

Video Games and the Simulation of International Conflict

Written by Marcus Schulzke

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MARCUS SCHULZKE, AUG 1 2014

Video games are important political media, yet they receive little attention from political scientists. Even studies of the political implications of popular culture and new media rarely discuss video games. This is a serious oversight, which I hope to correct by calling attention to some of the many ways in which video games, especially video games about armed conflict, play a role in international politics. I will start by discussing how video games differ from other media. I then explore four dimensions of military video games' political significance. First, political actors use video games as strategic communications tools that project soft-power through entertainment media. Second, video games simulate recent and current events in ways that may help to construct, and in some cases reconstruct, those events. Third, video games create imaginary conflicts that explore threat scenarios, the efficacy of military force, and the moral boundaries of warfare. Finally, video games can have critical import when they are used to question government policies or the conventions of the military gaming genre.

The Video Game Medium

Video games tend to be marginalized in political research, but they are important when judged by the same commercial indicators that are often used to establish the relevance of other types of media. Video games can reach large audiences and generate enormous sales figures. Gaming franchises about war, such as *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Medal of Honor*, have been particularly successful, with sales of around 188 million units, 38 million units, and 36 million units respectively (VGChartz). Moreover, video games tend to require a much greater time commitment than other media. Single-player campaigns in war games generally last between six and fifteen hours, and most games include multiplayer modes that extend gameplay indefinitely. War games also give rise to active fan communities that produce game modifications, fan fiction, videos, and other media.

Video games become even more interesting when one looks beyond their commercial success and popularity to their distinctive mode of audience engagement. Audiences of books, films, music, and other non-gaming media are by no means passive, but audience participation in these media is usually limited to textual interpretation and involvement in fan activities. By contrast, video games force players to become participants in simulated events. Players of war games become virtual members of armed forces engaged in simulated combat and they progress through games by securing victory for their side. This tends to embed players firmly in a particular perspective, thereby privileging that perspective over others (Schulzke 2013d). Biased presentation is especially important when games simulate real events, or fictional events involving real countries, in ways that support one side against another.

Some commentators argue that video games' unique mode of player engagement may make them more persuasive than other media (Bogost, 2007). This is a plausible assertion, but it needs far more empirical testing. It is also critical to avoid making unsupportable claims about what influence video games have on players – a common problem in the literature on video games. Players are extremely diverse and are apt to experience and interpret video games in myriad different ways (Schulzke, 2013b). I will therefore focus on how video games present conflicts and the efficacy of military force, rather than the more problematic issue of how games may affect players. When analyzed in this way, player engagement in video games is important because of how it structures game narratives and reveals attempts at persuading players.

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Video Games as Strategic Communication

Organizations use 'strategic communication' to influence audiences in ways that advance organizations' strategic goals and promote their interests. This might also be called 'propaganda,' though – because of that word's strong negative connotation – it is best reserved for strategic communication that is manipulative or misleading. Strategic communication can likewise be characterized as an aspect of the 'soft power' that states and other organizations use to shape audience preferences (Nye, 2004). Video games are attractive strategic communications tools because they offer a relatively low-cost means of reaching audiences and tracking audience responses (Schulzke, 2012). Games developed for strategic communication provide clear evidence that the political actors that have traditionally been the focus of research in international politics take games seriously and see them as a valuable means of persuasion.

America's Army is probably the most successful effort to use video games for strategic communication. Since its initial release in 2002, the game, which was produced by the US Army, has gone through over forty updates and has been played by more than 13 million people (Anderson, 2013). It firmly supports the US Army and consistently strives to make players feel like members of it. Players undergo simulated Army basic training, learn about Army institutions and weapons, and conduct multiplayer combat missions as American soldiers. The game teaches players the Army values, forces them to follow Army Rules of Engagement (ROE) during missions, and presents them with extensive information about the Army's culture and institutions. These efforts have prompted an ongoing debate over whether *America's Army* is propaganda and whether it could be responsible for militarizing civilian gamers (see Allen, 2011; Salter, 2011; Schulzke, 2013a).

Violent non-state actors have also developed video games for strategic communication, thereby demonstrating that the medium can be used by various types of political actors. Hezbollah's *Special Force* and *Special Force 2* are, like *America's Army*, meant to make players feel like members of the organization and participants in its operations. The *Special Force* franchise displays a concerted effort to present a positive view of Hezbollah and to show its fighters as heroic and justified in their actions. However, unlike *America's Army*, which is set in fictional conflicts, the *Special Force* franchise reconstructs Hezbollah's battles against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in 2000 and 2006. The games are therefore not only examples of games as strategic communication but also examples of how games can be used to reconstruct real events. The *Special Force* series combines these goals, using them to reinforce each other, as the games' advocacy for Hezbollah is largely based on their power to tell the organization's version of what happened during those wars.

Simulating Real Wars

Many video games simulate events in recent or ongoing conflicts, and are presented as accurate records of the events they recreate. Advertisements, game developers' comments, and box art regularly affirm these games' high levels of realism and their capacity to give players an authentic experience of war (Payne, 2012). As graphics engines, artificial intelligence, and weapons models continue to improve, these claims of realism can seem more plausible simply because of how well the games are presented. However, claims of realism tend to be misleading for three reasons. First, video game simulations of real events invariably transform important details. Second, simulated events are embedded in narratives that help to construct those events and their political implications. Finally, events are usually shown from one side of a conflict, which players are encouraged to identify with, thereby establishing the perspectival bias I mentioned earlier.

KumaWar is one of the most interesting efforts to simulate real conflicts and a prime example of how video games may alter critical details of the events they recreate. The game is released in a series of free downloadable episodes that are based on recent military operations. In some of the more notable missions, players can fight through the streets of Fallujah, kill Osama Bin Laden, and help to capture Muammar Gaddafi. Although *KumaWar* strives to maintain a high degree of accuracy, many of the real events it simulates are secret and have few witnesses, thus leaving a great deal of uncertainty about when the game is altering important details. At times the missions are inaccurate in ways that may seriously mischaracterize real events, such as when players taking part in the raid to kill Bin Laden find him armed with an assault rifle.

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Few video games present themselves as accurate historical records to the same degree as *KumaWar*, but it is common for games to borrow heavily from real events or to resituate real events in fictional narratives. To take just a few of the many examples, *Delta Force: Blackhawk Down* is based on Operation Gothic Serpent in 1993, which culminated in the Battle of Mogadishu. *Medal of Honor* recreates the events of Operation Anaconda and the Battle of Roberts Ridge in 2002. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* simulates several real terrorist attacks, such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings, as well as special operations missions, such as the rescue of Captain Phillips from Somali pirates. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Army of Two* are both loosely based on the events of the 2003 Iraq War.

Even more important than what the games borrow are the ways in which they selectively reframe real events or combine them with fictional elements. *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* presents the Madrid train bombings as part of a much larger international terrorist conspiracy that must be defeated with military interventions in Yemen, Somalia, Dubai, Philippines, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Pakistan. In *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, the ruler of an unnamed country that resembles Iraq possesses and uses a nuclear weapon. Some games also frame real events in strongly normative ways. For example, *Medal of Honor* attributes American casualties in the Battle of Roberts Ridge to a reluctance to commit large numbers of American personnel in Afghanistan and shows some of those casualties being rescued only after the Colonel directly seeing the operation decides to ignore orders from his commanders.

Creating Fictional Wars

When contemporary war games are not set in or based on real conflicts they tend to create new conflicts that involve real political actors and that mirror existing international tensions. *Battlefield 3* and *Battlefield 4* imagine American military involvement in Iran and China. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* simulate a Third World War between NATO and Russia. *Call of Duty: Ghosts* is set in a future war between a United States in decline and an alliance of ascendant Latin American powers that want to seize US territory. These and other simulated conflicts reflect and reinforce conceptions of hostility and risk. They participate in the persistent analysis of risk scenarios and of potential future threats, which takes place throughout popular culture, in news media, and in government. Moreover, because video games consistently strive to create more dramatic conflicts, they take part in the construction of risks and threats by intensifying both (Schulzke, 2013c).

A common theme running throughout games set in real and fictional conflicts, but that is particularly strong in the latter, is that that conflicts are largely won through the efforts of special operations forces that use advanced military technologies, conduct operations shrouded in secrecy, and routinely violate international law. These themes combine to produce simulated wars of such intensity that any actions the protagonists take, no matter how extreme, appear necessary and justifiable. This tacitly legitimizes dubious actions that include intentionally killing civilians and detonating a nuclear weapon in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, torturing an informant in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, taking control of foreign military forces in *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, using white phosphorus in *Homefront*, and violating state sovereignty in virtually every contemporary war game. The clear message in these games is that wars have a tendency of escalating into existential crises that justify the abandonment of moral and legal restrictions on the use of force.

Critical War Games

Although most military video games seem to glorify war, some take a more critical attitude. *Spec Ops: The Line* is a prime example of a critical military video game because it questions the legitimacy of US interventions in the Middle East and disrupts the conventions of military gaming (Payne, 2014; Schulzke 2014). The game's setting is an American intervention in Dubai that turns out to have disastrous consequences for the city's inhabitants and the soldiers sent to help them. The soldiers make a series of disastrous decisions that result in tens of thousands of civilians being killed. This implicitly decries US foreign policy and the country's eagerness to seek military solutions to international problems. The game also highlights the human costs of war that are persistently missing from other military games by showing the game's protagonists accidentally killing civilians and suffering from the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Even games that seem to glorify war or that are used as tools of strategic communication frequently contain critical

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themes, though they are usually subtle. The *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series is skeptical of high ranking military commanders' motives and shows politicians finding a way of negotiating an end to a total war that could not be resolved with military force. *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* shows a potential defect of using autonomous drones when the American drone force is captured by a computer hacker and used to destroy Los Angeles. The white phosphorus munitions featured in *Homefront* end up inflicting heavy friendly fire casualties. Even *America's Army* has become the site of criticism, though probably against the developers' wishes, as activists have used the game's chat function as a forum for protesting the Iraq War (Robinson, 2012).

The presence of critical themes and opportunities for critical interventions in games makes it important to avoid reductionist analyses of games that focus entirely on how they distort real events or glorify war. As with other media, games are open to multiple interpretations and can be politically significant in different ways depending on which interpretations they can sustain. The significance of video games for international politics is therefore multi-dimensional and calls for research that can account for the many nuances of the genre and of individual games.

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VGChartz. <http://www.vgchartz.com/>

About the author:

Marcus Schulzke is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds. He received his PhD in Political Science from the University at Albany in 2013 with a dissertation on how soldiers make ethical decisions during counterinsurgency operations. His primary research interests are security studies, contemporary political theory, and the political dimensions of new media. He has published research on a wide variety of topics in each of these fields, as well as work on politics and religion, applied ethics, and video games.