

Ordinary Gamers - The Vanishing Violence in War Games and Its Influence on Male Gamers

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Whenever war and computer games are discussed in public, politicians and educators are mainly concerned about the gruesome brutality that domesticates violence into children's heads. Killing small figures on the screen and fountains of red bloodpixels coming out of the victimized bits and bytes make them fear that teenagers will become more aggressive in real life. This discussion is one of the oldest when it comes to criticising new media. The same concerns were raised about Greek tragedy, Goethe's *Werther*, television, comics, and Rap music. But when you take a closer look at war games, you will realize that the violent scenes that are shown there are not nearly as gruesome as in fictional games featuring monsters and vampires. The main reason behind this is that here violence will only be recognized as entertaining for the gamer (or any other audience in literature or film) when he (much more than 90 Percent of war gamers are male) can draw a strict line between the real world and the non real gaming world – otherwise he would be scared by what he sees and stop feeling comfortable. Horror games as well as splatter movies are turning violence so much over the top that everybody realizes that what is shown on the screen cannot be real. War games on the other hand try to be as accurate as possible: They try to emulate real battles. Showing too much gruesome violence would distract the gamer and the game could no longer be recognized as an accurate simulation of real wars. By just pointing at the most violent games, critics overlook that war games have a much greater impact on gamers' opinions and their world views because they do *not* show the actual violence. It is hidden behind complex simulations of real guns, tanks, jets, and squad tactics. This is why authorities are more concerned about a gangster game like *Grand Theft Auto* than a recruitment tool like *America's Army*.

When you are in a game – not necessarily a video or computer game – you enter a world that is on the one hand separated from reality and your inner thoughts and dreams on the other hand (Winnicott, D.W., 1997 [1971], pp. 49-64). In a game world, obviously, you can try out something that would not be possible in real life. You test out different options with the virtual environment; find adequate tools that allow you to control your surroundings. This is why weapons are so attractive in game worlds. They give power and control to the gamer. In real life, the player, most of the time, is not able to control and manipulate his environment which makes him feel like he is at the mercy of some greater power (e.g. the state, laws, the economy or even terrorists).

This aiming for control might also be one of the main reasons, why some American citizens surround themselves with shotguns and firearms. Consequently, the line between real word weapons and their virtual counterparts in games becomes thinner.

This induces a feedback loop of a culture that people can only sleep well in with a loaded weapon under their pillow, just in case a terrorist comes by. Games take the role of a discharging device where gamers can get the comfortable feeling of power and control that compensates for their fear of unknown enemies and terrorist acts in the real world. And this feedback loop is very difficult to break open.

As distinguished from fictional fantasy games, war games often try to simulate real battles that took place in the past. You can slip into the role of a Second World War soldier who tries to conquer Europe and fight Nazi Germany. You can try to win the war in Vietnam or fly a fighter plane in a modern combat in Iraq. These games do not try to be as brutal as possible; they try to be recognized as an accurate simulation of real war. They achieve this by simulating weapons, jets, and tanks as detailed as possible. When the gamer believes that a real helicopter behaves like the virtual one he flies in a game, then he might also believe other information he gets from the game. Thus, war simulations always try to tear down the borders between game world and real world.

By concentrating on the technical issues of the war machinery, the gamer also focuses on these technical details. How far can a rifle shoot? How many bombs can a plane carry? What are the limits of the radar? Is it better to equip a soldier with an AK-47 assault rifle or a Steyr machine pistol? When you visit the gamers' forums of e.g. "Counter-Strike" you will find a lot of threads where children and adolescents discuss such issues. They are so busy talking about technical facts that they actually seem to forget the political, social, or humanitarian issues of war. They are merely focussed on fighting techniques. But when you have a look at the gamers' age, you should not be surprised anymore, the youngest start at the age of 11 or 12 and the average Counter-Strike-gamer is 19 years old (Gieselmann, H., 2002, p. 85).

When they begin playing Counter-Strike, they usually have not yet discussed political and humanitarian issues of wars at school. During their adolescence most of them measure themselves with others, compete, and get their ranking in their group of peers. Consequently, their being merely interested in technical and tactical issues reflects the status of the society culture they live in and what values are taught to children and adolescents. If society tells them that they have to compete to survive in the industrialized capitalistic countries than it is no wonder that this competitiveness influences the way they play and later maybe fight a war.

In fact, when you visit the board of *America's Army*, a shooter that is produced and distributed for free by the U.S. Army, you will find these technical and tactical discussions between gamers and actual army soldiers (*America's Army* forum, online). Here you have a direct link: In *Counter-Strike* and *America's Army* gamers shoot with virtual guns that look and function like their real life counter parts. Their performance is so realistic that gamers can compare them and talk shop with real world soldiers. Accordingly, information and impressions they get from the game influence their view on the real world and information from the real world will be taken over easily to the game world. The border of these two formerly separated worlds vanishes.

Counter-Strike was programmed by two hobby gamers from Canada and the USA. In an interview they said, they went to their local rifle range to test several guns in order

to be able to emulate them appropriately into the game (Foreman, J., 2001). Pre-*Counter-Strike* first person shooters mostly showed science-fiction worlds where one had to fight against monsters or aliens. The popularity of *Counter-Strike* brought a change. Subsequently most Shooter-Games dealt with real wars in which the gamer could fire 'real' weapons.

The Non-violence of the War Machinery

When you play *America's Army* –that, in the USA, is available for 13 year old teenagers – you will not see any bleeding wounds, ripped off extremities, or tortured bodies. In *America's Army* you always fight on the good side (the U.S. that is) against the enemy terrorists. If you shoot an enemy, he merely sits down as if resting and after a while vanishes. You hear no death cries or see any dramatic animations – war is presented in a clean, almost sterile way. *America's Army*, also, is not a game in which you can excessively spray gunfire over the place and behave like Rambo going wild. You have to move carefully and work in a team to be successful. You have to obey orders and play by the rules. Otherwise, you will not earn honour or get an advanced rank. Thus, *America's Army* does not present war as a barbarian slaughter. It displays a highly sophisticated necessity to defend freedom and soldiers just do what they are told to do and kill without lust or anger. This is the way the Army wants young males to believe how the real war works and within the game invites gamers to "join their club". The game is an official recruitment tool and the Army does not make a secret of it.

In the 1990s, the intellectualized simulation aspect was even more common in war games. Flight Simulations were very popular. Games were named after jets and helicopters. They were called "F-14", "F-16", "F/A-18", "Comanche", "MIA2 Abrahams" – the machines were put into the centre of the plot, not the hero or the war he was fighting. The simulations often were produced with the help of companies that develop the real war machinery. These companies were able to promote their weaponry with the help of the game and the developers had a proof that their game was an accurate simulation. Most noticeable was the year 1997, when five simulations were thrown on the market that all dealt with the F-22 Raptor fighter plane. This next generation aircraft is developed by Lockheed Martin and Boeing but the budget was at that time challenged by the Clinton government (Gieselmann, H. 2002, p. 104). Actually, Lockheed showed young male voters how powerful its electronic plane was by putting them in the front seat of a virtual cockpit, so the gamers were able to experience its technical superiority by themselves. In simulations like "F-22 ADF" by Digital Image Design or iF-22 by Interactive Magic, the gamer had to read through some hundred pages of a handbook before he was able to manoeuvre vehicles correctly – same as in real life. This supported the feeling of being in a seriously simulated world and not just in a game for leisure time.

The war was presented like we know it from the pictures of the Second Gulf War on television. In modern combat jets like the F-22 (themed "first look, first shot, first kill"), you do not see the actual enemy; he is nothing more but a symbol on the radar. You have laser guided missiles that seem to occupy a surgeon's accuracy. The victims' tragedy is not visible on the screen. You only see cold metal on the crosshair and not

the “white in your enemy’s eye”. The enemy gets dehumanized, in order to prevent you from hesitating to kill him.

By presenting the game war in the same way as the real war on television and the real war on television like a war in a computer game, both worlds become aesthetically married to each other. The real war appears like a game – without any human victims. The game seems to be as thrilling as a real war. And because you see no violence on the screen, no politician or educator bothered about these clean technical driven war simulations.

But this sort of simulation was not very attractive to the mass market. Most people wanted to have fun and did not want to read a telephone book of instructions first. This type of war presentation also was not very appealing to the filmmakers in Hollywood. They missed the hero in the story. They needed drama, close combat action scenes and not nerdy technical stuff. Accordingly, by the end of the 1990s, the big game producers pulled the plug out of this deficit genre. Their economical success and their shareholder values were more important than cleansed war propaganda. Instead, they came up with a new subgenre: The World War Shooter.

Virtual Reenactment

Inspired by Steven Spielberg’s “Saving Private Ryan”, games like *Medal of Honour* or *Call of Duty* appeared on the shelves which all told the same story. The gamer slipped into the role of an infantry soldier who had to fight in the Normandy. He had to take Omaha Beach by assault and fight Nazi Germany. “Saving Private Ryan” tells the story of a small company sent out to find a single soldier named Ryan who had lost his brothers in combat. The operation’s success was critical for military propaganda. If they found Ryan, they would be able to show all the other soldiers that the army really cared for each individual man and that soldiers were not just cannon fodder. The army tries to take over the role of a family. Their members are “Brothers in Arms”. With his pathetic movie Spielberg drew another view on the army than films did before. In “Full Metal Jacket”, Stanley Kubrick exposed the Army as an organisation that uniforms the soldiers’ minds and destroys individuality. But Spielberg reversed this criticism and started a renaissance of the propaganda movies of the 40s and 50s followed by titles like “Pearl Harbour” or the mini series “Band of Brothers” that found their counterparts in games like *Call of Duty* or *Medal of Honour*. The new message was: It is a man’s duty to go to war, the nation is a big family and it is an honour to kill and to die for your country. These are the main messages of the new military propaganda games.

In games, military comradeship appears to be stronger even than ideological views. World War Two games also offer a multiplayer part in which one group of players takes the role of the Germans and another one that of the Americans. These multiplayer internet games can be fought on a local area network or online on the internet. Many gamers are actually that much dedicated to their game that they form up as a team to play regularly. These teams are called clans. Due to the fact, that the games still try to be a technically accurate simulation of the Second World War (but not as complicated to handle), many gamers also seem to become more interested in

world war history. One of the genre's most popular online games is *Day of Defeat* which started as a user made modification of the commercial game *Half-Life* before it was further developed professionally and produced by Activision.

Before *Day of Defeat* (DoD) became a professional game, spare time developers from the U.S. and Canada run the official website with a forum where interested users were also allowed to share military collectables and photographs and meet military reenactors. This forum was very much frequented by clans that were named after German SS-Divisions like the "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" (*Day of Defeat forum: online*). In *Day of Defeat* they were allowed to fight on the German side and the online handbook even recommended that the gamer should use the SS-Dagger (which was called a "showpiece") to kill his opponent by sticking it into his head. Accordingly, nobody really wondered when clans honoured SS-Divisions on the website or people offered swastika devotionals.

I discovered many other websites from *Day of Defeat* clans that did not hide their admiration for the German SS. Their argumentation often was that they were aware of the Holocaust and that they had nothing against Jews but that the SS in their eyes was a group of brave elite soldiers. They distinguish between war crimes and massacres committed by the SS and their sportsmanship as tough fighters, as they called it. For example, if you go to the website <http://www.ls-dod.de/>, you can see the banner of the DoD clan "Leibstandarte" with a sign that says "We are against National Socialists". Who is a national socialist if not the SS Soldiers of the 1. SS Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hilter? The clan members do not seem to care about this contradiction.

This argumentation is not exactly new. Indeed you find it deeply rooted in German postwar society. Germany's National Democratic Party (NPD) picked this up when they demonstrated against exhibitions that show war crimes committed by German Wehrmacht during the Second World War. This Neo-Nazi Party tries to revise the proven facts of the massacres, arguing that their grandpa's were no criminals. And World War Games seem to be a perfect playground for them to get in contact to young male players and indoctrinate them with their argumentation before they learn the true facts in their history lesson at school (Gieselmann, H., 2003, p.104). After Activision professionally produced the game, they made sure that no swastikas or relations to the SS remained in the game because they did not want the game to be banned. Meanwhile *Day of Defeat* is re-published by Valve Software as *Day of Defeat Source*. You still find boards for military collectables and reenactors on the website and forum members that use Hitler Pictures as their tag. The producer Valve Corporation does not seem to care.

Then why are young gamers so open to Neo-Nazis' historical revisionism?

Considering that Christopher Browning was right when he showed that it were none but "Ordinary Men" of the Reserve Unit 101 who in 1942 massacred and rounded up Jews for deportation to the extermination camps in Poland, then these ordinary men must have also been very ordinary when they stayed with their families (Browning, Ch., 1992). But Nazi war crimes, the Holocaust, and massacres were probably the most evil crimes in the history of mankind. In the view of a German 14 year old male gamer: "How can my ordinary grandpa be responsible for such inhuman crimes?" He cannot/ does not want to believe it. Correspondingly, it is not hard to think about how

easy it must be to convince these adolescents that their grandfathers were good fighting soldiers, who earned a lot of honor. This is also the memory that is created by most families who have SA or SS Soldiers in their family tree (Welzer, Moller, Tschuggnall, 2002). They want to believe it, and the war games which only deal with comradeship and fighting tactics, but not with genocide and massacres give their wish a virtual housing where they can believe their SS-uncles were heroes. The games' accuracy in simulating technical weaponry helps to focus their minds on technical and tactical issues. It is proof of the simulated world that everything seen on the screen must be true. Thus, by playing these World War II Games, gamers cannot come to terms with their past. Instead they are thrilled by the pixel explosions of a virtual battlefield that becomes the main memento of the second world war.

In fact German publisher CDV advertised its strategy game *Sudden Strike 2* with the slogan "With you we would have won every war,' says my grandpa." What sort of grandpa was meant in this advertisement becomes clear when you play the game. In the German campaign the player controls a SS Division to conquer Poland. When you think the advertisement through to the end: With the help of a modern computer gamer Hitler would have won the war and the Third Reich would still exist. But gamers do not seem to think that far. No one really complained about the advertisement when it first appeared in several German Computer Game Magazines in May 2002.

Evolution of the Soldier Image

When you compare recent World War Shooters to the older *Doom* Game you will find several differences, despite they both are referred to as First Person Shooters. In *Doom*, the player fights on his own against masses of monsters. He has no buddies at his side that he has to take care of. He is a one man army. The *Doom* plot was often copied to real war scenarios. But this type of lonely hero is a discontinued soldier model. It was popular during the Reagan era when the Rambo-movies were shown at theatres. Rambo was the prototype of a dumb muscle machine that was trained by the military to kill everything that moves: Very effective for covered actions in the jungle of 'Third World' countries but not appropriate to represent the intelligent and well organized army of the 1990s.

President Clinton had a different military doctrine. He transformed the army (again) into a world police that should fight for freedom and justice all over the world. The army should no longer be thought of as a group of aggressive Rambos but as a high tech machinery that tries to prevent civil victims with their smart bombs. The soldier was no longer an animalistic macho but a cool thinking engineer who merely followed orders and functioned like a gearwheel in a clockwork. The former mentioned technical war simulations of the 1990s supported the new image of the army and were in sync with the Clinton doctrine.

George W. Bush changed that. After 9/11 he had to galvanize the US society with a common destiny. Osama Bin Laden played to his hands since Bush was able use the fear of terror to justify a higher military funding and the cut back of civil rights for his homeland security program. And here come the World War Two games that make

the gamer believe that he can take part in an important battle that changes history. He also has a common destiny with his comrades. It is no longer the Rambo type of soldier that was promoted by games in the 1990s. It is the figure of the caring father who has to look after his company, his "brothers in arms". To free the world of tyrants like Saddam Hussein or Osama Bin Laden, you have to fight for America like your grandpa did in World War Two against Hitler. You have to fight, as if you would defend your own family. That is the new picture in the games that support the Bush doctrine.

Accordingly, we see that military computer games take a big role in today's military propaganda. As young males spend many hours in front of the computer screen, they become as important as films some years ago. After the gaming industry got rid of their lossy simulation business it can now not only support the Bush military doctrine with their games but also please their shareholders with higher profits. "Call of Duty 2" was by far the most successful game for the launch of Microsoft's new console Xbox 360 at Christmas 2005. As long as these games stay successful, the game industry will carry on producing them.

But these products could not be as commercially successful as they are if they would not trigger views and opinions that are already existent in our society. When the collective memory of the crimes in World War II is vanishing more and more and when mass media products are fuelling this oblivion, how shall new generations become able to process the circumstances that led to the outbursts of barbarianism in the past? By masking real violence with clean simulations on the screen, they will not be able to learn from the errors of the past. They will be damned to repeat them.

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