

IR and the Future Wars of First-Person Military Shooters

Written by Johan Höglund

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JOHAN HÖGLUND, OCT 9 2014

Game theorist McKenzie Wark has provocatively suggested that the four freedoms for which the US fought during WW2 – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear – have now been replaced by a new set in the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. These are “Freedom from religion, Freedom from speeches, Freedom to desire” and “Freedom from security”. [1] His Orwellian observation is that “What secures the state is the production of insecurity”. In other words, the existence of a perpetual conflict, or the narrative of a perpetual conflict to be precise, creates a permanent sense of insecurity that legitimates any action taken by the security state, including the dismantling of civil rights or the pre-emptive invasion of other states. [2]

Since the beginning of the millennium, the first-person military shooter (FPMS) has arguably developed into the media form most adept at creating the insecurities Wark refers to out of various IR concerns. This article briefly surveys the role that the FPMS has played since 9/11 and then discusses the most recent set of first person military shooter games. This third generation of FPMS games depicts immanent military confrontation between the United States and an alliance between Middle Eastern Jihadists, Iran, Russian ultranationalists, and Chinese expansionists. The article observes that by imagining current IR concerns as erupting in intense warfare, these games both heighten the prevalent sense of insecurity and suggest models for managing present and future IR crises.

Past, Present, and Future War

At the beginning of *Battlefield 3* (2011), the gamer finds himself or herself shaking in a Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) along with a group of hard-talking marines. The vehicle stops at a roadblock to release the soldiers that spill out into the harsh daylight of Sulaymaniyah in Kurdish Iraq. As they make their way to the first rallying point, one in the group asks, “How does this part of the world get so fucked up all the time?” Nobody has a good answer, but the world soon does get ‘properly fucked up’ as insurgents launch an ambush against the group, involving the player in an intense fire fight that leaves dozens of dead (Arabian) bodies on the ground.

One might think that the sequence describes a scene from the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, or an imagined US engagement with IS (aka ISIS or ISIL), a group that has indeed attempted to make inroads into Sulaymaniyah. [3] However, the insurgents attacking the gamer in *Battlefield 3* are neither the remains of Baathist resistance nor IS, but an organisation called the People’s Liberation and Resistance (PLR). In the game, this jihadist group hails from Iran, and before long the gamer’s avatar is sent to Tehran where he wreaks great havoc, discovers a nuclear bomb, and also uncovers an unholy alliance between the PLR and Russian ultranationalists. As the game progresses, this contingent manages to explode another nuclear device in Paris, France, and to plant yet another in the US, this time to provoke a military conflict between Russia and the US.

Battlefield 3 was one of the biggest gaming titles of 2011, but its sales numbers actually pale in comparison to its main competitor: *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. When this game was released, it was not only the biggest game release in history, but the largest and most profitable entertainment launch ever. [4] Generating sales of \$400 million on its first day of release, and surpassing the revenue of the world’s most popular film *Avatar* by raking in \$1 billion in 16 days, [5] this game cemented the status of the first-person military shooter as perhaps the most popular entertainment genre of all.

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Interestingly, the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series has a plot strikingly similar to that of *Battlefield 3* and *4*. Again, Russian ultranationalists join with jihadists from the Middle East to provoke a third world war. In the second installment of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* trilogy, the US is even invaded by Russian forces. The player avatar first confronts the Russian invasion in a Virginia suburb, torn US flags waving from white porches in the smoky twilight of war. In the level that follows, he fights his way through the heavily damaged Hoover Building while Washington burns around him. A more nightmarish vision of the future is difficult to imagine (for the American public). The insecurities today have collapsed into virtual chaos that can only be brought into a semblance of order with the machine gun and the rocket launcher. Fortunately, the gamer controlling the military avatar in the game still inhabits the present, but it is a present where the possibility of invasion lingers.

The Past, Present, and Future Wars of Military Shooter

Since the late 1990s, termed the “age of anxiety” by Sarah Dunant and Ray Porter, the FPMS can be described as having moved through three generations that have explored three different historical phases, while at the same time commenting on the current geopolitical development. [6] The first generation appeared at the very end of the 1990s and in the wake of the interest in WW2 created by the release of Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). With the aid of games such as *Medal of Honor* (1999-2003), *Battlefield* (2002), and *Call of Duty* (2003), computer gamers could now step into the shoes of what George Brokaw has termed “the greatest generation”. [7]

Marianna Torgvnick has argued that the (refurbished) WW2 story became a way to comprehend the aftermath of 9/11. [8] Certainly, George W. Bush made frequent references to the US participation in WW2 when he tried to explain first 9/11 (a new Pearl Harbor), and then engineered the invasions of the Middle East (described as wars of liberation akin to what the US started on D-Day). The producers of the first generation of FPMS games could make good use of these sentiments, helping to produce the notion that war was not only a viable, but really the only practical, mode of international conflict resolution. As the US troops fought insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, *Battlefield*, *Call of Duty*, and *Medal of Honor* made it possible for stateside gamers to partake in a form of displaced and morally certified WW2 warfare that did not exactly resemble, yet metaphorically referenced, the wars in the Middle East.

The second generation of military shooters, including *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2006), *Close Combat: First to Fight* (2005), and *Kuma War* (2004), replaced the WW2 setting with present-day Middle East. These games located the interactive stories they tell to the time and place of the current military conflicts and also furthered the neoconservative agenda that was central to the Bush administration. As in the preceding generation, the only type of interstate communication imaginable in these games is the exchange of military-grade violence. In addition to this, a number of these games were either funded or developed by the Department of Defence (DoD). [9] As an example, *Full Spectrum Warrior* was first created as a training tool for the US army, and then reworked into a game to recuperate development costs. [10]

The intimate relationship between the entertainment industry, in general, and the first person shooter, in particular, with the weapons industry, the DoD, and the market has spawned new ways of understanding the ways in which games are produced and the work they perform in both local and global arenas. Many have agreed with James Der Derian in *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (2001) and have recognised that the media, the market, the military, the weapons industry, the US security state, and the entertainment industry appear to live in a form of symbiosis. [11] This is the vantage point from which Wark’s observations must be understood. The maintenance and possible expansion of the security state demands a certain narrative: “The work of the military entertainment complex is two sided. It has its rational, logistical side; but it also has its romantic, imaginative side. The latter invents reasons for the former to exist. Insecurities cannot simply be taken as given.” [12]

The third generation of military shooters, to which *Battlefield 3* and *4* and the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series belong, represents the most recent development of the imaginative side of the complex. Whereas the first generation depicted (and heavily edited) past war, and the second generation portrayed (a similarly edited version) of present war, the third generation is concerned with what Josh Smicker has usefully termed proleptic war. [13] In these

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games, the gamer is invited to actively participate in a future military conflict. This conflict is not understood as science fiction, but as a (likely, even desired) military confrontation between the US and Middle Eastern jihadists, Russian ultranationalists, the power hungry Chinese, or an alliance between these entities. In this way, these games serve to produce the insecurities that legitimize the security state. While the alliances that they imagine are certainly highly unlikely in reality, they manage to conflate a number of current geopolitical concerns and anxieties into a highly politicised popular culture narrative that involves millions of gamers.

This does not mean that the issues that they address and the anxieties that they probe and exploit are not real. In the wake of civil war in the Middle East, the rise of IS in parts of Iraq and Syria, the Ukrainian (civil) war, and recent demonstrations in Hong Kong, these games clearly explore issues central to IR today. However, these games also describe solutions to the issues they raise. The problems that these conflicts represent to the US and to the neoliberal West in general inevitably take the shape of violent conflict. It is perhaps not surprising that a first-person military shooter game should depict violent, military conflict (what else could they do?), but this does not make the observation redundant. In third generation military shooters, IR concerns manifest always and only as military confrontation. The insecurity charted by IR collapses into open confrontation. The fact that this confrontation remains virtual, contained in the digital space produced by the console, allows it to remain also an actual insecurity, but this insecurity is now firmly placed within the paradigm of warfare.

IR and the Future Wars of the Military Shooter

David Grondin is one of several to have observed on the pages of E-International Relations that there is a tendency within IR to dismiss popular culture. This dismissive position assumes that IR takes place in a clearly bounded public space and employs a lexicon untainted by the discourses that traverse and sometimes spring from popular culture. This position seems untenable for many reasons. Central IR players such as the DoD are deeply involved in the production of popular culture, and popular culture clearly informs the rhetoric of international politics. [14] Even if IR decides to disregard popular culture and the first-person military shooter, this genre will not disregard IR. With the advent of proleptic military war gaming, popular culture will not cease to define and resolve current IR issues. In the process, these issues are commodified for a generation that is moving away from the traditional media forms where conventional IR debate typically takes place. IR ignores this development at its peril.

References

[1] McKenzie Wark. "Securing Security". *Kritikos*. Volume 2, March 2005.

[2] It may be noted that Wark's argument shares intellectual ground both with Giorgio Agamben's notion of the "state of exception" and Naomi Klein's concept "shock doctrine". See Agamben, (2005) *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press in Klein (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Knopf Canada.

[3] Abigail Hauslohner. "ISIS recruits Kurdish youths, creating a potential new risk in a peaceful part of Iraq" in *Washington Post*. June 24, 2014. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/isis-recruits-kurdish-youth-creating-a-potential-new-risk-in-a-peaceful-part-of-iraq/2014/06/23/2961ea2e-defd-4123-8e31-c908f583c5de_story.html.

[4] MacDonald, Keza. (2011) "Modern Warfare 3 Has Biggest Launch of Anything Ever." *IGN*, November 11, 2011. Accessed 12 March 2013.

[5] Waugh, Rob. (2011) "Modern Warfare 3 hits \$1 billion in 16 days – beating Avatar's record by one day" *Mail Online*. 13 December. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2073201/Modern-Warfare-3-hits-1-billion-16-days-beating-Avatars-record-day.html>.

[6] Dunant, Sarah, and Ray Porter. (1996) *The Age of Anxiety*. London: Virago.

IR and the Future Wars of First-Person Military Shooters

Written by Johan Höglund

[7] Brokaw Tom. (1998) *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Delta Books.

[8] Torgovnick, Marianna. (2005) *The War Complex: World War II In Our Time*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[9] See Nieborg, David. (2006) "We Want the Whole World to Know How Great the U.S. Army Is", in M. Santorineos and N. Dimitriadi (eds) *Gaming Realities: A Challenge for Digital Culture*, (pp.82-92) London: EUROSIS; and Höglund, Johan. (2008) "Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter." *Game Studies* 8, issue 1. Retrieved from <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>.

[10] Höglund. "Electronic Empire"

[11] Der Derian, James. (2001) *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network*. Boulder: Westview Press.

[12] Wark, "Securing Security".

[13] Smicker, Josh (2010). "Future Combat, Combating Futures: Temporalities of War Video Games and the Performance of Proleptic History" in Huntemann, Nina B. and Matthew Thomas Payne (eds) *Joystick Soldiers : The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, P. 106-121. New York and London: Routledge.

[14] An interesting example of how the popular horror narrative informed the post 9/11 political landscape is Devetak, Richard. (2005) "The Gothic Scene of International Relations: Ghosts, Monsters, Terror and the Sublime after September 11" *Review of International Studies*. 31, no. 4. 621-643.

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