links the military's need to develop simulation and training programmes to the entertainment industry, and uses the development of Ivan Sutherland's head-mounted display project as an example of cooperation between the academic and industrial sectors. The history starts 40 years ago. Sutherland had a Harvard background, but funding for the project came from different sources: the military, universities, industry and the CIA. The CIA provided US\$80,000 in 1966, and funds were also supplied by APRA, the Office of Naval Research, and Bell Labs. The Helicopter company Bell provided equipment, while the Air Force put PDP-1 computers at Sutherland's disposal. MIT Lincoln Labs, under an ARPA contract, provided an ultrasonic head-position acoustic sensor, which became an important component of the new video-game technology. In 1968, Sutherland

left for Utah, where he joined the Computer Science Department at the University of Utah, which subsequently became an important environment for the development of new computer technology and computer graphics (ibid.: 293-297). The new animated technology has also been used in films such as 'Jurassic Park' and 'Toy Story'. Already in 1956, Arthur C. Clarke published his science fiction novel 'The city' in which computer simulations is one of the themes. The science fiction movie 'Ender's Game', by Orson Scott Card, provides an example of how this desire to merge the digital and the real preceded the availability of the technology. It was written in 1977, the year before flight simulators were invented. 'Ender's Game' conceives of a boy who saves the world from aliens in a war game, where the video-game situation becomes the training ground for real world warriors. It was used by the Marine University in Quantico, Virginia, and this was just the beginning of a long-lasting trend of military use of the new computer game technology. Soon, the economic benefits would ensure that the military became an important customer of the games industry.

The commercial breakthrough came in 1993, when Silicon Graphics, NEC and Nintendo announced a partnership and the world's most powerful game machine was launched. In 1997, the game 'Super Mario64' captured a worldwide base and sold US\$2-billion worth of games.

Lenoir uses Steven Woodcock's career as an illustration and concrete example from the military-industrial complex. Woodcock has been, since 1995, a lead software engineer for Gameware Development at Lockheed-Martin Real3D. He began his career in the development of game simulations for the Martin Marietta Information Group, National Test Bed (NTB), where he was responsible for testing, integration and documentation for ARGUS, the Advanced Real-time Gaming Universal Simulation, working, *inter alia*, with command-and-control simulation focusing on ballistic missile defence (BMD). Between 1995 and 1997, he switched from military network simulations to the interactive game industry, and became lead programmer on the Sega-produced Model 2 arcade game 'Behind Enemy Lines'. He has himself noted that his previous experience at Martin Marietta proved invaluable in designing the real time 3-D multiplayer games he has developed since 1995. He has also developed games for other companies, including the Sony PlayStation project 'Thundering Death'. Woodcock's work is a illustrative example of how technology and development originating in the military are used in the entertainment industry to create products such as 'Doom II' for Id Software and 'Falcon 4.0' for Spectrum Holobyte's video games (Lenoir 2000: 321-322).

What the CIA, as a partner and funding source, hopes to get out of this cooperation is not quite clear, but Lenoir suggests that the evolution of new technology in the private sector might move development and new information technology faster than in traditional government agencies (ibid.: 334).

The success of 'Doom II' led the Marines to look ahead to the next step in the commercialization of war-games. Cooperation with the company MÄK Technologies led to the design of a tactical operations game built to Marine specifications. According to the contract, the game should eventually go on sale as an official Marine Corps tactical training game. In addition to its work in the defence community, MÄK's software has been licensed for use by several entertainment firms, such as Total Entertainment Network and Zombie Virtual Reality Entertainment, to develop 3-D, multi-user video games such as 'Spearhead'. 'Spearhead' was published by Interactive Magic and can

be played over the Internet, taking distribution a step further. Its networking technology is similar to that used in military simulations. This became a new standard for all Department of Defence simulations, part of a DOD-wide effort to establish a common technical framework to facilitate the inter-operability of all types of models and simulations. MÄK benefits from working with both the military and commercial markets, taking advantage of the close to US\$500 million spent by the U.S. government to develop this technology. The contract between MÄK and the Marine Corps led to the contract for MEU 2000, a computer-based tactical decision-making game for the Marine Corps as well as a game for the commercial market, a multiplayer game in which each player assumes a position in the command hierarchy of either American or opposing forces. This became a prototype of later games, where the military version boasts more accurate details about tactics and weapons than does the civilian. Both versions, however, allow multiple players to compete on the Internet (ibid.: 324-326).

Simulating Real Wars

In many cases, we see that the games' technology is the same as that which various branches of the armed forces use in their simulators to train their own soldiers. Here, the SIMNET concept is essential. The combination of federal funding, university research and research in government-funded laboratories is essential to an understanding of SIMNET, for the development of hardware critical to the fields of 3-D graphics, simulation technology and virtual reality is impossible to understand without seeing it in the context of the military-industrial complex. Simulators developed prior to the 1980s were quite expensive, with a budget of between US\$30 million and US\$35 million. The cost of developing simulators was twice as high as the systems they were intended to simulate (Lenoir 2000: 308). The question of how to finance this was, of course, crucial. Jack A. Thorpe, from the American Defense Department's Advanced Research Project Agency (DAPRA), came up with the idea of financing the simulators by converting the technology to commercial products. Lenoir explains it like this:

(Thorpe's) idea was that aircraft simulators should be used to *augment* aircraft: they should be used to teach air-combat skills that pilots could not learn in peacetime flying, but that could be taught with simulators in large-scale battle-engagement interactions. Thorpe proposed the construction of battle-engagement simulation technology as a twenty-five-year development goal. Concerned about the costs for such a system, he actively pursued technologies developed outside the Department of Defense, such as a video-game technology from the entertainment industries. In 1982 he hired a team to develop a network of tank simulators suitable for collective training. (Lenoir 2000: 309)

The team that developed SIMNET consisted of retired military personnel and designers from Perceptronics of Woodland Hills, California. Perceptronics had pioneered the first overlay of computer graphics on a display of images generated by an analogue videodisc, as a part of a tank gunnery project in 1979 (ibid.).

The warplane company Lockheed-Martin invested in the technology of arcade video games, thus accelerating their development. Recruits to the U.S. Marines have used 'Doom' in their practice, and the U.S. Navy has used a custom hack of Microsoft's

Flight Simulator to help pilots fly a T-34C Turbo Mentor, the aircraft used for primary flight training (Poole 2004: 208-209).

Another agency on the scene is the joint military/film industry-funded Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT). In light of the new military practice of creating teams of military personnel, industrial strategists and academics, Lenoir suggests that ICT is more interested in modelling training behaviour than in developing 'realistic agents' for video games and films. Here, Atomic Games is a realistic partner. The company was founded by Keith Zabalaoui and became a subsidiary of Microsoft Games. Zabalaoui has a background in the Johnson Space-based robotic retriever for recapturing equipment for astronauts. Popular games like 'V for Victory' and 'Utah Beach' were developed; in 1992, the latter was selected as Game of the Year by Strategy Plus. Atomic Games' most successful game was based on real historical facts, and called 'Close Combat 2: A Bridge too Far', based on a real German-American tank battle in World War II (Lenoir 2000: 332).

In 1999, Intel Corporation announced the first of a new series of network processors designed to solve bandwidth problems to help create network devices for local and wide area networks as well as Internet-based networks. The future lies in Internet games that involve several players at the same time (ibid.: 335).

'America's Army' – A Success Story

One of the biggest successes on a global scale in the computer market is the official U.S. Army computer game (Nieborg 2006). Since it was released as 'America's Army': Recon on July 4th 2002, it has been upgraded with more than 20 new versions (Løvlie 2007: 8). It is available free of charge on the Internet and reproduces the image of courageous American soldiers. We can read from the introduction on their home page: "The Soldiers in Special Forces are a reflection of the Army within which they serve. They are courageous, intelligent, and resourceful and dedicated individuals". A new version was launched in 2003 (the same year that the invasion of Iraq took place), at Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, 13-16 May, in a combination of real and virtual events. Real tanks were placed outside as Air Force Division 101 launched a simulated attack (Pilet 2003). Inside the Expo, the new game was introduced as a tool to recruit more soldiers to the real U.S. Army, at the same time as it was introduced free of charge as a video game on the Internet. By November 2003, it already had 2,3 million users; by spring 2007, the number had passed 8 million, ranking among the most popular games on a global scale (Løvlie 2007: 8). Again, we must ask what kind of ideological influence this has on young people using the game (Nohrstedt & Ottosen 2005). The question is, of course, why the game is offered free when it has such global potential. A tool for recruitment in the American market is the most obvious answer. In addition, the purpose is to strengthen the image of the US Army among the domestic and international public (Løvlie 2007: 14) In an interview with Army News Service, Col. Casey Wardynski, director of the OMEA, project director of 'America's Army' and associate professor of economics at the USMA, made clear how efficient a tool it is: "The game has generated interest in the Army and has taught people about soldiering," he said. In a survey given to young people aged 16 to 21 years, 29% said that 'America's Army' was the most effective method of generating interest (Petemeyer 2004). Nor should the

game be under-estimated as a global instrument of propaganda. The game is extremely one-sided in its approach and offers the military solution as the only solution to a conflict. In addition, all issues are seen from a US perspective (Ottosen 2008).

In an analysis of the rhetoric in 'America's Army', Anders Sundnes Løvlie draws inspiration from Roland Barthes' visual analysis in an attempt to apply a rhetorical analysis to non-verbal text. According to Barthes, the message of the image is analysed on three levels: "The linguistic message, the denotative message (or the uncoded, iconic message) and the connotative, culture or symbolic message, which is seen as coded, iconic message" (Løvlie 2007: 19). An interesting aspect of Løvlie's work is that he finds evidence of glorifying US warfare in a subtle manner that is implicit in the rhetoric of the game:

What kind of rhetoric is this? It may seem like a relatively subtle kind of rhetoric, certainly one that deals with "minimal gestures" rather than overwhelming impressions or provocative postures. *America's Army* is propaganda, and there are certainly instances of verbal-text rhetoric of the most patriotic and grandiose kind in the game (...) However, the rhetoric of the game form itself, which is the one I have been trying to analyze, doesn't seem to rely on such an overtly excessive language. In stead it is a rhetoric of modesty, responsibility and moral authority; making sure no-one may come to see themselves as terrorists killing US soldiers, avoiding unrealistic excesses and undisciplined play (Løvlie 2007: 108).

'America's Army' is not the only militaristic game on the market. According to Nieborg, "'Counter Strike" was a role model for 'America's Army'. One of the newest games, 'Full Spectrum Warrior', was also initially developed as a training game, then recycled and released to the public. It is set in the fictional country of Zekistan, whose dictator has been accused of 'ethnic cleansing and terrorist sponsorship'. The idea behind the game is to survive in a hostile environment. It operates in an atmosphere of fear, where cars are exploding around you and there is potential death around every corner. Rather than controlling each soldier, you are given overall command of two 'fire teams' of four men. Enemies bed themselves down and you tell one team to give covering fire, and guide the other to a position where they can get a clear shot. Your soldiers swear and joke, and if you leave them out in the open too long, one after the other eventually gets shot and wounded – then it's a race to get the wounded to the nearest medical unit. In the heat of the battle, the game forces you to take multiple executive decisions. Variation comes with the ability to call in strikes and command snipers to 'take out' enemy soldiers. The similarity with Iraq or Afghanistan is probably not pure coincidence.

Analysis of 'Army of Two', EA Games Montreal³

Companies like Blackwater represent a new trend in which private companies increasingly go into areas such as the armed forces and national security, areas where governments have traditionally been in charge (Schumacher 2006). This outsourcing of the armed forces is also a theme in the computer game 'Army of Two'. Politically this is highly controversial, because international legislation such as the Geneva Convention and UN Declaration of Human Rights are based on the principle that governments are accountable to international law and responsible for the behaviour of their armed forces

(Scahill 2007). The fact that such controversial legal issues are absent from the dialogue in 'Army of Two' is an indicator that the text in the game reflects the interest of the military-industrial complex. The heroes in the game are self-made men who are making a career in this new market (Ottosen 2008, Andersen 2006).

'Army of Two' was developed by EA Games Montreal, a daughter company of EA Games. Prior to this specific game, the company had developed only sports games, the SSX snowboarding franchise being the most well known. 'Army of Two' is the company's first third person shooter, being promoted from early on as a revolutionary game for player cooperation. The premise here is that the two characters (controlled by up to two human players, locally or via the Internet) have to cooperate to finish the different missions. To facilitate player cooperation, the game designers have added new game mechanics that emphasize the importance of working together: reviving each other when hurt, lifting each other over obstacles, pushing buttons simultaneously, etc. (based on Ottosen and Wærnes 2008).

The game is, in effect, a modern war game, using many of the world's most well-known conflict zones as contextual levels. The game's crude language and violent animations are amongst the reasons the game is rated M for mature, the controversial aspects of the game also contribute to this rating.

Gameplay and Game-world

'Army of Two' is a military shooter where players cooperate to finish the different levels. Shooter games need enemies to shoot at, and this game has plenty of them. The interesting part is that they are based on actual organizations. One aspect worth examining is how the enemies are textured, in other words how they are dressed, the colour of their skin, etc. Depending on the level, the enemies seem textured to look like natives of their respective countries. The enemies in the Afghanistan level have darker skin, wear normal shirts and pants (they don't wear uniforms) and wield what appear to be Kalashnikovs. This level even includes turban-wearing martyrs that rush towards the players with bombs strapped to their chests.

In the Somalia level, the enemies are wearing casual clothes instead of uniforms, their skin tone is black (African) and they also wield Kalashnikovs. The Iraq level introduces enemies wearing uniforms (combat suit and berets), indicating that they represent the fighter cells in Iraq attacking US soldiers and their allies. The enemies representing Abu Sayyaf and the PLO also wear uniforms, but they wield more modern weapons (some even carry RPGs). This is to be expected, as they appear later in the game (difficulty often rises as a result of game progress).

As players complete missions and fulfil level requirements, they earn cash they can spend on buying and upgrading new weapons. Many of the weapons are modelled and named after their real-world counterparts, for example, the AK-47, 44 Magnum, AUG assault rifle and a Stinger rocket launcher. Other pistols, revolvers, shotguns, assault rifles, machine guns and rocket launchers are available. For 10,000 US \$ players can "pimp" each individual weapon, giving it a golden finish (often jewels are part of the finish). These weapons can then be utilized in the game.

Story and Mission Layout

There are two parallel threads to be found in the narrative of ‘Army of Two’. One is the story about the game’s on-screen protagonists, named Salem and Rios. The other is the political background story. In the latter, corporations and legislators debate about the military contractor issue. Salem and Rios are two Americans with backgrounds from Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1993, who decided to join a private military company. Salem and Rios left the US Army, complaining about the salary and the lack of effectiveness. Successful completion of the introductory level in the game leads to a cut-scene in which Salem and Rios (and their lieutenant Richard Dalton) are approached by a military contractor company called SSC, Security and Strategy Corporation. They all join and the game goes to another cut-scene, showing Salem and Rios basically killing enemies in various locations (the locations are not named). This cut-scene is supposed to illustrate the passing of time, specifically eight years until a major event takes place: the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in 2001.

Salem and Rios get their new orders: Go to Afghanistan and destroy missiles from the Cold War era controlled by Al-Qaeda, eliminate a local Al-Qaeda leader and rescue a colleague from SSC. Completion of the “Afghanistan” level leads to an interesting cut-scene: media reporting that SSC has acquired another private military company, the Black Mountain Industries. The name Black Mountain is obviously inspired by the real-world company Blackwater. This purchase thus makes SSC the largest private military contractor in the world. The next mission takes place in 2003, Salem and Rios are sent to Iraq to rescue a SSC colleague again, to take out an Iraqi terrorist and destroy his base. Completion of this level leads to a new cut-scene: two senators (Alex Richter and Richard Whitehorse) debate live on television about whether or not to pass a bill that privatizes the military. Privatization would of course be good news to SSC.

Salem and Rios get news that an aircraft carrier, the USS Constellation, has been taken over by a group of terrorists from Abu Sayyaf. After fighting their way to the bridge, they find the captain of the ship. He tells them that the ship is currently headed for the capital of the Philippines, Manila, with an armed nuclear missile on board. Their only option is to sink the ship before it reaches the port of Manila. Salem and Rios succeed in doing this and decide to stop taking missions from SSC until they know more about the true intentions of the company. Completion leads to a cut-scene in which Richard Whitehorse, the senator who is opposing passing the privatization bill, starts campaigning against it in the media.

While performing a mission for their weapons dealer, SSC contacts them to perform one last mission in China. The leader of Abu Sayyaf is supposed to cross a bridge over the Lijang River, and their mission is to take out the entire motorcade by blowing up the bridge itself. They blow up the bridge, only to find that the leader of SSC has set them up. The person crossing the bridge was actually senator Richard Whitehorse. Salem and Rios now have bounties on their heads. They also find themselves under attack from the PLA, the People’s Liberation Army of China. Under their escape from China, sources from within SSC tell them that the company has been staging attacks on US soldiers to hurt the reputation of the US Army, thereby promoting the ultimate passing of the bill.

The final mission takes place in Miami, in the SSC headquarters, where Salem and Rios kill their former employers (and a good number of their former colleagues). They also manage to clean their names in the process, and the game ends with a final cut-scene.

Although the bill did not pass in Congress (the media have named it the “Privatization Scandal”), Salem and Rios start their own private military company. Thus the ethos of the game is that the only path to pursue is a career in private companies. End of story.

The various missions have the player navigating through the different maps with one primary objective, to kill hostile forces before they kill you. This preventative military tactic can be read as a defence for the Bush Doctrine, which has had pre-emptive strikes as one of its corner stones⁴. Besides a few hostages, in the missions of ‘Army of Two’, civilians are absent from the play. Even in the Somalia level, which takes place in an urban city, civilians are nowhere to be seen.

The introduction of each mission lacks any historical background information or reference to the origin of the conflict. It seems that the conflict zones are used only to justify the use of lethal violence under war-like conditions. In terms of storyline, however, these places are unrelated to each other, other than being known conflict zones (where mercenaries are known to operate). This also fits nicely into the message underlying the GWT. The war has no clear end and the “enemy” can be found everywhere.

Kuma Reality

Kuma Reality Games offers a series of games based on real events, including the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia. Even the killing of the sons of Saddam Hussein and the hunt and arrest of them are available in a game (Thomas and Virchow 2005: 30). And if you get tired of playing past events, you can now download and the play the invasion of Iran.

The New York-based Kuma Reality Games is a commercial, limited liability company, in the business of developing and distributing computer games and *machimina* (movies made by recording staged events in a game environment). These products are distributed cost free through Kuma’s web pages⁵.

Though one of their machimina series, *Dinohunters*, is based on a semi-fictional TV series in which celebrities hunt extinct dinosaurs, Kuma’s main focus, *Kuma\War*, depicts real-life war situations through virtual re-enactments. In their own words, “*Kuma Reality Games builds re-creations of real-world events using advanced gaming tools*”. As of December 2007, the company has made 83 playable missions available from their homepage, most of them inspired by events in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan⁶. The fact that the games are free of charge is perhaps the dominating message on almost all of their web pages. On their homepage, two big green buttons (launching the installer program) with the words “*FREE! PLAY NOW!*” are practically impossible to miss and on the main banner on the Kuma\War homepage we find “*Get it! It’s FREE*”.

Kuma\War

Kuma’s own ambition is defined on their home page: “*Some read the headlines; others watch it on CNN, but only Kuma\War lands you smack in the middle of the conflict*”⁷. So the premise is re-living real-world battles in a digitalized virtual game-world, or in other words: playing the battle for yourself. This is done by entering their website and downloading an installer program. Once this program is installed and executed, it functions as a mission and player hub. All of the different play-modes, e.g. Shootout and

KillPoint, are accessible through tabs at the top of the window, and the player is given an oversight over how many people are currently in a specific play-session. On the left side, covering a major part of the window itself, is a featured mission. One example is a game called *Mission 31: Osama 2001 SP*. This specific single player mission is also given a description that ends with the words: “take out al Qaeda’s terror chief yourself”. On the bottom right corner of the window is a banner showing either commercial advertisements, e.g. History.com, or the other game modes available. Choosing any of the missions will prompt automatic instalment of the necessary files and when finished, hitting the play button will start the game. With broadband connection speed, players can visit the Kuma Reality Games homepage and be playing the games in a matter of minutes, thus it seems as though rapid accessibility has been given a great deal of thought in developing the game. Most of these missions have a banner on their information page stating that it’s from a *Real World Event*. Each mission also comes with its own detailed specifics, the form reminiscent of an article from a newspaper⁸. The bulk of all these missions cover military confrontations in Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq. An interesting mission is the “*John Kerry’s Silver Star*” mission, taking place during the Vietnam War in 1969. In the game, there is an undertext questioning whether John Kerry deserved the Silver Star he was awarded. After a short description of what took place that day, we find this twist: “*So it went, thirty-five years ago in Vietnam- or did it?*” The idea of this mission seems to be to make players decide for themselves (although playing the game should not be sufficient reason for anyone to make a final decision).

Kuma’s Worldview

This specific mission is interesting because it is one of the very few places where Kuma questions aspects concerning an American military involvement abroad. Since this issue was raised during the election campaign in 2005, when Kerry challenged George W. Bush, it can be read as a support for the last election campaign of President George W. Bush against Kerry.

The missions portraying more recent conflicts based on real wars such as in Iraq and Afghanistan are never critically examined by Kuma. Questions about ethical issues or the economic consequences of the US wars presented in the games are totally absent. Although you can play the game as either the American forces or their counterpart, for example Iraqi insurgence, there is no doubt where Kuma has its sympathies. The connection between Kuma and the military-industrial complex is established through the so-called Partners page on Kuma’s own website: “*Kuma is Proud to Support the Following Foundations:*”, and then acknowledging these two organizations: *The Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund* and *Vietnam Unit Memorial Monument Fund*. Each of the organizations is given a short description, mostly concerning what they work for, and a link to their own homepages. Mentioned among affiliates are also *Stars and Stripes*, without explaining what they do⁹. On their front page one can also read: “*Nearly 100 playable missions bring our soldier’s heroic stories to life, (...)*”¹⁰.

Kuma Reality Games claim their players will receive updates including “*extensive intelligence gathered by news sources around the world, and insight from a decorated team of military veterans*”. This implies that the company has several military veterans at hand and that the employees of Kuma search the media for information sources that can

be implemented in their Kuma\War-games. In several of the mission details, thanks are given to soldiers who helped to develop these specific missions. A more detailed explanation of how this cooperation took place and was implemented is not given, though it would be reasonable to assume that the soldiers described the specific environment, the weapons and equipment utilized and the amount of resistance. This would be relevant to game developers, as they could use that information to make an accurate game-world and set the correct game parameters in terms of weapons and enemies. One point that must be noted is that the information from the eyewitnesses being used is all from the US or the Coalition side. Given Kuma's own goal of historical accuracy, their emphasis on reconstructing real-world events, it is interesting that information from one party alone is applied as truthful background knowledge. It must therefore be assumed that these games are *supposed* to represent the events from a Western perspective; in other words, they cannot be used as accurate history lessons for the everyday user (though this is what Kuma evidently aspires to achieve).

Kuma and the Media

The relationship between Kuma Reality Games and the media is an interesting aspect of their activity. One example is an article taken from TV.com, describing Kuma's partnership with The History Channel. This involves coordinating releases from both the TV channel and the Kuma homepage and is called Shootout! These kinds of stories are often published as news. One example is the news that, on 3 November 2006, The History Channel and Kuma will air re-enactments of various famous historical gun battles. Simultaneously Kuma releases video games that allow users to play the episodes affiliated video game mission. The journalist also describes these games as *game-isodes*, in other words episodic releases of video games in term of content and themes. At the end of the article, it is stated that The History Channel will encourage watchers to visit their homepage, where the games are available for free download¹¹.

Through articles in the media, the companies themselves are receiving free advertisement and thus free marketing. This PR aspect is probably the most important aspect of the media relation. How effective these specific kinds of articles are in terms of attracting users is difficult to say, because this is not exactly headline news.

GamesFirst.com

The Kuma\War games, however, has made headlines in mainstream news through the remarkable content of their games. One example is from 2005, when Kuma released a mission called "*Assault on Iran*", inspired by the ongoing tension between the U.S. and Iran concerning Iran's nuclear facilities. The rumours that American soldiers had been sent into Iranian territory for reconnaissance was used as the premise for this game. Users thus got the opportunity to play as a Special Forces soldier planning for the Iran mission. In this hypothetical scenario, the player has the option to in fact destroy "*Iran's nuclear arms capabilities*."¹² According to GamesFirst!, an Internet magazine dedicated to computer and console games, this was not received lightly by an Iranian company that published a petition to remove the mission from Kuma's homepage. This was also reported on CNN.com, where Keith Halper, CEO of Kuma Reality Games, gave an

interview with CNN where he stated that this mission would not be taken out of their mission list¹³. The mission itself received a “game response” from a Iranian developer team launching, “*Rescue the Nuke Scientist*”. Not surprisingly, the American soldiers are the bad guys in this game. This was reported by *usatoday.com* and other news media, which framed it as a virtual game dialogue (or argument)¹⁴. This specific incident is one of the many examples where a Kuma release has sparked controversy, thus receiving a great deal of attention. Even Norwegian media have reported activities from Kuma from time to time, for example the above-mentioned Assault on Iran and The Capture of Saddam Hussein¹⁵.

An interesting side note is how Kuma is coining a keyword through the media: game-isode. The concept of game-isode is being used by Kuma, and subsequently by the media, to mean succeeding games with episodic content. There are several articles describing Kuma that apply this concept, thus crediting Kuma with a rather unique concept. By reading through Kuma’s pages on the Internet and their own press releases¹⁶, it is apparent that they are trying to promote themselves as the prime source for these kinds of games. Linking this specific word, game-isode, to the company is obviously a method used to increase user awareness of their line of products.

Video Games as War Preparation in News Media

Robin Andersen has also touched upon the relationships between computer games and television news as an aspect of her concept of the military-entertainment complex (Andersen 2005). A great deal has been written about the failure of the news media to critically investigate the propaganda about the alleged weapons of mass destruction during the period leading up to the war in Iraq in March 2003 (Solomon 2004, Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2005). Quality newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* have apologized to their readers for their part in promoting the war effort by uncritically repeating the lies of the Bush Administration (Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2004).

Robin Andersen analyses some aspects of the use of animations and computer game-like effects in the newsrooms of the major news channels. She argues that the core components of the imagery of video games-like effects in news presentation in the period leading up to the Iraq War were in fact fictionalization of news. In the run-up to the war in Iraq, all major networks showed digitized pulsing graphics that simulated the ongoing war. Andersen uses an example from the local Fox station in New York: a news story about new sophisticated weapons was introduced on the screen with pulsing graphics of the headline ‘PLAN OF ATTACK’. In the introduction to the news story, the announcer explains that “to take the so-called butcher from Baghdad” will require some “serious weapons”. After boasting that the channel Fox 5 has acquired access to information about these weapons, the announcer introduces the reporter Linda Schmidt. The viewers are then shown a grainy, monochromatic field with squares and rectangles transforming into white blurs. The reporter tells the viewers about new weapons introduced into Afghanistan that will soon be used in Iraq. Live footage supplied by the Air Force from Afghanistan is accompanied by station banners on the screen which read ‘WAR GAMES’, and viewers are told: “Watch closely and you can see a person running on the ground ... a white dot moving across the centre of your screen ... they’re firing at him ... and then they nail him”. This actual footage of real killing is framed

in a video-game setting, the reporter enthusiastically demonstrating to the viewers a weapon called the 'meat grinder' and boasting, as she holds it on her shoulder and aims it at the screen, about how light and easy it is. Robin Andersen makes the point that the new visual rhetoric of war – the digital image – builds a bridge between entertainment violence and real war violence. News reporting looks and feels more like entertainment these days, and entertainment has a particular type of sensibility:

News reports resemble video games. Media celebrates war and its weaponry, not only for the ratings and patriotic fervor, or even because of pressure from the White House public relations teams; Positive reporting on high-tech war has become fundamental to an industry highly invested in creating and profiting from the very same technologies used in weapons-the computer-based digital simulations at the core of video games. Such simulations are now seen across the media spectrum and have become fundamental to news representation of war. (Andersen 2005: 357)

The economic basis for this process is, of course, the merger between the military and the media industries. When the media, through their ownership, have common interests with the military-industrial complex, it is doubtful whether they will be capable of independent and critical war reporting (Bagdikian 2004: 156). The entertainment industry and the military-industrial complex not only share economic interests, but a common digital technology has resulted in war reporting that shares the graphic styles and sensibilities of video games (Andersen 2005: 13).

Conclusion

The digital technology emerging from the research laboratories in the military-industrial complex serves as a simulator, preparing soldiers for real wars, whereas the same technology – and in many cases the same games – are also converted into commercial video games. The long-term impact of millions of users playing within the narrative of war propaganda is unclear. Companies like Kuma present real wars as entertainment in computer games, and television channels use the technology from computer games in their news presentations. Future research should analyse how this borderline between facts and fiction affects players of computer games and the television audience (Stordal 2007).

The economic, technological and cultural links between the entertainment industry and the defence industry makes it difficult for the major news channels to serve as a critical watchdog in issues of war and peace (Andersen 2006). Not only are the major news organizations reluctant to criticize the Pentagon and the White House in war preparation, but in some cases they use the same digital technology as the game industry in their news reporting, in a manner that blurs the difference between fact and fiction in military affairs. The question is how this trend is going to be met by critical researchers and critical users of computer games. I have earlier suggested that Newsgaming, developed by Gonzalo Frasca and others, could be a constructive approach to create an alternative strategy to meet the challenge of the militarized game industry (Ottosen 2008). According to Norwegian media researcher Ragnhild Tronstad, Frasca makes a distinction between *ludus* and *paidia* rules. Frasca reserves the terms *ludus* for games that produces winners and losers. "Ludus rules are therefore rules that define a winning

situation. Paidia rules are rules that define or restrict the process of playing: how the equipment may be manipulated, for instance” (Tronstad 2003: 5). Through the website www.ludology.org, and the ideology of ludology, an attempt is made by Frasca and others to create computer simulators based on actual events such as 9/11 and Madrid, with alternative perspectives on current events. The hope is that peace researchers inspired by the analytical tools offered in the concept of peace journalism, and game designers inspired by ludology, can create a counter-force and promote popular games based on peace-building and non-violence as an alternative to the computer games coming out of the military-entertainment complex (Galtung 2002, Ottosen 2008).

Notes

1. With the expression military-industrial complex, I refer to the famous speech former president Eisenhower held at the end of his presidency, where he warned about a segment of US society constituted by a cooperation between the arms industry and the military establishment. In the speech Eisenhower stated that: “We annually spend on military security more than the net income of all United States corporations. This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every State house, every office of Federal government” (Eisenhower 1960).
2. Part of this analysis is also used in Ottosen 2008.
3. Many thanks to my research assistant Daniel Wærnes, who has made a major contribution to the basic analyses of ‘Army of Two’ and ‘Kuma War’. The full text of the analyses is available in the unpublished documents Ottosen and Wærnes (2008) and Ottosen and Wærnes (2008b).
4. The Bush Doctrine was announced later, in the State of the Union Address of January 2003, with three main strands: the concept of ‘pre-emptive war’; regime change in hostile countries housing potential terrorists; and aggressive promotion of US-style democracy.
5. www.kumawar.com
6. <http://www.kumawar.com/about.php>
7. <http://www.kumawar.com/partners.php>
8. <http://www.kumawar.com/operationspear/overview.php>
9. <http://www.kumawar.com/partners.php>
10. http://www.kumagames.com/kw2_free_game.html
11. <http://www.tv.com/story/6818.html>
12. <http://www.kumawar.com/Mission.php>
13. <http://www.gamesfirst.com/index.php?id=884>
14. http://www.usatoday.com/tech/world/2007-07-16-iran-video-game_N.htm
15. <http://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/2005/12/06/451448.html> http://www.gamer.no/artikler/iranske_protester_mot_kuma_war/20409
16. http://www.kumagames.com/news/history_2007.html

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