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Writing the History of the Future: The Killing Game

by Gerard Greenfield

How will the history of the US-led military aggression against Iraq be told? In many ways this question for tomorrow was answered yesterday: it's done. The history that glorifies military aggression, racism and state violence has been written. It is being taught, absorbed and institutionalized in various ways as historical fact. Not only is this history taught, but it is experienced.

A challenging new mode of learning or experiencing this history is through computer games, particularly interactive online gaming and historical simulation gaming. These games are often presented as based on "real events", involving "real people and places", and of course "real battles." Maps, chronologies, biographies and "official sources" add to this reality. Indeed, the authenticity of games may be considered as important as the quality of its graphics, player options and sound effects. Advertisements promoting military computer games cite the role of military advisors, including advice and support from the US Department of Defence, in ensuring the accuracy of the games and their proximity to reality.

A new innovation that has boosted the degree of authenticity in computer war gaming is the use of real images from wars fought, including video footage of actual bombings, replete with the destruction of "targets", and shots of US military in action. The new online game, Kuma War, developed with the assistance of the US Defence Department, includes the bombing of Iraq, the US military capture of Saddam Hussein and the killing of Uday and Qusay. Like several best-selling games depicting "Operation Desert Storm", newer games use real video footage of the Iraq war blended into digital effects – diminishing the line between game and reality; between truth and fiction.

For many Vietnam War games the advice of decorated US war veterans and high-ranking US officers is presented as proof of the historical accuracy of the scenarios and strategies recreated in the game. Of course this authentic history necessarily excludes other histories told by US war veterans whose experience led them to oppose the war and the current acts of US aggression. More importantly, the histories of resistance, of those who fought on 'the other side' and the victims of war, cannot be told. Cries of 'Stop the killing!' and stories of civilian casualties and immense suffering are not the stuff of entertainment. For war gaming to be authentic, the killing must be justified and must continue.

Defenders of the objectivity of war games may argue that games like ShellShock: Nam '67 portray the atrocities of war (through the eyes of a US draftee), and Battlefield Vietnam allows ambitious players to choose to take sides with the North Vietnamese Army. But the fact is that moving from "grunt" to Special Forces is a measure of progress in ShellShock, and killing racks up the scorecard whichever side is chosen. Choosing to be the "enemy" adds no objectivity, it just makes it harder to win. And the enemy is still depicted in racist terms.

Reinforcing the racism that justifies domination and mass killing becomes a key part of the authenticity of historically accurate war gaming. That is how we find players killing "gooks" in Nam and "towel heads" in Libya. It is how First Nation peoples are relegated to the status of "savages", without technology and skills (or even language), and thus the "civilizing mission" as a battle between good and evil is recreated. Players can choose to be the "baddies"; choose to be the "savages"; making it more challenging to play with a handicap. But the context of this violence, and its necessity is given. It's not an option. The genocides are digitally recreated. The bombings relived. History repeated. And acts of military aggression endlessly justified.

There have been few instances where the historical representations in these games have been seriously challenged. One example is a strike by workers at a Japanese-invested software manufacturing plant in China in 1997. The workers went on strike because a game they were producing contained scenes that glorified the Nanjing massacre. The massacre of civilians by the Japanese imperial army in Nanjing is depicted as another battle, led by war heroes (complete with biographical data on their heroism) and counted up as another high score. So while debates rage in Japan over the new history textbook of right-wing nationalist scholars and its glorification of war and denial of the Nanjing massacre, few have asked whether more pernicious modes of learning history needed to be examined. Which is more influential in making history in the minds of a younger generation: learning through a computer game played endlessly for hours over several days or weeks (or for days without a break as the gaming culture now entails), or the words of a school history textbook? Both may be important. But one seems to pose a greater challenge globally, in terms of what history is learned and experienced through war gaming.

The learning of history through computer war games is not a problem limited to the advanced capitalist countries, but extends to the global South. Shortly after 9/11, I was in an internet café in Shanghai where more than a third of the students crouching over their consoles were playing online war games. The engineering student next to me was playing a Vietnam War game: he was a US marine shooting up "Viet Cong" and calling in napalm strikes. I thought I'd seen it all. Then I saw the same game played in a cyber-cafe in Ho Chi Minh City by a group of university students.

It is true that the commodification of war and violence as entertainment and the subsequent misrepresentation of history are hardly new. The history of Hollywood is rife with this, as with nationalist/fascist cinema in so many countries past and present. But it is important to recognize the unique role of computer games as a tool of learning, and as a source of historical truth about war and oppression.

I am not suggesting that we promote peace games as an alternative. Non-violent games certainly exist and should be encouraged. But like the organic food alternative to corporate agriculture, this too easily caters to those who are already convinced. A niche market of ethical (or health consciousness) supporters that can easily co-exist with corporate agriculture is as much of a dead-end as non-violent gamers coexisting with the killing-as-entertainment majority.Neither am I suggesting censorship. Censorship is precisely the reaction that will tap religious fundamentalism of all kinds (recall the burning of Harry Potter books in the US for their evil witchcraft). What is needed is a critical response that engages the gaming population, that provides another view – a view that at very least reminds them it's just a game and that the information depicted in games is not historical fact. Critical reviews of war games that present the truth behind the aggression are very much needed, and must be part of a sustained, critical popular education based on a people's history against military aggression and imperialism, past and present. So long as the US-led "War on Terror" is an endless war, so too is the task of recording, teaching and popularizing the real history of what is happening. Looking forward into the past, all the efforts of the peace and antiwar movements today may be rendered meaningless if today's history is learned through racist, militarist and imperialist eyes. And the more vivid and engaging the technology, the more difficult our task. This task is even greater given the US commitment to an infinite war targeting yet another flank of the "axis of evil". Ironically, it's

here we find some truth in the online war games. The developers' diary of the online version of Kuma War describes it as "the game that never ends...."

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