

Virtual Magic Kingdom. With a target market of tweens and young teens, the site beckoned visitors on a fun-filled virtual tour of Disney's five global resorts and eleven theme parks, where they could engage in free online games based on real rides, including the Haunted Mansion and Jungle Cruise. They could also chat, create their own avatars, and earn virtual points that could be redeemed for prizes when visiting the actual theme parks. McCarthy, "Disney," 6B.

32. Friendster, explained *Wired News*, "helps users find dates and new friends by referring people to friends, or friends of friends, or friends of friends of friends, and so on." Leander Kahney, "Making Friendsters in High Places," *Wired News*, July 17, 2003.

33. Andrew Trotter, "Social-Networking Web Sites Pose Growing Challenge for Educators," *Education Week*, February 15, 2006, 8.

34. Kris Oser, "MySpace: Big Audience, Big Risks," *Advertising Age* (Midwest region edition), February 20, 2006, 3. As columnist Nat Ives observed, "Marketers hope these sites will make it easier to start and track communication about brands among friends and contacts," Nat Ives, "A New Type of Pitch to the Online Crowd Mixes Pop Stars and Personals," *New York Times*, December 3, 2004, C6.

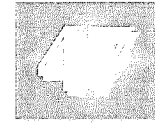
35. Jessi Hempel and Paula Lehman, "The MySpace Generation," *Business Week*, December 12, 2005, 86.

36. Ives, "A New Type of Pitch," C6.

37. Michelle Halpern, *Marketing* 111, no. 3 (2006): 5

38. Hempel and Lehman, "The MySpace Generation," 86.

39. The quote in Bourdeau, "The Kids Are Online," is from Rob Davy, commercial manager at Nexopia, which is based in Edmonton, Canada.



## Video Games and Machine Dreams of Domination

John Sanbonmatsu

The computer video game has emerged in the space of a few short decades from the shadows of "geek" subcultural obscurity to become the most pervasive entertainment medium in the industrialized world. In the United States alone, an estimated 170 million people—more than half the population—play video games (John, 2009).<sup>1</sup> By comparison, about 75 million go each year to professional baseball games, and 39 million play chess ("National Chess Survey," 2003). In 1980, the video game industry barely existed. Today, it dwarfs almost every other media industry. Sales of video game software, hardware, and accessories totaled about \$20 billion in 2009—twice what Hollywood brought in the box office that year.

If media theorist Marshall McLuhan was right, a generation ago, to say of the new mass media of his time, television, that "the medium is the message," what message is being signaled by the aggressive new medium of video games? What does the popularity of technologically mediated forms of play tell us about the social forces and myths shaping life today in advanced capitalist culture? Why have video games become as pervasive as they have? Might video games *play us* as much as we play them?

While some critics have depicted video games (as well as cyberspace and the new interactive digital media more generally) as liberatory phenomena—for example, praising them as spaces where players can subvert repressive gender norms by assuming fluid identities—others have argued that, far from being a utopian force in society, the video game is both a mirror of existing relations of power and authority in society and a powerful cultural force in its own right. Thus, feminists have observed that the content of video games mirrors the worldview of the White, heterosexual men who overwhelmingly create and play them, noting that exaggerated sex stereotyping, misogyny, and simulated violence against women are the norm. The vast majority of game protagonists and heroes are male, and the latter conform closely to the hegemonic norm of masculinity—the aggressive, dominating man authorized by the wider patriarchal culture (Alloway & Gilbert, 1988; Hill, n.d.). Few games model a range of female body types for players to inhabit as avatars: Women are White and

young (or exoticized women of color) with unrealistic body proportions and depicted either semi-nude or in clinging body suits (*Lara Croft*). Games like *Dead or Alive: Extreme Volleyball* are indistinguishable from soft-core pornography; others, like *Grand Theft Auto*, invite the player to exploit women sexually. Critical race theorists similarly note the prevalence of racist representations of people of color in many games. Asians are depicted as martial arts experts or sinister villains, never as political leaders, accountants, or composers; African Americans and Latinos are depicted as drug kingpins or prostitutes, not hard-working migrant laborers or professors of literature; Arabs are blood-thirsty savages and terrorists, never citizens of particular nations and cultures, or parents with children, and so on (see Chan, 2005; Leonard, 2004).

Video games are thus potent conduits of the dominant ideologies, myths, and norms of society (i.e., those most conducive to maintaining the status quo in unequal social and property relations). Like other forms of mass media, video games do more than just represent our world; they actively *shape* that world, conforming reality to particular ideologies, social expectations, and collective fantasies. As Ian Bogost (2007) observes, “The logics that drive our games make claims about who we are, how our world functions, and what we want it to become” (p. 340). The very immersive and participatory qualities of video games make them especially persuasive mechanisms of social indoctrination and control. Anyone who has careered down the virtual streets of Chicago in *Gotham Racing* or joined a platoon of Marines patrolling the dusty streets of a Middle Eastern city in *Call of Duty 2* can attest to the visceral power of the medium—the degree to which intense player involvement heightens the psychological connection between human and machine. While the industry disavows real-world connections between kids shooting virtual humans in the head and real-life mass shootings by children in our schools, that same industry, in other market sectors, brags that

video games are without peer among media in shaping human behavior and psychology. As Penny observes, “Psychotherapists employ simulation technologies precisely because they have effect in people’s lives,” while the Pentagon invests heavily in game simulations because of their proven effectiveness in conditioning soldiers to kill or to learn new battlefield tactics (Penny, 2004). Computer simulations are now widely used in corporate culture—by the aviation industry to train pilots, by hospital schools to teach surgical techniques, by the finance industry to simulate trading transactions, and by companies to train sales personnel in the arts of persuasion. There is no doubt, therefore, that the simulations we ourselves enact as ordinary consumers of video games are educating our senses and structuring our perceptual world too. The question is, what are we being “educated” into?

My argument is that video game culture “hails” or conditions us into an aggressive, socially destructive form of consciousness. By training the player into an *instrumentalist* conception of human thought and action—inviting him or her to conceive of the world as little more than an arena for demonstrating his or her own mastery and control—video games facilitate the ever more fateful intrusion of capitalism, technological fetishism, and masculine fantasies of domination into the fabric of daily life. At the same time, the process of “society’s ingression into the psyche,” as the philosopher Herbert Marcuse termed it, could not gain traction without our own tacit collusion or consent (Marcuse, 1968, p. 254). We ourselves seem to hunger for escapist forms of entertainment that restore to us, albeit only in virtual form, precisely that which many of us feel we are losing in real life—namely, a sense of our own efficacy and power in a chaotic, terrifying, and alienating world that seems increasingly out of our control. Paradoxically, however, the more we participate in simulations of life, the less involved we become in real life, forsaking those forms of speech and action that could *matter*.

## War Simulation and the Militarization of Everyday Life

To frame my discussion, I want to draw on Herbert Marcuse’s analysis of how media and technology serve to integrate consciousness into the circuits of capitalism and imperialism. Marcuse argued that the repression of human libidinal or instinctual needs by Western society yields ever more destructive forms of culture. As capitalism becomes more advanced, a gap opens up between, on one hand, the creative and productive forces of society, our potential to make the world a livable one, and, on the other, pathological forms of social life and behavior that are in reality quite harmful: mobilization for perpetual war, destruction of nature, and heightened aggressiveness in all arenas of life and culture. The result is “a suicidal tendency on a truly social scale” (Marcuse, 1968, p. 268). Such a system meanwhile requires a particular form of human personality or consciousness to maintain itself. Freud believed that the repression or taming of our biological instincts was the price we paid for our entry into society. The healthy human individual channels or “sublimates” his or her instinctual needs into socially productive activities—art, work, family relations, and so on. However, Marcuse argued that in the context of a pathological social order, society might cause such strain in the individual as to produce what he termed “surplus” repression, in effect taking the individual’s libidinal instincts and channeling them into socially *destructive* forms.

Technology is the characteristic mechanism of such aggression. As the distillation of an “instrumentalist” mentality, technology strengthens the life-denying system and effectively shields it from possible revolt by those whom it has stripped of power and dignity. Particularly, in the sphere of mass media, the dominant culture blurs together or integrates existential opposites—death and life, killing and culture, sadism and joy. The new “unities” then get sold back to us as commodities. As Marcuse (1968) wrote,

The brutalization of language and image, the presentation of killing, burning, and poisoning and torture inflicted upon the victims of neocolonial slaughter is made in a common-sensical, factual, sometimes humorous style which integrates these horrors with the pranks of juvenile delinquents, football contests, accidents, stock market reports, and the weatherman. (p. 259)

Marcuse’s framework is helpful in revealing the hidden meaning of contemporary video game culture. For, notwithstanding the seeming diversity of video games on the market today—for example, massively multiple-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), puzzle and educational games, driving simulations, sports and fashion games, and so on—themes of violence, aggression, and war predominate. In 2008, the three most popular new online games were *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Star Wars: Force Unleashed*, a futuristic battle game; and *Fallout 3*, a futuristic first-person shooter and combat strategy game. The other top 10 online games included the violent first-person shooter war games *Gears of War 2*, *Call of Duty*, and *Metal Gear Solid 4: Fable II*, a fantasy adventure game in which the hero fights various dangerous enemies; *Super Smash Mario Brothers Brawl*, a Hobbesian “war of all against all,” using popular animated characters; *Madden N.E.L. ’09*, a complex simulation of commercial male football; and *WWE Smackdown vs. Raw ’09*, an ultraviolent simulation of the misogynistic cable program, World Wrestling Entertainment, in which players inhabit the avatars of muscular male fighters and use extreme fighting techniques to kill their opponent—by setting their opponents’ bodies on fire (Freierman, 2008). As this list suggests, many of the leading games are both *masculinist* and *militaristic*. To understand why, it is essential to appreciate the institutional origins of the medium in the U.S. national security state apparatus, where patriarchal dreams of “virtuous” domination and control of others materialized into functional high-tech weapons systems.

The emergence of a permanent war economy in the United States after World War II, and with it the functional integration of capitalist industry and academic institutions into cold war nuclear war planning, led to computerization and a new culture of simulation. A watershed came in 1961 when academic researchers working for the Department of Defense at M.I.T. developed a digital game called *Spacewar*. Other researchers soon grasped the military potential of combining traditional war game simulations with computerization. In the late 1970s, the Office of Naval Research established the “Theater-Level Gaming and Analysis Workshop for Force Planning,” and by the early 1980s, the United States was spending many millions of dollars on computer simulations like SIMNET, which allowed dispersed participants to engage in real-time “war” over a virtual battlefield (Lenoir & Lowood, 2005). By the 1990s, finally, the Pentagon had built an elaborate network bringing together commercial video game design companies, university researchers, and U.S. military personnel to create what critics have called a “military-industrial-academic-entertainment complex.”

Today, the video game is the sine qua non of modern high-tech war fighting, an indispensable tool at all stages of conflict, from recruitment (e.g., *America's Army*, a MMORPG released by the U.S. Army in 2002 and since played by millions; Nichols, 2010) through training (e.g., *Marine Doom*, the military adaptation of the FPS video game, *Doom*, which teaches soldiers to kill unreflexively) to actual battlefield use. Among today's war game centers is DARWARS, a program funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) for the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and Marine Corps, which uses “webcentric, simulation-based trainers [to] take advantage of widespread PC-based technology, including multi-player games, virtual worlds, intelligent agents, and online communities.”<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, in Afghanistan, NATO pilots trained, perhaps, at PEO STRI

(the U.S. Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training, and Instrumentation, headquartered in Orlando, Florida) use computer-mediated weapons to drop real munitions on real people. And in Nevada and Arizona, U.S. Air Force pilots and CIA-sponsored mercenaries remotely operate robotic Predator and Reaper drones to launch lethal missile attacks in Syria or Pakistan, 7,500 miles away.

As Marcuse emphasizes, the form and content of technological artifacts and mass culture in a repressive or destructive order tend to serve the ideological and practical needs of that order. In this regard, commercial video games do critical ideological work in preparing the population for permanent war mobilization and military aggression, by normalizing and dehistoricizing state violence and demonizing “authorized” enemies of the U.S. state. While many Americans believe they live in a nation that uses violence as a last resort and then only in self-defense, the facts of U.S. foreign policy over the past century tell a different story, of illegal military intervention, counterrevolutionary warfare, support for pro-U.S. dictatorships around the world, and paroxysms of ruthless violence (Johnson, 2004). Yet military FPS (first-person shooter) games, including historical games depicting past wars, uncritically celebrate U.S. military and technological supremacy and depict America's enemies as dangerous savages worthy of extermination. The narrative content of many post-9/11 games in particular reiterates the values and policy assumptions of the so-called war on terror, mapping the world cognitively to prepare American soldiers and citizenry alike “for colonial exercises of spatial domination” (King & Leonard, 2010, p. 91). As Höglund (2008) observes, such games serve the interests of the U.S. state by constructing the entire Middle East “as a frontier zone where a perpetual war between U.S. interests and Islamic terrorism” can be enacted.<sup>3</sup> The result is a new Orientalism in which “the gamer involved in a military shooter set in the Middle East

is forever performing . . . strategic containment of the Other”—the dark-skinned barbarian perpetually threatening the innocent redoubt of Western civilization.

In sum, as Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) observe, the video “game industry, conjured into being by technologically adept and culturally militarized men, made games reflecting the interests of its creators, germinating a young male subculture of digital competence and violent preoccupations” (p. 257). What is disturbing is how widespread and “normal” such “violent preoccupations” have become, as young men and boys routinely play at war using forms of software and hardware that are functionally indistinguishable from the ones being used at DARWARS or in the Afghan “theater.” Gaming culture has indeed become the central mechanism for socializing the nation's boys and young men into an unthinking, pro-U.S. military perspective. Children and adults now play at war using highly realistic virtual weapons—the AK-47, M16A4, M1 Garand, Walther PPK, sniper rifle, and so on—whose technical specs and behavior in the field mimic the real thing. (Meanwhile, to capitalize on the fact that virtually every young male growing up today attains technical prowess in destroying virtual objects and enemies using commercial game controllers, the military has begun integrating Xbox and Wii controllers into the controls of its actual weapons and robotics equipment [Derene, 2008].)

What has enabled such realism and fidelity is the seamless integration of the private video game industry with the Pentagon. Not only do designers cycle back and forth between the U.S. military and private corporations, but commercial companies scrupulously model games on the latest in U.S. military doctrine, equipment, and weaponry. Some game companies even manufacture hardware or software for actual weapon systems. SEGA, which has a lucrative contract with the Boeing corporation to produce computer boards for a real tactical fighter plane, also produces *After Burner Climax*, which invites players to select “aircraft from

the F-14D Super Tomcat by Northrop Grumman to the F-15E Strike Eagle and F/A-18E Super Hornet by Boeing.”

In November 2009, Activision shattered the previous record for the opening of a video game (previously held by *Grand Theft Auto IV*) with its release of *Call of Duty 2: Modern Warfare*, a military shooter game that raked in more than \$300 million on its first day alone. *Call of Duty 2* was widely praised for its attention to “realism.” And indeed, to see the command protocols, infrared images, the tactical ballistics, and flight characteristics of the C-130 attack aircraft experienced by the player of *Call of Duty 2* side by side with those evident in actual video footage of U.S. pilots strafing real human beings from a C-130 during a night raid in Afghanistan is to be awed by the realism.<sup>4</sup> But as in other games, what counts as verisimilitude is technological fetishism, not historical or psychological truth. Elided in such war simulations are the actual human consequences of combat—loss, trauma, suffering, the deaths of children, the cries of wounded soldiers and animals.

Virtual warfare is no longer limited to the military battlefield, either: Civil society itself becomes a war zone for symbolically enacting aggression and playing out the destructive “scripts” authorized by the wider culture. Violence against women (a social class whose objectification and subordination is still widely sanctioned by the society) is an especially prominent theme in some of the leading games. Thus, the popular Japanese video game *Rape-lay* consists of raping girls and young women (e.g., on deserted subway platforms), while sexual violence is one of the draws of the *Grand Theft Auto* series (a role-playing [RPG] game set in highly realistic urban settings). On YouTube, young men from different countries post homemade videos showing their favorite ways of killing prostitutes in *GTA IV*. The players' avatars drive women in the game to remote, desolate spots in the *GTA* world, and then murder them in various ways—bludgeoning them with tire

irons, knifing them, shooting them in the head or stomach, burning them alive, drowning them, or dismembering them with a hand grenade. The bodies of the women writhe and fall apart in a fair simulation of the way a real woman's body might behave in real life, showing the detail that male software engineers specializing in "frag physics" lavish on simulated violations of the human body. The question here is not whether playing *GTA IV* directly causes violence against women but whether games that invite male players to participate in such simulated atrocities do not trivialize actual male violence against women—an epidemic in our and other societies—and legitimate and reinforce existing misogynistic attitudes. The evidence suggests that playing such games in fact does dull players' empathetic responses to real-world victims of violence, including women.<sup>5</sup>

Militarism and symbolic violence have become so pervasive that even ostensibly benign children's games are often inflected with technological aggression and masculine dreams of domination. In *Pokémon*, the player's avatar roams the world trying to enslave "as many of several hundred elusive creatures" as possible. "Once you leash one and it becomes part of your menagerie, you then train it and make it more powerful by carrying it around and deploying it in battles against other trainers" (Schiesel, 2010, p. C3). On the Arcademic Skill Builders website, meanwhile, children learn mathematical division by blasting away at a phalanx of advancing tanks ("Demolition Division") or learn multiplication by shooting at asteroids. Few children's games are in fact entirely free of militarization, and fewer from the drive to instrumentalize nature.

### Capitalism and Instrumental Reason

Even when the content of games is not explicitly violent, the medium itself conveys an educative "message" that instrumental

manipulation of the world, of self and other, is natural and socially productive. One striking feature of the computer video game is the extent to which the player's fundamental cognitive and behavioral modality is oriented toward *manipulation* of the representational world, rather than *receptivity* toward it. In this regard, the computer video game may represent the ideal distillation of what Marcuse and other critics have termed *instrumental reason*. By this I mean, first, the prejudice of the modern capitalist age that things in the world have no value outside of our ability to manipulate them and, second, a mode of thinking and action whereby qualitative experiences, processes, and modes of being are reduced to *quantitative* measures. Hannah Arendt (2003) observed these "typical attitudes" in *homo faber* or "Man the maker,"

His instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in his tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-ends category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; his sovereignty, which regards everything given as material and thinks of the whole of nature as [a mere thing to be made into whatever we wish]. (p. 364)

The roots of this "instrumentalization of the world" are deep—they go back at least far as ancient Greek culture and myth, which celebrated the "cunning" of human reason in its capacity to master and dominate the world. With the emergence of capitalist social relations in modern Europe, Nature came to be viewed as "thing-like," as dead matter to be manipulated at will. The logic of the commodity, which is the logic of abstraction and numerary—the "mathematization of nature"—meanwhile became the dominant perceptual template through which Western culture viewed the world (Husserl, 1970). Computerization in some ways represents the ultimate triumph of this

process, a victory of the quantitative over the qualitative in our encounters with the real. As critic Michael Heim (1993) notes, however, what we "gain in power" through the system of technological abstraction comes at the expense "of our direct involvement with things" (p. 18). We learn to think and perceive in fragments, to "outsource" our skills and consciousness to machinic entities, and to treat one another with brutal, offhand indifference. Reality collapses into solipsism: The world seems to organize itself around *my* needs and desires. The human and animal body—the true ground of all our experiences and ways of knowing—is diminished, as virtual reality leads to a sense of *disembodiment*.

This instrumentalist conception of the world achieves its fullest expression in first-person shooter games, where the subject's interaction with others is most likely to be represented by a disembodied weapon floating in mid-air, and in strategy games, which reduce history to instances of technological social Darwinism (groups of humans dominating and subduing one another on the basis of their artifacts; Friedman, 1999; see also Galloway, 2006). But instrumentalism stalks even ostensibly innocent games like those in the lucrative *Sims* franchise, where living processes—whether life in the suburbs or life evolving on another planet (as in *Spore*)—are reduced to a series of cost-benefit decisions. In the original *Sims*, the player lives in a middle-class White suburban neighborhood, shops, raises a family, pursues a career, forms friendships, dates, and so on, all the while keeping an eye on quantitative status bars that allow him or her to monitor the *Sims*' biological functions, social status, and so on. Life is reduced to a sequence of strategic moves to maximize one's individual interests, with the Sim player assuming the role of a technocratic manager over his or her life—"controlling and predicting and directing the behaviour of a very finely tuned market niche, a 'segment of one'" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 278). As J. C. Herz (2000) writes, "Everything is

an object that yields a measurable benefit when some action is performed on it" (p. G10). Other human beings are viewed in the same light, as a means for maximizing one's own self-interest. "Even having children is a means to an end," Kline et al. (2003) observe of *The Sims*, "since it is through the interaction of your *Sims*' kids with the neighbours that adult *Sims* get to know each other" (p. 276), and it is through such interactions that one builds the connections one needs to advance one's career and increase one's income.

The fact that such instrumentalist egoism is by no means accidental but is "formally engineered into the game-play" can be traced to the ultimate objective of commercial gaming culture, which is to integrate the player into the circuits of real-world capitalist production and consumption (Herz, 2000). Ideologically, the worldview of *The Sims* is in fact indistinguishable from neoliberal economics. As economist (and capitalist apologist) Milton Friedman once wrote, "Children are at one and the same time *consumer goods* and potentially responsible members of society" (Friedman, 2002, p. 33, emphasis added), confirming the hidden logic of capital, which is to reduce all labor, all living beings, to the status of *things*.<sup>6</sup> Today, the computer video game is the "ideal commodity" of post-Fordist capitalism, the paradigmatic form of a system that now requires "a ceaseless stream of new commodities with ever-shortening product cycles and life-spans" (Kline et al., 2003, p. 66). Kline et al. (2003, pp. 60–77) relate the emergence of the video game as *the* significant consumer commodity of the 21st century to the need of the world capitalist system to stave off systemic crisis. The information revolution, they suggest, made it possible for capital to circumvent the objective limits of an older "regime" of capital accumulation. Just as the post-1980s era of speculative finance capital led banking institutions and consumers to invest wildly in "virtual" or fictive financial commodities—credit default swaps and other esoteric derivatives—the need of

capital to colonize new markets led to the extension of commodity fetishism into the *virtual* realm. Where once computer games had to be tethered to bulky media like cathode-ray TVs or hulking, stationary consoles at the arcade, today they leap nimbly from cell phones and laptops to PCs and from HD televisions to the DIS (Disney Information System), heedless of spatial or temporal limits. Whereas chess can be played for free and has withstood the centuries with few modifications (and those rendered through folk adaptation), today's virtual games are expensive and designed to be obsolete within days or weeks, requiring the consumer to spend money continuously. Game content itself becomes commodified: In *Second Life*, players buy virtual clothes from the Gap or other mainstream retail chains, using real dollars, and hire real sweat-shop labor in China to mine virtual gold in *World of Warcraft* (see Castronova, 2005, pp. 170–204).

While the appeal of simulation games like *The Sims* or *Spore*—or *GTA*—is that they offer the player the illusion of complete freedom and power, in reality they tap into the thwarted libidinal energies of players and spin virtual flax into the real gold of the capitalist economy. Multinational corporate behemoths like Sony, Entertainment Arts, and Activision spend billions on marketing campaigns to manipulate the consciousness and behavior of the millions of children, teenagers, and young adults in the wealthy North who together make up the lucrative youth market (in 2000, worth up to \$164 billion; Kline et al., 2003, p. 221). As Kline et al. (2003) point out,

[When] one looks at the . . . economic, technological, and cultural forces shaping *The Sims* gamer—not merely as the participant in a . . . scripted and designed play scenario but also as a member of a population among which certain levels of technological familiarity are increasingly normalized, required, and rewarded, and as the target of a high-intensity marketing regime designed to elicit certain

levels of consumption activity—much of [his] apparent autonomy and empowerment evaporates. The player reappears as object, not subject, the product of a system . . . partially programmed . . . as much played upon as player. (p. 279)

On one hand, the player himself colludes in this process, knowing full well that the real game in town is the game of consumerism and profit realization. On the other hand, he barely comprehends the degree to which his own behavior, his consciousness, his values, his desires, have been effectively commandeered and subordinated to reinforce a regime of power whose destructive features are rendering his sovereignty as a political subject, his own consciousness itself, *obsolete*.

## Conclusion

The more ubiquitous the video game form becomes and the more lifelike its simulations of reality, the more its characteristic phenomenology comes to assume the form of a *paradigm*, a structuring set of knowledge practices and theories with the power to shape the way we see and experience the world. The trouble is, the more we paradoxically seek solace in the womb of the machine itself—that is, in a limitless virtual realm where the very masculinist and “instrumentalist” approach that has failed us in the real world yet retains its aura of potency—the more we flee the actual public sphere, that realm of appearances where *action and speech* might still matter. Political theorist Sheldon Wolin warns of a creeping “inverted totalitarianism” in which powerful interests rule not by whipping the masses up to a frenzied unity (as in fascism) but by turning us into quiescent spectators. Meanwhile, our own deep anger over being treated as mere things—by our employers, by our government, by the anonymous corporate bureaucracies we are forced to interact with every day—gets

channeled into socially destructive forms: addictive online behaviors, simulations of atrocities, real bombs, and missiles raining on real people in foreign lands. By thus adapting life instincts to the external needs of an unjust social order, the individual in effect (to quote Marcuse again) “collaborates in his own repression, in the containment of potential individual and social freedom, [and hence] in the release of aggression” (Marcuse, 1968, p. 254). The individual comes to bear “the marks of a mutilated human being.” For while the behaviors, forms of culture and play, and so on called into being and sanctioned by the system may be productive for that system itself, they are fundamentally destructive from the vantage point of actual human happiness and planetary well-being.

## Notes

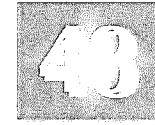
1. The original report was released by the NPD Group, a market research firm.
2. DARWARS website (<http://www.darwars.org/about/index.html>), accessed March 10, 2010. I am indebted to Nina Huntemann for her research on military uses of video game technologies.
3. As David Nieborg points out, the U.S. Army's *America's Army* MMORPG “has become a powerful vessel for disseminating U.S. Army ideology and foreign policy to a global game culture” (Höglund, 2008, p. 9).
4. Both the real C-130 footage and the simulacral footage were available on YouTube in April 2010. I want to thank Darius Kazemi for bringing this footage to my attention.
5. “In violent video games,” the authors of one study of the effects of violent media on children's behavior conclude, “empathy is not adaptive, moral evaluation is often non-existent, but proviolence attitudes and behaviors are repeatedly rewarded” (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004, p. 34).
6. South Korea, a nation so obsessed with video games that some individuals have literally played themselves to death, became a tragic proving ground for this theory of human disposability

when authorities there arrested a couple for child abuse and neglect after the parents left “their 3-month-old daughter to starve to death while they raised a virtual daughter online during 12-hour bouts at a cyber cafe.” The couple had become addicted to *Prius Online*, a game akin to *Second Life* where players engage in virtual work and virtual relationships, and “[learn] an extra avatar to nurture once they reach a certain level.” One police officer observed, “The couple seemed to have lost their will to live a normal life because they didn't have jobs and gave birth to a premature baby. . . . They indulged themselves in the online game of raising a virtual character so as to escape from reality, which led to the death of their real baby.” The virtual child, ironically named *Anima* (the Latin word for “breath” or “soul,” which in ancient usage meant a *living being*) flourished; meanwhile, the real baby perished from “severe dehydration and malnutrition” (Frayer, 2010). While one must be careful not to make too much of a single case, the incident nonetheless serves as a reminder of what can happen when flesh and blood human beings become subordinated to, and indeed absorbed into, the realm of virtual commodities.

## References

- Alloway, N., & Gilbert, P. (1988). Video game culture: Playing with masculinity, violence, and pleasure. In S. Howard (Ed.), *Wired-up: Young people and the electronic media* (pp. 95–114). London: University of London College Press.
- Arendt, H. (2003). The human condition. In R. C. Scharff & V. Dusek (Eds.), *Philosophy of technology: The technological condition*. New York: Blackwell.
- Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of video games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Castronova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds: The business and culture of online games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chan, D. (2005). Playing with race: The ethics of racialized representations in e-games.

- International Review of Information Ethics*, 4(12), 24–30.
- Derene, G. (2008, May 29). Wii all you can be? Why the military needs the gaming industry. *Popular Mechanics*. [http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military\\_law/4266106.html](http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military_law/4266106.html)
- Frazer, L. (2010, March 10). Baby starved as couple nurtured virtual kid. AOL News. <http://www.aolnews.com/crime/article/south-korean-couple-nurtured-virtual-child-as-their-baby-starved-police-say/19384636>
- Freierman, S. (2008, November 10). Popular demand: Video games. *New York Times*, p. B10.
- Friedman, M. (2002). *Capitalism and freedom* (40th anniversary ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Friedman, T. (1999). Civilization and its discontents: Simulation, subjectivity, and space. In G. Smith (Ed.), *Discovering discs: Transforming space and place on CD-ROM* (pp. 132–150). New York: New York University Press.
- Funk, J. B., Baldaacci, H. B., Pasold, T., & Baumgardner, J. (2004). Violence exposure in real-life, video games, television, movies and the Internet: Is there desensitization? *Journal of Adolescence*, 27, 23–39.
- Galloway, A. (2006). *Gaming: Essays on algorithmic culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Heim, M. (1993). *The metaphysics of virtual reality*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Herz, J. C. (2000, February 10). The Sims who die with the most toys wins. *New York Times*, p. G10.
- Hill, N. (n.d.). Playing with patriarchy. *Cerise Magazine*. <http://cerise.theirisnetwork.org/archives/9>
- Höglund, J. (2008, September). Electronic empire: Orientalism revisited in the military shooter. *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 8(1). <http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- John, Tracey, “170 Million Americans Play Video Games, Study Finds.” *Wired Magazine*, Aug. 3, 2009. (<http://www.wired.com/gamelifelife/2009/08/npd-games/>).
- Johnson, C. (2004). *Blowback: The costs and consequences of American empire*. New York: Holt.
- King, C. R., & Leonard, D. J. (2010). Wargames as a new frontier: Securing American empire in virtual space. In N. B. Huntemann & M. T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*. New York: Routledge.
- Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., & de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing*. Montreal, Quebec, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Lenoir, T., & Lowood, H. (2005). Theaters of war: The military-entertainment complex. In H. Schramm, L. Schwarte, & J. Lazardzig (Eds.), *Collection—Laboratory—Theater: Scenes of knowledge in the 17th century* (pp. 427–456). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Leonard, D. (2004). Unsettling the military entertainment complex: Video games and a pedagogy of peace. *Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education*, 4(4).
- Marcuse, H. (1968). *Negations: Essays in critical theory* (J. J. Shapiro, Trans.). Boston: Beacon.
- National chess survey reveals the truth about chess: Why people play and what scares them away. (2003, December 2). *Business Wire*.
- Nichols, R. (2010). Target acquired: America's Army and the video games industry. In N. B. Huntemann & M. T. Payne (Eds.), *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games* (pp. 39–52). New York: Routledge.
- Penny, S. (2004). Representation, enaction, and the ethics of simulation. In N. Wardrip-Fruin & P. Harrigan (Eds.), *First person: New media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Schiesel, S. (2010, March 19). Look kids: A way to slip Pokémon past mom. *New York Times*, p. C3.



## Strategic Simulations and Our Past

### The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History

Kevin Schut

#### Education and Historical Simulations

A growing number of educators are starting to champion the use of digital games as teaching tools.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who has played a substantial number of games probably already realizes that this new medium has several educational benefits. But aside from the obligatory copy of *Oregon Trail* (Learning Company, 1997) or other relatively simple and limited edutainment CD-ROMs hanging around the classroom computer, computer games have not been commonly used to teach in a systematic manner. Now an increasing number of voices are speaking up for just that.

In a recent guest editorial in *Wired* magazine, famed game designer Will Wright (2006), who designed *SimCity* (Maxis Software, 1989) and *The Sims* (Maxis Software, 2000), touts the ability of games to encourage scientific thinking. Likewise, writer Steven Johnson (2005), in his engaging book *Everything Bad Is Good for You*, argues that video games have been a perfect vehicle for encouraging increasingly complex thought patterns. This echoes recent publications in education theory. James Paul Gee's (2003) book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* is a very readable treatise on how good digital games model good learning practices. The book puts together a persuasive case for the ability of games to make meaning situated, to help create motivated, tailored, and incremental discoveries, and to encourage social sharing of knowledge, among other things. Although evidence-based research is still not available in large quantities—and much of what is available is methodologically questionable—Kurt Squire (2004b, 2005; Squire & Jenkins, 2003) is one prominent education researcher who has widely published about using the game *Civilization III* (described in more detail below) in actual classrooms. Although he

From Schut, K. (2007). Strategic simulations and our past: The bias of computer games in the presentation of history. *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media*, 2(3), 213–235.