DIGITAL WARFARE, IDENTITY AND ENSTRANGEMENT:

SPEC OPS' BRECHTIAN INTERVENTIONS IN POST-9/11 WARGAMES.

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ABSTRACT

How do games construct, and intervene in, the practices and ideology of warfare?

Back when I first joined a virtual army, games were still decidedly trivial. Context was arbitrary: *Contra*'s premise (Konami, 1988) was arbitrary, even irrelevant. Its Japanese version had Bill fighting an unnamed hostile nation; the American version staged Lance fighting aliens. Either way, it did not affect playing the game much. 14 years later, playing a soldier in *Metal Gear Solid 2* (Konami, 2002), Solid Snake addressed me personally and, after reflecting on my playing the game – addressing me as the "embodied gamer" behind the screen (Higgin, 2010), made me wonder how convincing games' simulation of soldierhood had become. Snake openly wonders that the illusion of virtual training might act "to remove you from the fear that goes with battle situations" (Konami, 2002). "War as a video game—" he wonders, "what better way to raise the ultimate soldier?" (ibid.).

As if to prove a point, a month later, in that same year on the fourth of July, the American army released *America's Army* (U.S. Army, 2002), a promotional game for the United States' armed forces – at once both didactic tool and recruitment platform. In the wake of 9/11, the conceptual category of the 'terrorist' has developed, in parallel, as a dominant cultural trope and video game mechanism.

What I propose to do in my talk is to conduct a threefold analysis centring around the design of identification and *Verfremdung* in a medium that takes the player-protagonist relation as a fundamental function of its semiosis. That is: first, how does the player-subject relate to the act of game-play? Second, how do the conventions of simulated warfare focalize an unquestioned loyalty to a nationalist, exceptionalist apparatus, fighting the faceless aggressor of reified Terrorism? Third, how have critical wargames such as *Spec Ops: the Line* (Yager Development, 2012) sought, instead, to enstrange their 'embodied players' from the rule- and narrative-governed actions of game-play?

My main argument is that the increased engagement of digital games in the arenas of the Political (cf. Mouffe, 2005) as propaganda and training tools has led to wargames such as *Spec Ops* that, conversely, seek to utilize theatrical techniques of enstrangement [*Verfremdung*] in order to re-familiarize players with the violence and social injustices of 21st Century warfare.

My methodology draws fundamentally on the works of Viktor Shklovsky, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin (on enstrangement), Michel Foucault (on governance and subjectivity), Mieke Bal and Ernst van Alphen (on the split subject of ideology from narratology), on the works of Frans-Willem Korsten, Keir Elam and Jesper Juul (regarding the relationship between simulation, (re)presentation and semiosis) and on Miguel Sicart's earlier books on simulating morality (2009, 2013). Even more important to my approach, however, are my case studies, which serve simultaneously to problematize critical theories while simultaneously making them insightful and concrete. A practice that, throughout these early decades of game studies, has been considerately de-emphasized.

KEYWORDS

Simulation, game-play dialectic, war games, Sicart, enstrangement

1. INTRODUCTION

> "I will always place the mission first.
> I will never accept defeat.
> I will never quit.
> […]
> Click below to learn more about Army Values and careers in the U.S. Army."
>
> – Soldier's Creed (*America's Army* website, U.S. Army, 2014)

> "How many have you killed today?"
> "Do you feel like a hero yet?"
>
> – Loading Screen (*Spec Ops: the Line*, Yager Development, 2012)

Back when I first joined the army, things were decidedly 8-bit. I was playing the *Contra* series' *Operation C* (Konami, 1991) on the Game Boy in 1994, and I was absolutely fascinated by the idea of simulating soldierhood. Years later, I considered myself – by digital standards – a war-hardened veteran. Playing *Metal Gear Solid 2* (Konami, 2002) almost a decade after *Contra*, digital war and I had further grown up together. Graphically, games had certainly improved. By the turn of the century, the *Metal Gear* series had far excelled beyond *Contra* by comparison, narratively as well as critically. Narratively, *Contra*'s premise was trivial, arbitrary even: the Japanese version had Bill fighting an unnamed hostile nation; the American version staged Lance fighting aliens. Either way, it did not affect playing the game much.

Critically, *Metal Gear Solid 2* affected *me*: after years of perfecting my aim, reflexes and tactical thinking; a game offered reflection. The game addressed me, personally, apart from Raiden (the protagonist I was controlling) and asked me what I was doing. Game scholar Tanner Higgin argues that through these comments on the act of play – "Turn the game console off right now! […] You'll ruin your eyes playing so close to the TV!" – *MGS2* "hails the player as the embodied gamer" behind the screen (2010, 261).

What *Metal Gear Solid 2* did to surprise me and many others, was not just that it directly addressed the player, but that it addressed the role of digital games in the processes and politics of warfare. Still in *MGS2*, the previous game's protagonist, Solid Snake, appears and tells the player that the illusion of virtual training acts "to remove you from the fear that goes with battle situations," causing Snake to openly wonder about "war as a video game—what better way to raise the ultimate soldier?" (Konami, 2002). As if to prove the point, a month later, in that same year on the fourth of July, the American army released *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002), a promotional game for the United States' armed forces – at once both didactic tool and recruitment platform.

Within the post-9/11 media landscape, digital games have played an increasingly productive role in army recruitment and in the propagation of the ideological basis necessary for the promotion of

warfare (Allen, 2014). However, as the digital game has grown up to join posters and cinema as effective recruitment propaganda;[i] it has also grown up to join literature and other media in their ability to show *counter*hegemonic potential.[ii]

Against the more general background of the (pre-)digital entanglement between play and warfare, this paper focuses on those later 21st century development, i.e. the period *following* games' growth from chess and the *Kriegspiel* to *Contra* to *Metal Gear Solid*. That is: the workings, on one hand, of digital wargames as a recruitment apparatus as well as, on the other, a vehicle for criticism. In other words, I ask 'how do games construct, and intervene in, discursive practices and ideological conventions of warfare'? Specifically, I aim to dissect the mechanism of identification that is at the heart of these phenomena. To do so, I will focus predominantly on two case studies: firstly, Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012); and I will do so, secondly, in the context of *America's Army* and its progeny of the wargame genre. By that, I mean the governmental and commercial games of which *America´s Army* stands out as a transparent archetype of recruitment propaganda: those games in which the generic conventions of the military-nationalist, post-9/11 shooter are developed.

In order to engage with my research question, my analysis is threefold. First, this paper explores the theoretical framework of how a player-subject relates to the act of gameplay. Second, I ask how such a governed act may construct a discursive or ideological practice by convention, using the elaborate academic reception of *America's Army* as a tangible basis for reconstructing its genre's discourse. There, I argue that the generic conventions of simulated warfare focalize an unquestioned loyalty to nationalist, exceptionalist discourse, while the focalizer engages with unlocatable faceless aggressors. Third, I will argue that critical wargames such as *Spec Ops: the Line* provoke a reflection on this generic familiarity by defamiliarizing the embodied player from these conventions.

2. SIMULATION, STYLIZATION, GOVERNANCE

How does the player-subject relate to the act of gameplay? To answer this question I feel I must account for the relation between game and play as posited recently in Miguel Sicart's polemic essay "On Procedurality" (2011). Additionally, I must account for intuition and the kind of experience that allows players to relate the actions and memories of game-play in a distinctly first-person grammar. As in the introduction, I may remember playing *Contra* as much as I might have played football the next day. Similarly, I remember the time that *I* won an *America's Army* match by making a decisive kill; or the time I fought off a surprise attack in a sandstorm in *Spec Ops*, and so on.

There is nothing ground-breaking about these realizations, but it begs the question as to what that *I* consists of that can act inside a fictional environment, inside a set of rules and goals while also, simultaneously being *Contra's* Bill or Lance or *Spec Ops*'s Martin Walker. Put simply, there is a fictional character within a simulation, the rules of which in turn confine (or more accurately *govern*) the actions with which I control the aforementioned fictional character. Taking a cue from the

dichotomy addressed by Sicart: to ask 'how the player-subject relates to the act of gameplay,' is first and foremost to ask how games, as formal "system[s] of rules and mechanics," relate to the act of play, which is contrarily *not* mechanical or instrumental, but rather "a negotiation, […] appropriation […] expression," i.e. play as a "process of appropriation of those rules".[iii] The way that the former delimits the latter (in the case of digital game-play) then sheds light on what a player-subject can do within such a system of governance.

Before 'including the player,' as it were, I find it helpful to grasp the delimitation at work in games. The possible world presented by digital games – in their combination of ludus and fiction – are a type of *stylized simulation*, a term I will quickly elaborate. Simulation, firstly, according to literary scholar Frans-Willem Korsten, indicates a form of action that originally goes back to the Latin *simulare*: to imitate, to feign, to depict in a visual way" (2012). Simulation's *imitation* "plays with the dynamic of representation, whilst at the same time not being truly representational" of a 'real thing' – it functions, rather, as a stand-in of the real (ibid.). Epistemological concerns of the 'real' aside, the practice of simulation "serves to indicate, in a rather straightforward sense, ordinary forms of practice that have been fairly common in many different cultures and throughout all periods" (ibid.). Korsten's example is that of simulation as a 'mode of training,' in the everyday sense that pilots may practice flying aircrafts or soldiers may train for combat. *America's Army* serves as a particularly tangible example of the way that combat simulation may provide an approximation of 'real' combat without the consequences – all the more so in its use in professional army training (Snider 2005; Jean 2006; Testa 2008).

In the case of computer simulation it is worth questioning to what sense it still *re*-presents an elsewhere, a then-and-there that was pre-organized. Rather, the emergent and procedurally generated situations of digital games may be said to present a 'here-and-now'. According to semiotician Keir Elam, in his writing on theatre, "dramatic worlds" – as opposed to "classical narratives' […] explicit *there and then*" – are "presented to the spectator as hypothetically actual constructs" that are "seen in progress 'here and now' without narratorial mediation" (1980, 67). Game scholar Teun Dubbelman pointedly questions this, asking that if this is true, "to what extent are these events still representational in nature as the audience witnesses the events unfolding directly in front of them" (2011, 161)?

Jesper Juul similarly argues that "the story time is *now*" in the sense that "events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined" (2005b, 223; emphasis original). Juul would later, in the same year, argue that games are in a sense 'half-real,' in that we interact with an 'actual' ruleset governing a fictional character (2005a, 163). Indeed, something would be missing if we would simply conclude so far that simulations feign a possible world that is imitative or presentative of some 'real'. The fiction presented and the ruleset governing it are vital in determining the *scope* of that simulation. As the example of *America's Army* shows, it is not holistically a simulation in the sense that it imitates an all-encompassing worldview – if only because it promises to simulate only what

goes on in the battleground; *not* what goes on in board rooms, voting booths or in a nearby civilian settlement.

Indeed, the simulation effected by games aims not to be – if only by technological limitation – completely 'real itself:' it is already a delimitation, or actualization, of a virtual (in the sense of *potential*) in that it is stylized. For example, I call *America's Army*'s specific simulation of warfare 'stylized' because it limits a simulation of reality 'in full' by choosing, and by presenting in a specific light, certain elements or details of it. The notion of games as stylized simulations arose in early work on game design. Notably, game designer Chris Crawford mentions it in his *Art of Computer Game Design* (1984), stating that "where a simulation is detailed, a game is stylised" (9). A telling comparison by Crawford is that of a simulation to a technical drawing and a game to a painting: a comparison of accuracy over expression. "A game is not merely a small simulation lacking the degree of detail that a simulation possesses; a game deliberately suppresses detail to accentuate the broader message that the designer wishes to present" (ibid.). The point is that digital games may accurately model some dynamics, but through exclusion, emphasis and scope be called *stylized*: "depicted or treated in a mannered and nonrealistic style" ("stylized, adj." *Oxford Dictionaries*, 2014); or "to conform (an artistic representation) to the rules of a conventional style; to conventionalize" ("stylize, v." *OED Online*, 2014).

Both definitions reveal something else: first, that stylization is a certain 'mannered' composition or shaping of realism; second, that it is often done so according to a set of conventions – style is, after all, etymologically a figurative use of the writing tool *stilus*, denoting traditions of artistic composition.

The characterization of games as stylized continues with Juul, for example, arguing that games are "stylized simulations; developed not just for fidelity to their source domain" but rather aesthetically adapting *elements* of the real world (2005a, 172). Games, in other words, simulate selectively, in such cases that "the simulation is oriented toward the perceived interesting aspects of soccer, tennis or being a criminal in a contemporary city" (ibid.). These limitations are both generative and constraining: as game scholar Joris Dormans argues, they "create both limitations and affordances" (2012, 26).

So, digital games have the ability to model systems, but they stylize them for aesthetic and practical purposes. How, then, may play find the freedom of expression within such a system, if stylization necessarily entails a reduction of potentiality – of action and world? Rather than being mutually exclusive, the delimiting game-as-structure and the appropriative, expressive player-as-subject are in a dialectical relationship, producing what Sicart suggests to call the 'player-subject' within the game. Sicart argues that it is the relation *between* game and player that produces the player-subject. I think his focus on this negotiation is productive as it connects the game-as-object to the player-subject by viewing the former as a power structure in a Foucaultian sense. Much like the way in which power structures are prerequisites for the subject, he argues, "the game as an object is a

prerequisite for the being of the player" (2009, 67). This makes immediate intuitive sense: how else could I remember actions of me as Cpt. Martin Walker without the context of the *Spec Ops* game?

"Playing a computer game," for Sicart, "is an act of subjectivization, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game" (63). He uses the term subject in both Michel Foucault's meanings of the word: as "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 2001, 331). How does this subjectivization process work in the context of digital games? Once a player figures out the rules of a game, they know what their "actions in the game were supposed to be," allowing them to act on that knowledge (Sicart, 2009, 65). That is: playing involves acknowledging and obeying its rules. Sicart consequently argues "that when a player is immersed in this system, her behaviour is shaped by the game system, its rules and mechanics" (66). Inferred knowledge on that system produces the power relation that generates the subject's behaviour. This approach differs from, say, a model of interpellation, only in that the relation of the diegetic player-subject (while still undifferentiated from the played character) to the player as "a cultural and moral being" outside of the game is *voluntary* (63). Player-subjects evolve as test-cases: possibilities for players to perform other subjectivities within the proposed system.

3. CONVENTION, IDEOLOGY, DISCOURSE

I have noted above how the mannered reduction of stylization as a shaping of realism depends on convention. Literary scholar Ernst van Alphen's semiotic reading of a convention is as a recurring "rule that fixes [fastens] meaning" in the process of a subject's decoding a sign (1987, 42). A linguistic convention may be the Subject-Verb-Object order of the English language; a social convention may be that women belong in the kitchen and men financially support the family; a generic convention may be the exclusion of civilian NPC's [non-playable characters] in order to erase the possibility of killing innocent bystanders from the simulation of war. A conventional nature of these ways of organizing language, society (nations; morality; etc.), genres and so on come into focus more clearly when we look at them 'from a distance,' such as in the seemingly old-fashioned example of domestic gender roles. An example of a political convention observed from a historical distance would be that of a King such as Louis XIV who, by virtue of his lineage, rules over his subjects within his realm, levying taxes, implementing laws, and so on.

The relevance of those observations is such that historical changes show these organizations of world to be indeed 'conventional:' what might long be experienced as 'normal' or simply 'the way things are in the world' may change. I follow Ernst van Alphen in calling conventions *ideological* when the experience of those conventions is as 'just the way things are'[iv] – as, in a word, natural (1987, 44). It is problematic to state that conventions experienced as or taken to be natural are 'actually' natural if we consider, as an example, the contradictive ideological conventions – in this case social, political, generic and, often, religious – regarding homosexuality. Another would be the rhetorical category of terrorist. To claim something as 'terrorist' is to relegate it to a subnational level,

of irrational extremism targeting non-combatant targets and to label it as intrinsically illegitimate and clandestine (e.g. U.S. Code § 2656f) – defining features arguably dependent wholly on perspective.

As such, when conventions become ingrained – such as in the case of genre expectations – I claim that they become intimately familiar to the player. The distance is lost with which we may otherwise see the conventional, and thus changeable, nature of ideological conventions in history.

The reason I favour van Alphen, here, is twofold: first, van Alphen is interested in the ideologic*al*. That is, rather than set up a political definition of what ideology is, he focuses on providing a working concept of how we may speak of – or write about – the ideological properties of texts and other media. Second, van Alphen writes within the context of the late eighties' budding narratology of Mieke Bal.[v] This is apparent, in part, due to its formal or structuralist approach, which is productive here: van Alphen approaches culture formations, such as texts, through the narratological paradigm of narrator, focalizer and character. Hence, conventional organizations of text, art or, in van Alphen's case, culture and ideology, are made according to perspectivized restrictions of possible significations. The argument, simplified here for the sake of the article's scope, is that by virtue of their perceived quasi-naturalness, ideological conventions erase their alternatives.

An immediate example would be *America's Army*'s use of the oft-cited "swapping paradigm" as a generic constriction of possible significations. That is, "that two players on different teams appear to themselves as U.S. soldiers but to one another as enemies" (Allen, 2011, 48). In other words, focalization in *America's Army* and subsequent games is always restricted to that of the American soldier fighting anonymous terrorist others. Many generic conventions follow from this unilateral identification that need not to be extensively repeated after existing research. There is a minimum of 'play' with the rules: no modifications, deviation from desired behaviour, cheating or rulebreaking – according to the American Army's rules of engagement (Nieborg 2006; Løvlie 2007). The presentation of violence is highly sanitized, focusing on technical details – a discourse of "realisticness" without social realism (Galloway 2004) – which glorifies guns and machinery while leaving out the gore prominent in other games (Galloway 2004; Løvlie 2007; Lukas 2010). In other words, it is a discourse that erases cruelty from war, for the same reason that it is stylized not to include the details of torture, white phosphorus, 'collateral damage' or other things featured in actual conflict (Sample 2008). Finally, another tendency within these games' reception has a focus not on recruitment or the game's glorified semi-realistic presentation of war, but the *re*presentation of the enemy: an a-specific alienated Other that is removed from any geopolitical context or motivation of its own (Allen 2011; Höglund 2008; Lizardi 2009; Salter 2011; Šisler 2006, 2008, 2009).

If these are the conventions of one game as found in the academic reception and criticism of *America's Army*, I argue that these conventions are recognizable in a whole genre of games. The *Call of Duty* series (Activision, 2003) represents an immensely popular, entertainment-centred equivalent of the war game, but its many versions share with *America's Army* the clinical, gore-free stylization of a glorified war, a Eurocentric focalization and an often faceless, clandestine opponent whose motives

rarely rise out of social inequality, injustice or any sort of explicit, sympathetic or otherwise identifiable cause. The same could be said for the discourses constructed, or further made conventional, by similar games including the *Air Force* (Konami, 2001), *Battlefield* (Electronic Arts, 2002), *Full Spectrum* (THQ, 2004) and *SOCOM* (Sony, 2002) series as well as a plethora of other, entertainment- or training-focused wargames.

4. CARICATURE, REFLECTION, ENSTRANGEMENT

To an extent, Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* starts out by emulating with enormous genre-savviness, the tropes and clichés of the wargame genre. Everything about it is set up to conform to the conventions of block-buster shooting games: its cinematic opening scene in medias res (a helicopter dog fight over a ruined Dubai); its semi-first person configuration (oscillating between point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shooting as in blockbusters *Gears of War* [Epic Games, 2006] and *Uncharted*); its setting of American foreign military intervention (as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [Activision, 2009]; *America's Army*); even its main character's voice actor Nolan North (as in many games of the *Call of Duty*, *Uncharted* [Sony, 2007], *SOCOM*, *SWAT* [Vivendi, 2005] and *Army of Two* [Electronic Arts, 2010] series). As one blogger has pointedly stated: "Spec Ops occurs in the ruins of Dubai. There is a desert. There are people to shoot. So anybody who has played an FPS should feel right at home" (Calhoun, 2014).

Thus, the role is perfectly familiar to the reasonably experienced player: they play Cpt. Martin Walker who sets out to rescue Col. John Konrad in a narrative similar to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): Konrad has defected and set up an autonomous anarchic commune amidst an orientalised, fearsome Dubai swept by sandstorms. Yet, as game-play progresses, its narrative occurrences problematize the straightforward discourse of American exceptionalism and military glorification – in part through its glaring allusions to *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1899)[vi] and the diegetic ubiquity of Vietnam era protest music.[vii] That is not to say that there are not players who simply ignore its glaring allusions. For each reviewer, commenter or friend that lauds the game's subversion of convention there is a commenter or friend that "will play the game as a generic third-person shooter and take away little more than that" (Keogh, 2012, 4). As game scholar Brendan Keogh notes, he spent time repeatedly watching a YouTube video series to check his references: "the player that produced these videos spent much of the time trash-talking the NPCs and revelling in the violence with hardly a moment's reflection" (ibid.). Important as this is to note, it is also perhaps all the more reason to stress the role of individual play and interpretation in game-play's actualization.

At one pivotal moment in the game, the player controlling Martin Walker is confronted with numerous defected American soldiers. Conveniently, the game provides a solution to the uneven battle in the form of a mortar carrying white phosphorous bombs. One of Walker's team mates protests, but Walker insists that there is no choice, which, indeed, the game's governing rule-set enforces. That is to say, after regaining control the player has no choice but to use white phosphorus as the only way to

progress in the game, despite the chemical's unclear legal and ethical status (MacLeod and Rogers, 2007) and recent controversial uses by the United States Army (Spinner et al., 2004).

While the governing structure of the game demands the player progress by using the chemical weapon, the game does something interesting to enstrange the player behind the screen from the actions she is forced to perform within this structure. Firing the mortar bombs is done by first shooting a camera up in the air with a parachute, and then aiming the mortar strikes through a screen relaying the camera's view. As the player does so, the game repeats one of its recurring tropes: the player sees Walker's reflection and – in turn – their own reflection as an interpreting subject on the TV screen displaying the game.

This uncovering of the split nature of the player is a schizophrenic moment to be understood as an 'enstrangement' from the actions and convictions of the player-subject and the avatarial character, or "one could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*verfremden*]" (Benjamin, 1939, 18, original emphasis). I choose the term enstrangement as a translation of *Verfremdung*, here, because of the relation of Brecht's term to the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie*.[viii] The function of enstrangement is that one can be made re-aware of (cognitively) familiar circumstances and objects by presenting them in a new (or 'strange') fashion (Shklovsky, 1929, 6). Hence, a convention so familiar so as to appear natural may be enstranged to draw attention to it – such as the social convention of, say, the American working class to labour for minimum wages without guarantee of health care and little social security; or Muslim women being subordinate to the will of their husbands and male kin. Or the shooter's genre convention of ruthlessly brutal American foreign intervention against a stateless terrorist other.

In this moment the game presents a doubly enstranged experience. It reminds the player of their otherness to Walker: i.e. that they are controlling an avatar with a specific background story, visual representation and goals. *And* it reminds the person behind the screen of their otherness to the actions performed in governed game-play: i.e. that the choices taken are finite and pre-programmed according to the developer as co-speaking subject. Both of these, I argue, are taken for granted in moment-to-moment digital play. Such an astonishment – particularly within the concatenation of *Spec Ops*' more subtle enstrangements from violent games' conventions – may serve to remind the player of the material reality of these situations. These more subtle enstrangements aim to remind the player similarly of his split subjectivity: literal reflections, requests by other characters to quit the game, the loading screen asking 'you' how many soldiers you have killed.

By disrupting the identification of *Spec Ops*' stable embodied presence, the effect of enstrangement allows the player to distantiate themselves in a critical attitude that allows a recognition of the depicted rule-governed activities in game-play. Colloquially, in my case I was reminded that I had effortlessly identified with Cpt. Walker – certainly not the first Western soldier-avatar that I had controlled in the process of killing thousands of stateless (or even outer-space alien) terrorist actors. I had suspended the split between myself behind the computer, my actions within the game and the character whose role I was partly enacting. By disrupting my identification – showing both the

otherness of my avatar and my own act of playing – the game reminded me of this split, the quasi-natural conventional nature of the situation and its likeness to white phosphorus attacks such as those in Fallujah.

The critical potential of this discrepancy between a myself and my playful actions is that it may allow an enstrangement from familiar situations through, as Walter Benjamin puts it, an arousal of "astonishment rather than empathy" (1939, 18). That is to say: by being confronted with familiar things from enstranged perspectives, one's astonishment with them is renewed. In that way, enstrangement provokes a critical re-engagement with ideological conventions regularly taken for granted as natural.

Concretely, in the case of *Spec Ops*, the thematized reflection enacted by the played character Walker, his team mates and the auctorial narrator of the loading screen enforce a disrupted identification of the interpreting subject with their in-game performance. The effect, as discussed, has a critical potential: it serves to remind the interpreting subject of the unabashedly cruel actions taken for granted as enacted by the power structure of the game's affordances and constraints. Retroactively, I argue that it serves as a means to reflect on previous violent deeds performed by convention in *Amerirca's Army* or elsewhere, hence without hesitation or critical reflection. Keogh reminds his readers of *Gears of War*'s "cover system evoking the intensity and claustrophobia of an utterly futile war" leading the player to act violently "even as the games laughably ask us to weep for a character's dead wife moments after he trash-talked an enemy while stomping on his brains" (Keogh, 2012, 2). Such performances are demanded in these games: stomping on brains is an affordance that the game offers to most efficiently kill a nearby enemy, while its constraints insist on taking this enemy out in the first place in order to progress.

Meanwhile, the actions demanded by game-play in *Spec Ops* addresses the dangers of unquestioned loyalty by portraying the means by which it is enacted as cruel. After killing hundreds of soldiers, or walking through a battlefield of half-dead soldiers still gasping for breath, the player will often encounter loading screens with written messages – on a level of the narrator – confronting them with the questionability of their actions: "How many Americans have you killed today?"

This double enstrangement works because it depends on a knowledge of conventions. Past repeating the conventions of traditional shooter games, however, *Spec Ops* subverts them. The affordances, constraints and desires offered to the player-subject are structurally put into question. In the cynical words of the loading screen, the game asks: "Do you feel like a hero yet"?

That these conventions are otherwise habitually left unquestioned – as in many of the generic titles named above – is what grants *Spec Ops*' reflection a critical potential. As such, it grants the enstrangement necessary for game-play to challenge conventional ideologies and for the player to reach renewed insights into the material conditions and social relations of lived society. In that way, material conditions and social injustices that are regularly taken for granted as quasi-natural, ideological conventions can appear once again as they are: unfair, unjust or cruel.

ENDNOTES

[i] Beside *America's Army* stand such examples as the Chinese People's Liberation Army's *Glorious Mission* (Giant Interactive Group, 2011), the Palestinian *Under Ash* and *Under Siege* (Afkar Media, 2001; 2005) and Hezbollah's *Special Force* series (Central Internet Bureau, 2003; 2007).

[ii] To stick with my earlier example, Higgin argues that *Metal Gear Solid 2* "offers a critical rather than celebratory perspective on the military-entertainment complex" through its critique of war as "a regime of biopower" (Hardt & Negri, 2004, qtd. in Higgin, 2010, 262)

[iii] Sicart's definition of games, throughout "On Procedurality," occurs mostly as a reflection on the importance placed by 'proceduralists' on such "system[s] of rules and mechanics" as the sole container of meaning of games. While Sicart rejects such a claim – arguing instead that play can never be 'instrumental' in the sense of completing the meaning embedded in games' rules – he does keep intact that specific formal understanding of games.

[iv] "Deze codes krijgen iets natuurlijks: 'zo is't nu eenmaal' of 'zo gaat 't nu eenmaal'" (van Alphen, 1987, 44).

[v] A school of thought (owing to Gérard Genette) that should not be confused or conflated with game studies' own narratology, or what Janet Murray called "a phantom of [ludologists'] own creation" (2005).

[vi] For the connection to Heart of Darkness and its cinematic adaptation *Apocalypse Now* (1979) see Payne (2014); Hamilton (2012); Brendan Keogh's book-length close-reading of the game (2012) or Lejacq (2012), in which the developers confirm their intention. For a concise overview of "*Spec Ops: The Line*'s Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter" see Keogh (2013).

[vii] I noted, among others, Jimi Hendrix, (diegetic instances of) Deep Purple and Martha and the Vandellas as well as present-day protest music including the Black Angels.

[viii] The use of enstrangement is perhaps unusual in light of the native English words 'estrangement' or 'defamiliarization,' which is why it may necessitate a lengthy aside. In preferring this neologism I follow Benjamin Sher, who introduced it into English to translate Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky's term *ostranenie* (1990). I employ this term as a translation of both Shklovsky's *ostranenie* and playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdung*, for three reasons: its accuracy as a neologism, the historical connection between the two terms and their overlapping conceptual traditions.

As Sher argues, *ostranenie*'s o- prefix is "used to implement an action," and applies to two stems: *stran* (strange) and an inflection of *storon* (side) as in *otstranit'* [to remove, to shove aside] (1990, xix). As a result, he proposes that Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is "a process or act that endows an object or image with 'strangeness' by 'removing' it from the network of conventional, formulaic, stereotypical perceptions and linguistic expressions (based on such perceptions)" (ibid.). "Estrangement", according to him, is both a negative and limited translation, "making it strange" is too positive: both are not neologisms. Instead, "they exemplify the very defect they were supposed to discourage" (ibid.). 'Defamiliarization' is another common translation that is rather a "transition from the 'familiar' to the 'unknown,'" whereas *ostranenie* is rather a process from the cognitively known to the familiarly known, to "knowledge that expands and complicates our perceptual process in the rich use of metaphors, similes and a host of other figures of speech" (ibid.). Enstrangement is, like *ostranenie*, a neologism that counterpoints estrangement, with the use of which I follow Sher's.
My use of enstrangement furthermore serves as an English cognate to Brecht's *Verfremdung*. Literary theorist and translation scholar Douglas Robinson traces Shklovsky's Russian term via Sergei Tretiakov to Brecht (2008). Shklovsky indeed confirms as much in a 1964 interview and further anecdotal evidence leads Robinson to argue for at least a common genealogy that differentiates the two terms (*ostranenie*/*Verfremdung*) from *otchuzhdenie*/*Entfremdung*: alienation (171) – or, as Sher translates it: estrangement. Use of the neologism *Verfremdung* functions, as with *ostranenie* and *enstrangement* to differentiate it from similar words: *entfremden* [estrange] and *befremden* [alienate].

I use the English enstrangement, then, as different from the broader denotations of estranging and alienating. I do so in order to stress the historical and conceptual similarities between *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* as neologisms denoting a 'making strange' that functions to re-familiarize knowledge taken for granted. The idea of enstrangement is that one can be made re-aware of (cognitively) familiar circumstances and objects by presenting them in a new (or 'strange') fashion (Shklovsky, 1929, 6). Hence, a convention so familiar

so as to appear natural may be enstranged to draw attention to it. In summary, I refer with enstrangement to both *ostranenie* and *Verfremdung* as a preferred translation of either.

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