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Games of Empire

Video and computer games are exemplary media of contemporary Empire. Just as the eighteenth century novel was as a textual machine creating the bourgeois subjectivities requisite to an emergent capitalism, and as television and film were media vital to twentieth century Fordism, today digital play—a global industry whose revenues exceed those of the Hollywood box office—is a constituent component of both planetary hyper-capitalism and of insurgencies against it. And nothing is more central to games or Empire than war. In this essay, we briefly review the historical relationship between military simulation and digital play, and then focus on one instance of this connection—*Full Spectrum Warrior*, a dual-purpose simulation designed both as a training aid for the U.S. Army and as a commercial game. Such games are amongst the visualization and virtualization technologies of what Jordan Crandall calls “armed vision,” which, he argues, are essential to new global complexes of military power.¹ In their crossover of combat training and popular entertainment, digital war games are a major site of the “banalization of war” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as necessary for habituating imperial biopower to perpetual conflict.²

MIMENET and the Institute for Creative Technologies

Several recent studies of the Military-Entertainment Complex, “militainment,” or what James Der Derian calls MIMENET (“the military-industrial-media-entertainment network”) have delineated the shared genealogies of digital play and military simulation.³ At first, the dominant partner was the U.S. national security state. Pentagon funding supported the computer laboratories where *Spacewar* and other proto-games were created in the 1960s.⁴ By the 1990s, however, post-Cold War military budgets were declining, while commercial games had advanced so fast as to be superior to the Pentagon’s in-house simulations. A newly frugal military began to adopt or adapt civilian games for training purposes.

“9/11” gave this rapprochement a massive boost. U.S. military budgets shot back near to Cold War levels, but alliances between games companies and armed forces did not disappear. On the contrary. The military poured funds into co-designed simulations to anticipate the new challenge of the “war on terror.” Developers rushed to capitalize on market opportunities created by media coverage of terrorism and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq: Sony infamously attempted to copyright the slogan “Shock and Awe.” War game sales rocketed, and collaboration with the military gave such products the cachet of authenticity that console-warriors craved.

Some instances pushed the intersection of virtual and actual war to the extreme. One was the U.S. Army’s widely discussed online computer game, *America’s Army*, launched in 2002 to recruit young Americans with no experiential connection to war, but plenty to video games. Another, starting from a commercial basis, was *Kuma Reality Games*, an online gaming service launched in 2004, whose Web site reports the war on terror in a format mimicking CNN or Fox, and then invites paying subscribers to “re-live” an event in the form of “playable missions”—an attack on Al Qaeda in the Afghan mountains, the capture of Saddam Hussein or the assault on Fallujah; “Wherever the war takes our forces, we’ll put you there.”⁵ While *America’s Army* and *Kuma Reality* received most attention in the mainstream press, military-game industry overlaps were ubiquitous. The Department of Defense Game Development Community, a network aiming to connect “the entire community developing games within the US military” and supported by DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), currently lists some forty games “custom made” for military purposes, about twenty-five “off the shelf” products considered useful, as well as several “mods,” or game modifications.⁶

Even in this crowded field, however, the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT) occupies a special place. ICT epitomizes the intersection of military planning, computer simulation, film studios and video game developers in what Der Derian terms "a new configuration of virtual power."⁷ Based at the University of Southern California, it was created in 1999 by the army and funded to the tune of \$45 million to tap into the entertainment industry's high-tech expertise. A senior official, Michael Macedonia, describes its goal as "to produce a revolution in how the military trains and rehearses for upcoming missions" by "develop[ing] the art and technology for synthetic experiences" to a pitch "so compelling that participants will react as if they are real," thus providing a "quantum leap in helping the army prepare for the world, soldier, organization, weaponry, and mission of the future."⁸ The ICT hired talent from game companies and film studios to collaborate in this mission: the artists who designed the special effects for *The Matrix* and *Total Recall*, screenwriters for films such as *Training Day* and *The Fast and the Furious*, a designer from the *Alien* movies. The deal was clear: the military got sophisticated training aids for its soldiers, entertainment companies got insider military knowledge—and products to sell.

ICT creations include simulations with "branching storylines" to train U.S. officers negotiating with Afghan warlords; "compelling filmed case studies" of "interpersonal military leadership issues"; investigations of neurobiological discoveries linking affect to learning, aimed at harnessing "emotional valiance and training retention"; anticipatory visualizations of future war, such as the award-winning film *Nowhere to Hide*, "a sweeping vision of the Army's Future Force in action" depicting "vertical envelopment conducted against a fleeing asymmetric enemy"; "FlatWorld" which "allows users to experience virtual worlds—say a Baghdad street corner under enemy fire—without wearing clunky goggles"; and the Sensory Environments Evaluation program (SEE), "immersive virtual-reality tunnel that can re-create unpleasant environments"—such as abandoned bunkers filled with bats—"with astonishing verisimilitude."⁹ The aim, according to one ICT spokesperson is "to create veterans who've never seen combat."⁹ Not the least of ICT progeny are a series of game-like training simulations: *Full Spectrum Commander*, *Full Spectrum Leader*, and *Full Spectrum Warrior*. To understand these titles requires a short excursion into military doctrine.

Full Spectrum Dominance

"Full spectrum dominance" is a concept whose centrality to Pentagon thinking was announced in *Joint Vision 2020*, a planning document released in 2000 by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Its opening page declares the U.S. military aim over the next two decades to be "the creation of a force that is dominant across the full spectrum of military operations—persuasive in peace, decisive in war, preeminent in any form of conflict."¹⁰ *Joint Vision* goes on:

The label full spectrum dominance implies that US forces are able to conduct prompt, sustained, and synchronized operations with combinations of forces tailored to specific situations and with access to and freedom to operate in all domains—space, sea, land, air, and information.¹¹

Additionally, "given the global nature of our interests and obligations," full spectrum dominance requires that the United States "maintain its overseas presence forces and the ability to rapidly project power worldwide."¹² So "full spectrum" designates military force that can flexibly modulate its activities across different types and theatres of operations, scaling its responses up and down as its goals and circumstances require, shifting seamlessly, from, say, tactical nuclear options to guerrilla war, with planetary reach.¹³

The possibility of "full spectrum dominance" is in turn given by the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), a transformation in military practices occasioned by the shift from industrial to informational warfare. The possession of overwhelming strategic, operational and tactical advantage is determined by superiority in high technology, especially in communications and computing, rather than quantities of manpower or even equipment. RMA identifies a situation of "virtual war," fought out "onscreen," in which the enemy becomes visible, knowable

and destroyable through the mediation digital technologies, from satellite generated maps to heads-up display systems, and computer controlled and dispatched weaponry.

What causes greatest disquiet to U.S. planners, however, is the threat of low-tech opponents and "asymmetrical conflict." The NATO and Red Army forces that faced each other in the Cold War were "symmetrical" enemies, mirror-images, each with missiles, tanks, artillery, air and infantry, and tactical and operational doctrines, which, that distinct, fell broadly within the same plane of military logic. But the U.S. troops fighting Iraq or Afghanistan face "asymmetrical" foes: insurgents massively outgunned in terms of high-technology firepower, far less well trained, but retaliating with practices, such as suicide bombing, assassinations of civilian collaborators, and other forms of terrorism that seem, to imperial eyes, alien, uncivilized and inhuman. *Joint Vision 2020* identifies such "asymmetric approaches" as "perhaps the most serious danger the United States faces in the immediate future."¹⁴

Associated with "asymmetric" conflicts is yet another acronym: MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain). As Mike Davis has noted, Pentagon strategists consider the Third World city to be the "key battlespace of the future."¹⁵ The view that "the slum has become the weakest link in the American empire" is based not only on the disasters that befell U.S. occupations of Mogadishu and Beirut, but also on Israeli experiences in Gaza and the West Bank. If "the future of warfare... lies in the streets, sewers, high-rise buildings, and sprawl of houses that form the broken cities of the world," special training is required for the soldiers who will fight in such conditions.¹⁶ MOUT tactics are applied on a daily basis in cities such as Baghdad, Fallujah and Nadjaf. Preparation for such fighting involves incessant war games, physical and virtual.¹⁷

ICT's "full spectrum" simulations are part of these rehearsals. All are onscreen, digital trainers, modelling asymmetric combat: *Full Spectrum Command* aims to train company level leaders, in charge of about 120 men; *Full Spectrum Leader* works at the level of 30-men platoons. *Full Spectrum Warrior (FSW)* deals with very small scale squad level operations: the army intends it not to train officers, but to help soldiers understand what their leaders are asking them to do: "By taking the boss's job, Soldiers might deepen their appreciation for the correct execution of dismounted battle drills in the urban context."¹⁸ What really distinguishes *FSW*, however, is that it is a military-civilian co-development with two versions. The military version teaches soldiers how to make smart decisions in the nightmare of urban combat. The civilian version, released in 2003, makes this an entertainment experience.

Under the auspices of ICT, Pandemic Studios developed both versions, with Sony Pictures Imageworks doing special effects. The giant game publisher THQ Inc. later prepared the game for commercial sale. Civilian and military versions alike are playable on Microsoft's Xbox, with the commercial version later being ported to the PC and PS2. From the army's point of view, "leveraging Xbox" capabilities saved on special simulation devices, and capitalized on young recruits' familiarity with game consoles, creating a "potential efficiency in 'training for training.'"¹⁹ The army invested \$5 million. Pandemic and Sony did the development promising \$2.6 million worth of in-kind work. In return, they got the rights to the commercial game. It is with this entertainment version of *FSW* that we begin.

Mission to Zekistan

Turn on your console, load *FSW*; skip the manual, the tutorials, and the introductory video; jump directly to the first "mission." Here is the dusty, deserted, sinister Middle Eastern town, with its labyrinth of winding streets. Here "we" are, your point of view embedded in the midst of a U.S. infantry squad. Already barely visible enemies have opened fire from ambush; in front of you, a truck burns; its driver lies wounded; automatic weapons chatter; distant explosions reverberate. You are a soldier-subject in the war on terror: kill or be killed.

And this is all you really need to know. After a few mission failures you may return to the tutorials, or the manual. There you find the backstory. Zekistan is an imaginary Central Asian country with a "three thousand year" history "punctuated by violence and bloodshed." After

guerrilla struggle against Soviet invasion comes a civil war in which "Mhujadeen fighters" led by the charismatic "Mohammed Jabbour Al Afad" emerge supreme. Afad's regime converts the country to "fundamentalist worship," and persecutes the "ethnic Zekis, the nomadic mountain people that had originally settled the region," practising "genocide" and "forced sterilization." Thousands of "ex-Taliban and Iraqi loyalists" set up "terrorist-training facilities and death camps." Following a "devastating wave of terrorist attacks" across "Europe and South East Asia," U.S. intelligence tracks the source to Zekistan. After "repeated warnings and failed diplomatic resolutions in the UN," NATO votes to invade. Massive air strikes prepare the ground for infantry and armour to begin the "land war"—which is where you, the virtual warrior suddenly inserted beside a burning truck on a dirty street, come in.²⁰

This is a complex geopolitical story. But it is basically irrelevant. All the parts are familiar from innumerable CNN reports, news photos and movies: the political premises, the allotted roles, and the desired outcome predictable. In a prophetic essay, "Requiem for Our Prospective Dead," written at the time of the first Gulf War, Brian Massumi observes how, in a situation where "war and nonwar was getting harder and harder to tell apart" the legitimization of state violence operates primarily in "an affective register, through the mass media." This "affective circulation" depends on a series of conversions, elisions, and blurs. On the one hand, the enemy combines attributes of military opponent, despot, terrorist, thug, genocide perpetrator—omni-purpose evil. On the other, there is an implied identification between U.S. soldiers, media audiences and foreign populations supposedly being philanthropically aided by "our" side. As Massumi puts it, "All you need do is feel—a oneness with the prospective dead hero, and, based on that, hostility for the hypothetical enemy."²¹

Such is the universe of *FSW*. Zekistan is Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo; Al Afad, bin Laden, Saddam Hussein and Milosevic; his Zekistan Liberation Front are composite tyrannical, ethnic-cleansing, weapons-caching terrorist malefactors. You, the player, are "our" troops, at once defending the homeland and liberating oppressed inhabitants of invaded countries. One of the U.S. soldiers whose position the player adopts, displays on his helmet the letters "NYPD": New York Police Department. U.S. soldiers in Central Asia are planetary police. In a moment of scripted dialogue, after a ferocious firefight has left bodies strewn all across the streets, one of our infantrymen reflects aloud: "I think just by being here we help."

First-Person Thinker

The virtual experience of *FSW* is that of commanding two four-person teams of U.S. infantry: Alpha and Bravo. The player's point of view is normally from behind the shoulder of the sergeant commanding a team. He voices orders entered by the player on the console pad or computer keyboard—"Bravo, pay attention! Move!"—which are then executed by the fire team as a group. But the player's in-game subject-position is more complex than it first appears. One can switch from leader of Alpha to that of Bravo, and back again. Indeed, one can "see" from the position of any member of the team if it is necessary to get a specific line of sight on an enemy position. Even if a sergeant is hit, his team continues to operate and can carry him to medical aid. So it could be said that the player's implied position is that of a "ninth" officer, invisible and invulnerable, commanding both fire teams (and indeed in the military version this figure is included, and can move between Alpha and Bravo). But even this officer could not "see" from all the perspectives available to the player. Ultimately, the player of *FSW* has a trans-individual position, as the consciousness of a collective entity. The protagonists are Alpha and Bravo, a military team experienced as microcosmic group mind.

The player must complete a series of increasingly challenging missions. Alpha and Bravo clear streets, evacuate wounded, relieve surrounded comrades, discover mass graves, eliminate anti-tank weapons halting U.S. armour, call in air strikes on enemy vehicles, fight their way through a palace, a university, and an oil refinery, rescue captured aircrews, and eventually unearth "Al Jafad" himself. And all this, according to the in-game clock, happens on 24/09/2004. It's a busy day.

The necessary skills are rapidly learned in the in-game "MOUT Training Course." There are two types of commands: fire and movement. Fire commands select weaponry, targets, and the intensity of fire: "point fire" takes out specific targets, "suppression fire" unleashes a maximum volume of bullets compelling foes to keep their heads down or die. Movement commands direct the team to its next location, with the cursor showing exactly where each member will end up; teams can "rush," moving with maximum speed, or "bound," advancing cautiously keeping weapons trained where enemies may appear.

The player, as squad leader, doesn't directly fire weapons, but rather orders others to do so. The art of the game is the balance of fire and movement; the rapid detection of enemies; the location of covered positions with commanding fields of fire; and the interplay of support between the two squads; manoeuvring one so that it can cover the other's assault, all while managing ammunition supplies and navigating through a city. The process is remarkably cerebral, geometric, almost chess like. Contrasting *FSW* with conventional "first-person shooters" games Michael Macedonia calls it "a first-person thinker."²²

Alpha, Bravo and the Tangos

But *FSW* has its affective dimensions. It goes to some lengths to personalize the members of Alpha and Bravo, whose backgrounds are described in detail in the game manual and, in the Xbox version, in introductory scenes. Thus of Sergeant Santiago Garcia Mendez we learn that he is a "first generation American," born to Cuban immigrants who instilled "his strong work ethic and drive to better himself and his community" and that he is "a fiercely protective and loving father, a trait which comes through in dealing with his squad."²³ Cpl. Andre Ellis Devreux "Crawdaddy"—is an African American who had "a typical suburban middle class upbringing, complete with little league, summer camp and a trip to Orlando, Florida when he was ten. That was the summer before he lost his mother to cancer..." "Nova" Picoli "grew up in a crowded household with four older sisters" and joined the army to escape debt, and Private "Gidget" Ota is "the middle child of a single working mother in Honolulu." In a bow to Middle Eastern amity, the squad includes both Arab-American Private Asher Shehadi Ali ("although he finds aspects of his parents' culture fascinating and takes pride in his heritage, he is also a proud American" and considers himself "no different from any other Southern California guy"), and the "Caucasian," but clearly Jewish, Private "Philly" Alexander Isaac Silverman, is Alpha team's "resident smart ass."

One of the game's main tropes is thus that of "Band of Brothers," familiar in war movies. In their mix of ethnicities and classes, Alpha and Bravo are an equal opportunity paradigm. Of their eight members, three are Caucasian, two black, one Arab and one Polynesian. There are four high school diploma holders, one graduate from university (pre-law), two from college, and one from police academy. Though programmatic in its inclusiveness, this is actually a semi-plausible representation of a combat squad in the contemporary professional army, which is "in essence a working class military," enlisted from people who are "upwardly mobile" but from families "without the resources to send them to college." With "minorities overrepresented and the wealthy and underclass essentially absent," its composition resembles that of "a two year commuter or trade school outside Birmingham or Biloxi."²⁴ Alpha and Bravo are somewhat better educated, and more ethnically diverse, than the statistical norm, but not unbelievable.

This militarized multiculturalism is explicitly thematized in the game. At the end of one mission, there is a cut scene where one of the white soldiers tries out some hip-hop rhyme. "You are not, nor ever have been, black" remarks one of his Afro-American team. "Blackness is a state of mind, brother" he retorts. Sergeant Mendez then intervenes with a proper assertion of uniformed race-blindness: "There's only one colour in this army, green." "Philly" Silverman pipes up, "With respect sir, I think that's brown"—presumably referring to the actual colours of camouflage battle gear. "Yo, shit brown," quips another black trooper. In the imperial army, race and class antagonisms are subsumed, not only in the common uniform, but also in the shared, shitty grittiness of soldierly life.

The "buddy" ethos is sustained throughout the gameplay. When a squad member is hit, his team members cry, "They got Philly!" (or Mendes, or whoever). Soldiers comment on the heat: "I wish I had a pop, nice and cold"; the pathos of war: "It doesn't have to be this way"; inactivity: "Nothin' wrong with chillin' for a while, I suppose"; and become agitated if exposed to fire without cover: "I thought standing out in the open was pretty much what they told us *not* to do!" Remarks range from the salacious: "You should see my wife in the morning, just after she gets out of the shower"; the properly domestic: "Should be a letter waiting for you from your family"; the derogatory: "This place sure is fucked up in all kinds of ways"; and the virtually self-reflexive: "When we get back to base, I'm going to whip your ass on the Xbox."

The enemy is, of course, different. Apart from the Osama bin Laden surrogate, "Mohammed Jabbour Al Afad," they are nameless, and mostly faceless. At the beginning there is a fast cut scene displaying masked figures opening a crate of rocket launchers as the U.S. troops roll into town. Other than this, the Zekistan Liberation Army always appears from the perspective of its U.S. opponents, as rather rudimentary figures, usually in the mid to far distance, at the end of streets, behind sandbags, or on rooftops spraying fire down the street. Scarves often hide their faces. When they are spotted, Alpha and Bravo identify them as "Zekes," "Motherfuckers," or, most often, "Tangos," from "T" for "target." They appear with small icons above their heads indicating whether they are "under cover," "engaged" (that is, pinned down by incoming fire), or dead—marked with skull and crossbones. They thus do seem like targets on a firing range. When they die, and of course they must die, nearly all of them, for the player to succeed, they crumple into inert heaps. As Alpha and Bravo pass by, they occasionally give them an epithet: "Should have done something else today, Zeke."

Armed Vision

FSW features aspects of contemporary warfare beyond simply the firepower and discipline of U.S. light infantry, aspects specific to new media of visualization and virtualization. In an incisive analysis of "armed vision," Jordan Crandall posits that in the history of visual technologies such as photography, cinema and video, one can distinguish two major perspectives: horizontal and vertical.²⁵ The horizontal orientation is set at "ground level" and concerned with "the advance or retreat of sightlines and perspectives along the terrestrial expanse of the earth." In contrast, the "vertical," or "aerial," orientation is concerned with looking downward rather than sideways. The vertical dimension is in origin an optic of surveillance and command:

Mapping changes and discovering patterns, the objective was to understand what moves (troops? construction materials?), how it moves, and how that movement can be intercepted or exploited.²⁶

It adds to our visual experience an orientation that is somehow ultimately not "for us," but rather is the perspective of a militarized, machinic eye involved in "modes of positioning, tracking, identifying, predicting, targeting, and intercepting/containing."²⁷

Each loading of *FSW* opens with a vertical perspective, a view as if from a surveillance satellite: first the earth from space; then a "continental" view of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia; then a city image; finally zooming to an overhead view of streets where combat is occurring. These overhead views are granular, with static interference, a marked mediated techno-vision, the optic of military command, scoping out the battlefield from an "eye in the sky." Then you are down at street level with Alpha and Bravo, in the composite collective eye of the squad, making your way through Zekistan. Here you progress horizontally, street by street, building by building, corner by corner. The virtual urban landscape is lavish. Papers blow on the streets, burnt out cars litter the crossroads, smoke from conflagrations billows thickly upward, crows and cats rise and run as your squad passes. The squalor of debris, the beauty of tilework in Islamic palaces, the colours of flaming sunsets glimpsed at the end of streets, all are rendered in gorgeous detail. But be entranced at your peril. Simply finding a designated objective can be a

challenge. And since Alpha and Bravo are often outnumbered and always moving in the open, in face of waiting enemies, vulnerable to ambush, it is only by getting some advance warning. In other words, by invoking vertical vision.

At any moment, pressing key "E" gives the player, as team leader, a view of his Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver. Here you see a city map, with a view of several blocks surrounding your current position; the two teams are marked; your field of view shows as a green cone; medical aid points and objectives are displayed; and enemies appear as red icons. Additionally, you can request helicopter reconnaissance. This invocation vertical vision is especially strongly marked because the helicopter pilot, although only present as a radio voice, is the one persistent female presence in the game (the only other women are medics and aid workers who appear fleetingly). She is (going by the accent) a black American: "Louise." So the move from the horizontal orientation of the grunt infantry on the ground to the vertical, aerial dimension breaks the game's gender code.

If a flight is available, the pilot confirms her approach via radio. The helicopter can be heard, and, in some of the most striking visual moments in the game, seen, circling in the sky through gaps in the city skyline. As she passes overhead, Louise marks enemies on the GPS, and informs the player whether their presence is heavy or light: "Tangos galore," "Tangos like ants on soda," "Targets up." Such flights are, however, limited: use too many, and Louise may respond to your panic-stricken request with a cool, "Sorry Charlie, that's a negative."

Sometimes fire can be summoned from the sky. A crucial role for Alpha and Bravo is not directly defeating the Tangos in firefights but spotting for devastating air or artillery strikes. Here the role of the infantry is thus, in Crandall's words, "to act as a direct human interface to a machine that cannot yet fully interface with all of the ambiguities of a material world"—a function performed in-game by placing a special green bomb icon on target. After a few moments the screen is rocked with spectacular explosions, providing a pyrotechnic gratification acknowledged by one virtual soldier's scripted comment: "Ahh never get tired o' that."

This interplay of vertical and horizontal is of course integral to "full spectrum" doctrine, which depends on the combination and cooperation of airforce and army into a single invincible striking power. The first Gulf War was christened the "Nintendo War," because it introduced television watchers to game-like perspectives of gunsight and bombnose cameras. *FSW* takes things further, by offering both vertical and horizontal perspectives on war, in a situation where the role of the human horizontal sight is to vector in the apocalyptic power released from the vertical heights. We experience, virtually, what Crandall terms "the integration of analyst, operator, database, and weapons network into a smart image... unlike anything we understand in civilian perspectives." *FSW* is one of what he calls the "new kinds of militarized formats" in visual media, fusing "technological innovation and the erotic charge of combat" in "renewed, compulsive militarization."²⁸

The Big Lie

That videogames are "too violent" is a common claim. *Full Spectrum Warrior* is perhaps not violent enough. As we've noted, the game is cerebral, almost chess like. And the price of failure is remarkably low. If soldiers in Alpha and Bravo are lightly injured, "blood" spatters across the screen. If one is more seriously wounded, he falls, and will, unaided, eventually die. He can, however, be carried by his squad back to a Casualty Evacuation point, where healing is almost immediate. The wounded man staggers to his feet to upbeat comments: "You've still got your looks," "Wow, am I glad to see you again sarge!" "He's one tough son-of-a-bitch."

If two or more soldiers are seriously wounded, the mission ends, abruptly. There is a sudden cut to cinematic animations of your team falling to enemy fire. Soldiers jerk back, crumple to the ground, or are lifted off their feet by the impact of bullets and hurled through the air in balletic arcs; fountains of scarlet blood jet from the punctures stitched across their bodies. The animation and game physics involved in these moments is extraordinary. Bodies fall realistically in the precise situation where they were hit. So, for example, an infantryman seeking

cover amongst a stack of crates is caught in a burst of machine gun fire; not only is the chipping of containers by bullets striking them and ricocheting around visible, but the unfortunate soldier's cheek slams against the side of the crate as he is hit, his head snapping back convulsively before he slides to the ground.

All this, however, only lasts an instant. Almost before the player registers that they have led Alpha and Bravo to death and disaster, a voice-over comes up with some good advice: "Always use cover." Then the "Mission Over" screen appears—with the "Return to Last Save" option, which restarts the game at the most recent of the designated save points scattered through its course. This may mean having to repeat several minutes of manoeuvres, and re-kill a number of "Zekes." Let this happen a few times and whatever horror you may have felt at the deaths of your men turns to exasperation. It is essential to *FSW* that time can be reversed, and every mistake undone; the "save-die-restart" sequence makes Alpha and Bravo immortal.²⁹ This is, of course, the big lie of war as game.

There are other, minor, subsidiary, lies in *FSW*'s virtual war. That missions end if you have more than one serious casualty reflects the U.S. military's well-known concern for (and success in) minimizing politically volatile losses to its highly trained post-Fordist techno-soldiers ("The US Army has zero tolerance for casualties!" the manual sternly declares). But it also means you never witness the annihilation of numbers of your own troops. And—need it be said?—this is war where no one lies for hours shot in the abdomen shrieking for their mother; has their testicles blown off; or wakes in hospital finding they have lost a limb. It is war without mutilation or post-traumatic stress disorder. It is also war without moral dilemmas. There are almost no civilians. The miracle of Zekistan is streets are deserted, and houses empty, apart from the ubiquitous Tangos (who all die instantaneously when hit, vitiating problems of prison guards or enemies wounded). Air and artillery strikes do not hit wedding parties. There is no collateral damage. War is peace.

HA2P1PY9TUR5TLE: Decline and Fall?

"Based on an actual training aid for the US Army," declares the *FSW* packaging. Immediately after release it was discovered that entering a "cheat code,"—"HA2P1PY9TUR5TLE"—into the Xbox commercial game unlocked the army version (this option was disabled when the game was ported to the PC and PS2, suggesting the disclosure was unwelcome to the military). As many reviews of the game attest, a major attraction of *FSW* is that it gives gamers a glimpse, if not of real war, at least of real military virtuality.

The military version plays like the commercial game, but with significant differences. It spans two theatres of war, the Middle East and the Balkans. The personalization of and banter between soldiers is removed. So are much of the graphical polish, special lighting, blur effects and visual detail. There are no cut scenes. The audio quality is markedly lower. The rich musical score that added excitement and intrigue is gone. Apart from faint wind and distant gunfire, all is quiet in the streets—with one exception: civilians speak to your soldiers more often. In the commercial game this happens very occasionally, and is entirely benign: in one cut scene Arab-American Private Shehadi gets directions from a friendly "Zeke" (after a lengthy dialogue in Arabic, the Sergeant asks "What did he say?" "North," replies Shehadi). In the military version, there is some of this fraternization—"Come this way, America"—but also many expressions of hostility: "Filthy American pigs!" "This is our home, capitalist pigs," or, when the U.S. troops are facilitating elections, "Go home, don't vote." While the civilian game presents a war of liberation, the military version more accurately familiarizes U.S. soldiers with being unpopular.

Less spectacular than the civilian version, the military game is harder to survive. Cover is scantier; fewer onscreen icons give information about the vulnerability of friends and foes; there are more civilians, so identifying "hostiles" is harder. The enemy attacks more aggressively, from a greater variety of directions; the awkward behaviour of weapons like grenades is more accurately represented. Rather than a "global positioning system," the soldier gets a crude hand-drawn map of the missions, although the interplay between "vertical" and "horizontal" vision is

preserved by the ability to lift the camera hundreds of feet into the air, seeing the entire map from bird's eye view in real time. It is possible to modify the quantity and aggressiveness of opposing force and civilians, and also to change the capacities of one's own troops, altering their accuracy and reaction times. Wounded soldiers cannot be carried to evacuation points: you gather their weapons and ammunition and move on. On balance, the military version is a sparer, but more complex and challenging simulation than the civilian game.

But perhaps not complex and challenging enough. In 2005 scandal erupted around *FSW* when Taxpayers for Common Sense, an organization critical of the Bush regime's military spending, suggested Sony, Pandemic and THQ had obtained massive public subsidization for a commercial venture that fell far short of military training needs. News reports suggested *FSW* should be reinterpreted as "Full Spectrum Welfare" and that the army had been "out-gamed."³⁰ The main source was a whistle-blowing graphic artist, Andrew Paquette, who claims he was fired from the *FSW* development team after writing repeated memos warning that the game would not be realistic enough for the army. His main objections concerned the inadequate modelling of the urban environments it purports to represent. Most of the city buildings, Paquette pointed out, are just facades: those that have interiors can be entered only on one level. Hence what is usually considered the worst parts of urban combat—floor-to-floor house clearing with enemies lurking in cellars or upper floors—simply doesn't exist. "What they did," Paquette said, "was give the Fisher-Price version of a city."³¹ Suing both Sony and Pandemic for wrongful dismissal, he said the companies "didn't pay attention to what the army needed," and that their attitude was "We don't care about the army, we're making money off this."³² These complaints were echoed from other sources. Taxpayers for Common Sense unearthed internal ICT e-mails warning "we have a huge problem on our hands" because the army "was not satisfied."³³ Military personnel involved in training corroborated this, saying that the game was "incredibly shallow," and had a "very limited set of situational challenges."³⁴ ICT spokespeople recouped the situation by ceding ground, declaring *FSW* a useful experiment that would improve other training aids. "We have learned a lot," said Macedonia, "and that's the purpose of research—to learn those types of things, not to deliver a product."³⁵

Set against the daily death toll in Iraq and Afghanistan (where insurgents now refuse the sort of combat practised in *FSW*, resorting instead to tactics of destabilization and mayhem) the scandal around the ICT expenditures seems trivial. But it provides an insight into the Achilles heel of "full spectrum" doctrine. The Iraqi insurgents or the Taliban cannot better the U.S. Army in the field. But they may spend it into the ground. The low-casualty (for the United States), high-technology strategy on which the Pentagon depends is monstrously expensive. Empire's vulnerability is not battlefield defeat, but economic crisis caused by the collapsing overhang of military budgets. The heist of \$5 million from the U.S. Army by Pandemic, Sony, THQ and Microsoft is dwarfed by the war profiteering of corporations such as Halliburton, but it offers a microcosm of imperial decline and fall.

The Banalization of War

In the short term, however, *Full Spectrum Warrior* was a success. The commercial game earned enthusiastic reviews and industry awards, sold about a million units, and grossed \$50 million (U.S.). Pandemic will release a sequel, *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* in 2006. And despite the furor over funding *FSW*, on November 20, 2004, the army awarded ICT a new five-year, \$100 million contract. Military-civilian game collaborations are an aspect of what Paul Virilio calls "pentagon-capitalism."³⁶ Such partnerships contain the possibilities of boondoggles such as occurred with *FSW*. Yet, in the larger imperial perspective, even this may be considered as money well spent. Here we should return to the notion of "full spectrum dominance." Implicit in this doctrine is a lucid understanding of war as a project with not only military, but also ideological and political dimensions. Maintaining an imperial populace's will to fight is as important as battlefield dominance. In a U.S. context, this is reflected in neoconservative determination to cure the "Vietnam syndrome" of peacenik disaffection to which historic

humiliation in Southeast Asia is ascribed. From this point of view, whatever the success or failure of simulators such as *FSW* in preparing soldiers for Baghdad, their role in habituating civilians to perpetual war may be as or more important.

To suggest games such as *FSW* prepare not only soldiers, but also civilians, for war is, however, to enter a complex, and frustrating, debate about the links from virtual to actual. The success of military simulators in improving soldiers' battlefield performance—for example, learning to fire swiftly and accurately—have lead video game critics such as Lt. Col. Grossman to claim first-person shooters constitute informal "training to kill."³⁷ Such assertions, widespread after the Columbine massacres, have been revived by the demagogic lawyer Jim Thompson, who while seeking publicity for victims of alleged video game-induced shootings, denounced ICT as a "tax payer rip off" responsible for "training" terrorists.³⁸

We find these uni-linear media-effects claims tempting but unconvincing. Media audiences are comprised of subjectivities that are multiplicitous, assembled in manifold and contradictory social formations. Positions inscribed in games (or other media) are not necessarily replicated by players (or audiences). Simulators in military training are one relay among the myriad circuits of the "war machine"—part of what we can loosely term "diffuse barracks." From this perspective, virtual violence is part of an ensemble of practices aimed at dis-inhibiting, disciplining and directing deadly aggression, ferociously etching direct lines from simulation to actuality. The idea that these conditions are replicated every time a shooter is played in a civilian living room is naive—but that they are a component of a broader ensemble of "affective circulations" that ready bodies and bolster legitimation for war is less so.³⁹ For when the same identities and assumptions are reiterated by numerous media channels, and asserted by many institutions, the chances for their successful reproduction rise. In societies on a war footing, militarization becomes part of the ambience of everyday life. We enter a version of "the society of control" where the boundary between barracks and the living room imploded:⁴⁰ hatred towards an officially designated enemy, triumph in his death, or at least indifference towards its necessity, vigilance for his wiles, acceptance of casualties in the course of struggle, uncritical loyalty for "our" side, all become values promulgated across a wide social bandwidth, on a "full spectrum" from the President's podium to daily news reports. In the era of "war on terror" this is the situation in the heartlands of Empire, and especially in post-9/11 United States.

In these settings, games such as *FSW* generate subjectivities to which war—and a very selective rendering of it, as we have seen—is increasingly normalized. Such games prompt not atrocities of gothic delinquency, but we'd wager, of loyal support for the President and the troops. Their virtualities enter a polyphonic affective, visual, and ideological chorus supporting militarization. Dissonance is still possible.⁴¹ The persistence of anti-war activism within digital game culture itself is a potent reminder that ludic militarism is contested.⁴² But the battle song is loud, the opponents asymmetrical. Referring to the process of socializing populations for participation in and endurance of endless imperial counterinsurgency conflicts, Hardt and Negri refer to a "banalization of war." This phrase, which echoes Hannah Arendt, conveys a situation in which ongoing war is a normalized condition in which the enemy is regularly depicted as "an absolute threat to the ethical order" and "reduced to an object of routine police repression."⁴³ *FSW* contributes to this banalization of war by promoting uncritical identification with imperial troops; by clichéd celebration of the virtue of their cause and the justice of their activities; by routinizing the extermination of the enemy; by diminishing the horrors of battle and exalting its spectacle; by forming subjects of, and for, "armed vision"; by investing pleasurable affect in military tactics and strategy; and by making players material partners in beneficiaries of military technoculture. Virtual involvement of civilian populations in actual imperial war makes military games a home-front component of "full spectrum dominance." "Don't bring out the general in you!" goes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's ethical injunction.⁴⁴ But as one of the developers of *Full Spectrum Warrior* said of the game: "The bumper sticker version is, 'Everyone's a general.'"⁴⁵

Notes

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3. James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media Entertainment Network* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); Jonathan Burston, "War and the Entertainment Industries: New Research Priorities in an Era of Cyber-Patriotism," in *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7* (London: Sage 2003), 163_75; Tim Lenoir, "All But War is Simulation: The Military-Entertainment Complex," *Configurations* 8, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 289_335; Stephen Stockwell and Adam Muir, "The Military-Entertainment Complex: A New Facet of Information Warfare," *FibreCulture* 1 (2003). See also Tamara Vukov, *The War Game Room*, <http://www.pomgrenade.org/WGR>, which provides an outstanding graphic and aural archive of the topics explored here.
4. See Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003) 84_90, 99_101.
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28. Ibid.
29. For discussion of the argument that "save-die-restart" makes games inherently a trivial form, see James Newman, *Videogames* (London: Routledge, 2004), 84_86.
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40. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Society of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3_8.
41. See Vukov.
42. We discuss counter-war games in our essay "A Playful Multitude? Mobilizing and Counter-Mobilizing Immaterial Game Labour," *Fibreculture* 5, <http://www.journal.fibreculture.org>.
43. Hardt and Negri, 13.
44. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987), 24_25.
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