

**RECONTEXTUALIZING
THE ICONOGRAPHY OF WAR
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CULTURE
THROUGH THE NARRATIVE AND THERAPEUTIC
DIMENSION
OF IMMERSIVE INTERACTIVE MEDIA**

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Abstract: The article represents an exploration of the various approaches to the themes of war in contemporary American popular culture, with an emphasis on the relationship between fiction and reality. In a media landscape that has been saturated with spectacle and violence, the reality of war tends to become minimized as iconography or genre, even while attempting a meditative approach on the subject. These themes are often explored within new immersive media – namely video games and VR experiences – both with the goal of entertainment, this aspect raising certain concerns about glossing over the consequences of the bombastic actions portrayed, and within military systems, with training and therapeutic applications. A particular interest is shown towards the cauterizing properties of deconstructing such a traumatic subject matter, for soldiers and veterans on one hand and for the general audience on the other, the latter having to face the social, economic, and emotional effects of contemporary war.

Keywords: War, American culture, cinema, new media, realism, immersion.

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Introduction

The following article aims to probe and analyze the relation between the audience and the realistic representation of war in contemporary media – especially cinema and video games, which find a midpoint in the still fresh medium of VR – from the perspective of the duality of realism and fiction. The premise of this study is that recontextualizing real situations, with ample social and personal impact, such as war, within immersive media experiences, contributes to the formation of a state of self-reflexive trance, therapeutically dissociative, permitting the categorizing and processing of harsh realities, traumatic elements or negative feelings. American culture and society have been, along the ages, extremely preoccupied and prolific with regards to illustrating and analyzing warfare – both the real and the fictional or mythologized. Therefore, both the academic resources and the media references shall come primarily – but not exclusively – from the USA, which can be seen as a contemporary epicenter of war culture.

The constant collaboration between Hollywood and the Department of Defense even has its own name – the military-entertainment complex, a logical yet ominous continuation of the term military-industrial complex, used by President Dwight Eisenhower in his 1961 Farewell Address, marking the end of his second

term in office¹. During the Cold War, Eisenhower would warn the public opinion about the risks of the proliferation of the influence of an economic and political conglomerate based on the industries of war. The major social impact that Eisenhower foresaw – which seems to have become a reality, solidified further by the military actions and foreign policies of the USA in the post-9/11 period – concerns not only the civil society and the political class, but also the cultural sphere. This fact is further exacerbated by the ubiquity of military subject matter in American blockbuster films of the last decades. In response to this demand, the need arose for movie and video game studios to obtain authentic military equipment, forcing them to risk straying the media products towards propaganda for the sake of authenticity. Video games are especially targeted by this specter of militarization, promising their audience authentic warfare experiences strengthened by the allure of active participation.

Methodologically, it is necessary to define the relevant terminology pertaining to technical and aesthetic aspects of the contemporary media paradigm, starting with a term that is vital and frequently used in the discussion of interactive experiences – immersion. This notion of the sensory and intellectual submerging of the user – or player-spectator – in the fictional world of the piece of media discussed contributes to the elevation of the content to an almost mystical degree, akin to a trance on the edge between reality and fiction.

This article is concerned with defining a set of common coordinates for certain immersive experiences using as subject matter a very common topic for contemporary media – war fiction. Far from an exhaustive study on this very diverse and ideologically charged genre, the goal of this analysis is to identify instances of the iconography of war that are relevant to the concept of immersion within the discussed pieces of media, and to discuss them from the perspective of the sense of otherness instilled by the experience and the relationship between reality, cultural context and authorial vision. We will also discuss possible applications of these systemized relationships with the reality of war, particularly VR therapy for soldiers and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The same functional and methodological coordinates of this type of therapy, transferred onto the experience of regular players of military video games, reveal a special motivation for the attraction that war-themed games elicit

¹ Available online at: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address#transcript> (Last access: 09.06.2022)

in the general audience – the integration of the reality of war within a normal daily experience, through immersive fiction, with the goal of addressing certain fears and anxieties towards contemporary issues.

Immersion and the substitution of reality

In a virtual medium, the credibility of objects and the actions of characters, at least on a sensory level, is facilitated by the flooding of the senses through controlled stimuli – the VR headset literally obstructs the eyes and ears of the spectator or the player. This is a version – greatly amplified, but very similar methodologically – of the concept of *game feel*, defined by Steven Swink (2009, p. 13) as a part of the generalized toolset of video game design:

When players say “It feels like I’m really there,” “It’s like I’m in the game” and “The world looks and feels realistic,” they’re experiencing game feel as an extension of the senses. The game world becomes real because the senses are directly overwritten by feedback from the game.

On the other hand, our brain is extremely familiar with the intimate nature of those stimuli that it receives unmediated from nature, and the potential dissonance between our expectations with regards to an object and the technical limitations of its representation in VR is a sore spot that has been analyzed by both the theoreticians and the technicians of virtual reality. A certain dose of unlikeliness will always exist within a VR experience, albeit solely because of the equipment that serves an intermediary. Still, many theoreticians argue the fact that this evidence of fakery or unreality is inherent to the medium and is actually one of its strong suits, even strengthening the credibility of the fictional universe.

Janet Murray (2019, p. 99) defines this effect of submerging the spectator in a new world, known in video game parlance as immersion, thus:

We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus.

Replacing the signals, we receive through our sense is but the first step towards complete submersion of the spectator or player in a created world. These signals must follow a series of coordinates with which the newcomer to that world should be accustomed. In her volume *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray explores the relationship between the physical, real world and the fictional world of the game or the VR piece, which can be deciphered by analyzing the sets of symbols and

stimuli that the interactive experience utilizes to offer a holistic emotion in a credible context. The spectator's point of view and personal experience, in tandem with the intention and methodology of the designer or, rather, the storyteller, set the rules of this exchange and the precise spot where the border between these two worlds is traced. Murray (2016, p. 120) observes, regarding this relationship between worlds: "as an aesthetic value, a design goal for the interactor's experience, immersion requires consistency and detail, and most of all a careful regulation of the boundary between the imaginary and the real".

Certainly, the place where the distinction is made is vital for the veracity of the experience. Immersion is an almost mystical state, augmenting the feelings and sensations of the one living the experience in a context tailor-made for this purpose and understood as such by individuals in the audience. Immersive digital experiences do not differ all that much – apart from technologically of course – from a story told by a masterful orator, who can transpose the audience in an almost religious state. Although in these experiences, this transposition is frequently strengthened by a social factor – for instance, a congregation united by shared beliefs – in the case of a VR experience, the intimacy of this immersion is underlined and amplified by depriving the spectator of sensorial contact with other people or the real world. A dose of intimacy is inherent to any immersive experience, be it a video game, a musical piece, a film or an electrifying spoken story. Still, during these deep dives within both the artistic piece and the corners of the self, the senses are not entirely fooled, maintaining the clarity of the person's contact with a fictional or custom-built universe – or, at least, a universe that is detached from immediate and verifiable reality – which, as Murray (2016, p. 100) remarks, contributes, despite expectations, to the strength of the illusion:

In order to sustain such powerful immersive trances, then, we have to do something inherently paradoxical: we have to keep the virtual world "real" by keeping it "not there". We have to keep it balanced squarely on the enchanted threshold without letting it collapse onto either side.

The otherness of fantasy worlds, especially those with an interactive component, is a fact that is never completely dissolved, and this is what allows a degree of emotional experimentation in the spectator or player that is akin to therapy – confronting dilemmas or complicated feelings in an environment that retains the sensory aroma of reality without the weight of its permanence, a controlled environment.

The recognition of an object or a situation as “real” is a very different area of study and interest than what constitutes the so-called “objective” reality of our conscious experience. According to Jesper Juul (2019), the verisimilitude of VR has a series of limitations that are inherent to its position in the contemporary media landscape, it being ultimately a technology-based medium custom built to deliver products that are eminently fictional.

Virtual reality is not, and is not becoming, indistinguishable from regular reality, and that is the point. There are many promises that technological progress is making VR indistinguishable from “the real thing”. Yet in actuality, VR, like all human art, is selective in the way it represents, and this makes a virtual reality object more readable, more predictable, more easily perceived as part of causal chains than regular objects.

This process of selecting content and perspectives is a cornerstone of design for any artistic experience that relies – acknowledged or not – on *mimesis*, from literature to visual arts and film. The interplay between the extensive descriptions and the symbolic and metaphoric language of a work such as James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* (1920) doesn’t just aim to portray a day in the life of Leopold Bloom in an astonishing amount of detail for the sake of fidelity, but rather has a goal in the selection and filtering of these minutiae both through the subjective sensory perspective of the protagonist and the equally subjective viewpoint of the author, to which it adds a metaphysical, mythological dimension meant to reorder the events, stimuli and concepts approached, using as fuel the previous cultural experiences that the reader and author share between themselves. A literary work starts from the baseline of the readers’ complete sensory deprivation in the new world that it creates, reinventing and translating it through vocabulary, by building images, sounds, smells and tastes that, when carefully curated and blended, aim to immerse the reader in a world that is both new and recognizable or digestible in its internal logic, which is then placed in a cultural context with the role of symbolic translation.

A piece of cinema that is emblematic for this notion of immersion is Steven Spielberg’s seminal film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), especially the opening sequence, picturing the Normandy landings. The aesthetic choices – the chaotic camera moves, filling the screen with particles of sand and blood, the gory details of mutilated bodies, the infernal racket – are meant to simulate the point of view of a concrete observer on that beach. Recreating a real event with as much visceral fidelity as possible was meant by Spielberg as a tribute to the veterans of the

Second World War, and for this purpose, the verisimilitude of the experience had to surpass the audience's expectations, getting as close as possible to an exact impression of the armed violence on that fateful day. Some of the most interesting reactions to the experience of viewing this sequence belonged to the veterans themselves, confronted through the film with their own authentic experience. Military veteran Roy Gass mentioned in an interview with CBS correspondent Sean Comey (1998) that "I was really happy the screen was there to block out the bullets". Richard Winter, a decorated veteran – and the real-life reference for the protagonist of the also Spielberg-produced miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001) – said in an interview for the LA Times (1998) that "It's hard to talk to someone who wasn't there. It's not just the memories. They don't know what questions to ask". That level of specific detail represents an enormous contribution to the authenticity of the experience, while the otherness of the screen – or of the written page, or of the VR headset – provides that dose of fiction or acceptable imitation that keeps the experience within the realm of realism and not reality.

***Provocative and therapeutic fiction
– virtual reality and video games***

Media products – through their aesthetic language, the inherent otherness of the perspective and the possibilities made available through their technical foundation – can have an enormous amount of power over the spectator's emotions, and this power, distilled into the previously described element of immersion, may be used with a therapeutic purpose. Especially in treating PTSD, an immersive VR experience can be used as part of prolonged exposure therapy – a form of phobia and post-traumatic stress therapy that implies long-term contact with the source of the trauma or anxiety, in a controlled environment, under the guidance of specialists.

One of the labs using VR technologies and digital simulations both for the training of soldiers and for treating PTSD is the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), part of the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, founded by Richard Lindheim, a former producer for the science-fiction series *Star Trek*. Citing him in an article about one of the simulators developed by the ICT, Dan Leopard (2010, p. 132) describes the original mission statement of the department founded by Lindheim as already under the sign of fiction: "the Pentagon originally approached him to create a military simulation system saying, 'We've been thinking of what the ICT should do. Very simple, why don't you

develop the holodeck from Star Trek”’. Although the applications of the developed simulators are as concrete as possible, the way in which these systems are still perceived by the unspecialized public grants them that fantastical status; that leverage towards immersion in a constructed reality is present, in this case, ever since the project phase for the experience, under the guise of a “very simple” science fiction device.

Albert „Skip” Rizzo is one of the most prolific researchers and therapists in the field of virtual reality as a therapeutic tool and has been, for a long period, associated with the ICT. Emboldened by the success of experiments using VR equipment for prolonged exposure therapy, such as *Virtual Vietnam* in 1997, Rizzo developed a number of VR experiences that were meant to reintroduce the victims of terrorist attacks (as is the case for the *Virtual World Trade Center* program) or soldiers returned from service back into their traumatic moments, using this exposure and recollection in order to stimulate and guide them in processing their emotional load. The procedure, as described by Rizzo (2015, p. 262), has the great advantage for clinicians of using “the latest advances in human–computer interaction to deliver consistent, controllable, and immersive trauma-relevant stimulus environments that do not rely exclusively on the variable nature and ultimately hidden world of a client’s imagination.” The quantity and nature of the memory’s details is controlled by the therapist not merely indirectly, verbally, through suggestion, but by direct intervention, mediated by digital platforms, in an experience design process not unlike video game design. Strengthening this comparison, one of the most well-known and successful programs developed by Rizzo, *Virtual Iraq*, is based on a modified version of the popular military video game *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2004), itself originating as a simulator for the Armed Forces developed by the same ICT, adapted for the general market afterwards.² Much alike *Full Spectrum Warrior*, the *ArmA* series of video games – developed by Bohemia Interactive, a company whose main activity is, much like the ICT, developing simulations used in military exercises – is part of this category of military simulators, offering a large amount of details regarding the realistic experience of a squad of soldiers in real warfare situations and, thus, a very particularly authentic experience, destined for a passionate audience with a keen interest in military technology. In the same vein are the *SOCOM* series, developed

² According to an interview of Rizzo for The New Yorker, may 2008, available online at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/19/virtual-iraq> (Last access: 09.06.2022)

with the direct involvement of the American Navy Seals, and the *America's Army* series, developed and distributed free of charge by the US Army, as a recruitment and initial training tool for young people aiming to enroll in the Armed Forces.

The attraction that armed conflict elicits in the video game audience is undeniable, confirmed by the resounding commercial success of military video game series like *Battlefield* and especially *Call of Duty*. Although both series started with a World War II setting – with *Battlefield 1942* (2002) and *Call of Duty* (2003) – focusing, with the guiding precedent of *Saving Private Ryan*, on a sanitized version of the soldiers' suffering in theaters of war, the next installments tried to vary the formula in order to separate themselves from the countless military video games set in the same era. The peak of the cultural relevance of the *Call of Duty* series was the fourth title of the series, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), set in fictional – but very plausible – version of the conflict in the Middle East, released during the American military incursions in Iraq and Afghanistan. This change of setting can be seen as an opportunity to meditate on the nature and the price of those conflicts, as much for the countries acting as a backdrop for these military fantasies as for America itself. Still, the drive to shock is undeniable, undoubtedly doubled by a financial motivation, a mechanism that is very familiar to the video game market through successful precedents such as the *Mortal Kombat* and *Grand Theft Auto* series, who are constantly followed by media scandals.

One of the missions in the game *Modern Warfare*, called *Death from Above*, takes place from the perspective of a control screen for a military assault drone. Just like its real-world counterpart, the monochrome screen in the game shows considerably less detail than the rest of the video game, making enemies and allies stand out from the background as vague white silhouettes, basic mechanical targets for the invulnerable player, whose sole mission is discerning between the friends that need to be protected and the foes that need to be killed. The nonchalance with which the player acts, based on these simple decisions, is emphasized by the radio chatter of their crew mates, offering indications and relaxed congratulations to the player, occasionally making jokes at the victims' expense. After the mission ends, the story continues in a different place, from a different perspective. Although the repercussions of the mission can be inferred by an educated and attentive audience, the lack of their explicit acknowledgement is a decision that is meant to file off the harshness of these events for an audience that's not interested in such subjects. Even more so as a result of such distillations

of their purpose, games like the ones in the *Call of Duty* series earn their criticism for minimizing the real suffering on the war fronts in favor of macho stories and closed-circuit ludic interactions, prioritizing the player's pleasure above all else.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), a story based on the novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) by Joseph Conrad, brought to the silver screen as one of the most significant anti-war movies, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The goal of the game is an attempt to deconstruct the themes and iconography of American warfare in mainstream culture – specifically the Vietnam war and the conflicts in the Middle East –, focusing particularly on the consequences of the action that are glossed over or hidden by games like *Modern Warfare* – much like the mainstream media during the Vietnam war in the US. In a scene that is very similar to the previously described mission, Walker, the protagonist of *Spec Ops: The Line*, controls a white phosphorus mortar through a screen, using it to clear a path to the objective through enemy-controlled territory. Although the targets are again indistinct white dots, this time around we can see the character's reflection on the surface of the screen, superimposing the image of the aggressor directly onto the image of the acts committed. After an interaction that's very similar to the *Call of Duty* mission, Walker and his squad pass through the bombarded area, where they discover that many of the white dots that were hit were civilians, among them a mother holding her child, both bodies charred. This image haunts Walker, along with the countless atrocities he sees himself forced to commit in order to reach that nebulous objective.

Even though the gameplay loop in the game is intentionally very similar to recent titles in the same genre, the whole story of the video game analyses the motivations and consequences of these interactions and the acts of aggression and cruelty – that would be simply used as set-pieces or action sequences in other video games – with an emphasis on the moral and mental price that the protagonists pay for the accomplishment of their mission. Walt Williams (2012), the writer of *Spec Ops: The Line* said, in an interview for GamingBolt:

“War is hell” isn't just a saying. It's true. You'd probably find it difficult to find someone who disagrees with the statement. And yet, we have allowed war to exist strictly as entertainment within video games. No other medium treats war strictly as a spectacle.

The self-referential ambition of this game to analyze the treatment of military themes in media proved however to not be a financial success, despite the

enormous critical and academic praise. *Spec Ops: The Line* sold 0.42 million copies, according to *VGChartz.com*, compared to the 19.8 million copies sold by *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* or the almost 31 million sales of the most successful installment of the series, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), according to *Statista.com*.

One of the theories meant to justify this large-scale usage of war – and, implicitly, violence – as an entertainment media product is catharsis theory, described by Asbjørn Grønstad (2008, p. 32) thus: "Those who subscribe to a theory of catharsis hold that the experience of watching fictional violence can be emotionally and morally beneficial, since it contributes to a purging of destructive impulses in the viewer." Despite its coherence, this theory is not unanimously accepted as a universal explanation for this attraction. Nina Huntemann, based on discussions with players of these games, builds an alternative perspective, in which these consumers use the stimulation of aggression in order to actively respond to moral dilemmas and negative feelings. Within the simulations of armed conflicts, they do not superimpose the necessarily reductionist worldview of fictional scenarios onto the real world, but instead use it in a way similar to prolonged exposure therapy, in order to quench the anxieties that real and current wars – especially in post-9/11 America – elicit in a civilian audience, caught in the middle of a continuous mediatic and ideological war against the ineffable specter of international terrorism:

While players clearly do not wholly accept the ideology about militarism embedded in these games, they do not wholly reject it either. Instead, players use the sanitized fantasy, uncomplicated by ethical questions and the gory details of warfare, to calm the terror inside. [...] The clear-cut missions, infallible technology and visible enemies offer the player simplicity that does not reflect the confusing reality, another important appeal of wargames. (Huntemann, 2010, p. 232)

Therefore, immersion in such a subject, adjacent to reality, tailored by the producers and storytellers with clarity in mind – both narrative and mechanical – displays the potential of positive effects for people without agency in the armed conflicts that happen during their lifetime, serving as a platform through which they can express – and, thus, address – the feelings they are struggling with. These experiences and the ones of the soldiers going through PTSD therapy with the aid of VR are far from being identical, but the parallels between them help us towards fully understanding the recontextualizing power that immersive media have.

Conclusion

Processing a harsh reality, such as the experience of war, is a significant task, even more so in the case of actors in theaters of war – veterans or soldiers that took part in real-life combat, suffering from trauma on this account. In this article, we have probed one of the therapeutic possibilities that current technology can offer to these individuals, through virtual reality, analyzing the mechanics of this methodology – the notion of immersion – and underlining the presence of these mechanics in many other pieces of media that are available to a mainstream audience – military films and video games which, as is the case of the relationship between *Virtual Iraq* and *Full Spectrum Warrior*, are capable of going full circle, the game that derived from a military simulator becomes itself the basis for another military-use program.

The mythology and iconography of war, which these products use as a basis, is not meant to only be deciphered intimately by soldiers and veterans who, unlike an average consumer, have the resources and the vocabulary of authentic experience. This specter of militarism looms constantly over American culture, maybe most obviously through its iconography in cinema and video games, fields that also birthed some of the most potent meditations on this subject matter. Immersive experiences such as video games and VR programs can present the audience with the opportunity to process this intimate relationship with this ever-present specter, in a controlled environment, devoid of the real repercussions of armed violence, through technically mediated stories. As Murray (2016, p. 100) remarks:

A good story [gives us] something safely outside ourselves (because it is made up by someone else) upon which we can project our feelings. Stories evoke our deepest fears and desires because they inhabit this magical borderland.

From this liminal sphere, where the safety of observation can be blended productively with sensory stimulation, there can sprout the beginning of a creative deconstruction of feelings or ideas, a first step towards healing or self-actualization.

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