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Just Less than Total War

Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia

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In *Homo Ludens*, his landmark study of “the play element in culture,” Johan Huizinga claims that warfare has traditionally been a part of the ludic. Although bloody, violent, and often grimly serious, as long as war maintained a difference between combatants and civilians and admitted a rough parity between the combatants, war was a game. Whether implicit or explicit, it had rules. Huizinga portrays this situation slipping away during the process of colonization as Europeans turned their arms against “lesser breeds without the law”¹ and thus lost the sense of a contest between equals.

We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights; in other words, its cultural function depends on its play-quality. (89)

Finally, with the introduction of the uniquely modern concept of total war, the line between soldier and civilian is blurred out of existence and all trace of war as ludic *agon* is erased: “It remained for the theory of ‘total war’ to banish war’s cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element” (90). Waterloo may have been won on the playing fields of Eton, but the mud of Flanders buried all connection between playing field and battlefield.

Huizinga does not trace the genealogy of the term *total war*, but I think it worth doing in this context. The phrase is most fully associated with the German general Erich Ludendorff, officially deputy to the army chief of staff, Paul von Hindenburg, in the latter half of World War I. Unofficially, Ludendorff was the military dictator of the wartime German state, which he organized to the single end of winning the war. Luden-

dorff essentially inverted Carl von Clausewitz's famous maxim that "war is the continuation of politics by other means." War was no longer to be the seeking of political ends by military means; rather, the political state was to serve military ends. The economy was mobilized to produce military equipment, the population seen either directly as resources for war (i.e., cannon fodder) or as producers of goods in support of war, and the culture was rallied in support of the national/military cause. In such a situation, of course, all members of the population are part of the war effort, and once this assumption was established for the German state, it was easy to extend it to the condition of opponent states: Ludendorff was a devout proponent of the unrestricted submarine warfare that caused the US entry into the war, and he supported the nascent technique of strategic bombing that, however ineffectual in material terms, brought the terror of war to non-uniformed citizens in London and Paris. Thus, in Huizinga's terms, war stopped being ludic in 1916 when Ludendorff ascended to power. Looking back, it seems a likely date: the Christmas truce where professional soldiers met in mutual respect in 1914 had by this time given way to huge armies of recently conscripted civilians whose only real strategy was one of attrition. Whichever fully mobilized state first lost the ability materially to produce war would lose. History tells us that it was Germany that lost the war of production, whereupon Ludendorff exiled himself to Sweden where he began to create a mythology of an indestructible German military that had been betrayed at home by leftists, Freemasons, and Jews. He later returned to Germany and was elected to the Reichstag as a Nazi.

What I want to do in this chapter is take a look at first-person shooter games that are historically situated to represent and simulate the Second World War. I begin with Huizinga and Ludendorff to make a point: World War II was a total war from the beginning. Hitler had learned the lessons of Ludendorff's Great War, and the Western Allies would adopt them as well. Civilian casualties outnumbered military in World War II.² It was a war of complete economic mobilization for all of the major combatant nations. *Homo Ludens* itself can be read as a kind of requiem for the ludic in the face of the rise of Nazism. The Nazi party adopted a doctrine of total war before they even found a war to fight; in a sense, with Ludendorff's paranoid ravings forming one of many inspirations, they continued the last total war more or less where it had been left off. Improvements in technology resulted in death on a mass scale not possible twenty years before. Much of this technology, especially strategic air bombardment, was aimed at civilian targets. From the London Blitz to the firebombings of Dresden and Tokyo to the atomic strikes that ended the war, World War

II was a messy, tragic, and extended exercise in nonludic warfare—a full stop to Huizinga’s cultural play-element as an aspect of armed conflict.

This presents a problem when you want to make a game, especially a first-person shooter (FPS). Economies of scale and their speeds of development are the usual stuff of resource management games. From the days of *Doom* (1993), however, FPSs have concentrated on the lone heroic—or, as often, anti-heroic—figure of the isolated marine in his epic quest for the BFG (“Big Fucking Gun”). In single-player modes, *Doom* pitted a human contestant (both in the sense of the player and his or her on-screen avatar) against a horde of distinctly nonhuman demonic opponents. Even in the first appropriation of the Second World War for FPS purposes, the now classic *Wolfenstein 3-D* (1992), enemies were barely human. (This seminal FPS provided superhuman mutant Nazis as opponents once the player had risen above the mundane task of dispatching merely human prison guards.) But if designers and players desire a game that is more realistic than the cartoon gothic of *Wolfenstein 3-D* (even if we take realism as a genre rather than a question of absolute and verifiable authenticity), then they are left with the task of making an enjoyable game out of a horrific and, in Huizinga’s terms, profoundly nonludic experience.

So I contend that what the recent group of World War II FPS games (*Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Medal of Honor*, *Battlefield 1942*, and *Call of Duty*) does is create a sense of nostalgia for the Second World War as the last ludic war. They do this by imposing specifically what Huizinga claims that modern war lacks: rules. Civilians are entirely lacking in these games and friendly fire incidents are either impossible or, in the case of *Battlefield 1942*, controllable. Soldiers by and large do not panic; *Call of Duty* does contain a moment where a medic refuses to rescue a wounded soldier, but it is a scripted event. It will play out the same every time one plays the single-player game, and it will always end with the panicked medic receiving a predestined German bullet to the head. The unpredictable, in other words, becomes predictable. Combatants face each other as equals in a controlled environment where war becomes an agonistic game, offering a grim form of play that tests their mettle—a kind of pugilism with submachine guns.

More telling than the overtly ludic elements of play, perhaps, is the lack of mistakes. I do not mean by this, of course, that it is impossible for the player to do stupid things and thus play badly: I consider my own play-level for these games to hover somewhere around the area of inept. Rather, the universe surrounding the field of play is a kind of error-free zone. I’m drawing here on Paul Fussell’s book on the Second World War, *Wartime*, in which he constructs the war as basically a pageant of grue-

some mistakes (17–35). In FPSs, however, weapons do not jam, grenades do not have unpredictable fuse lengths, players do not become hopelessly lost (reliable compasses and maps are part of the standard display for each game), and friendly troops do not mistake the player for the enemy. Things work, and death is a product of having done something incorrectly or inefficiently. It is not, with very few exceptions, a product of bad luck.

To return to Huizinga's terminology, I think what we have with World War II FPSs is a kind of remediated nostalgia. I am poaching Bolter and Grusin's term here: for them, remediation is the tendency of new media to incorporate the forms of older media—to present themselves as “refashioned and improved versions of other media” (15). I think this is both literally and symbolically true for these games. It is literal in that the games are not so much attempting to simulate the Second World War as they are attempting to simulate a Second World War film. Neither *Medal of Honor* nor *Call of Duty* exactly shrink from their homages to Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998); the latter game is quite overt in its references to the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001), as well as adding a healthy dose of *Enemy at the Gates* (2001) in its Soviet storyline. The adjective “cinematic” is consistently used in advertising, reviews, and fan sites for these games. A few of many possible examples: Infinity Ward, the developer of *Call of Duty*, touts the game's “cinematic intensity” on its website³ while *The Adrenaline Vault*'s review of the game cites (positively) its “cinematic feel” (Alam). The *GameSpy* review claims that *Call of Duty* “make[s] you feel like you were inside a World War II movie” (Accardo). *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*'s predecessor in the genre, also garners the epithet “cinematic feel” from *GameSpy* (Accardo), while the reviewer for *The Adrenaline Vault* describes the feel of play as finding oneself in “an incredibly immersive interactive movie” (Mandel). These games thus illustrate ludologist Bob Rehak's observation that “video games are starting to resemble movies more than they do ‘real life’” (104). It is abundantly clear that the game designers are aiming less for a recreation of the experience of combat in the Second World War (an admittedly impossible goal) and more to remediate the cinematically mediated access to such experiences that has been the dominant cultural mode of representation since the time of the war itself. More people have seen war films than have seen combat: in this sense, authenticity connotes truth to the war film more than to what the war film represents. A game will thus succeed to the extent that its electronic medium remediates cinema.

This argument need not involve rehashing the narratology versus ludology debate that has formed one of the foundational questions for game

studies and the attendant issue of whether game studies has been unduly subjected to paradigms developed for film studies. I make no claim that all games necessarily remediate cinema, nor that they should do so, nor that the academically established study of film is the exclusively appropriate lens through which to view computer games (I also doubt that anyone actually believes this). My point, rather, is that both producers and consumers of these games are remarkably clear and explicit in their interpretations of what the games try to accomplish and, in the view of most gamers, succeed in doing. The goal, at least as far as *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* are concerned, is immersing the player as a character in a war film. More specifically, they aim to give the player the experience of fighting World War II as represented in films dating from the late 1990s. To the extent that such films draw heavily on the WWII film as an already established genre, we thus have a layering effect: the games represent the recent movies, which represent the earlier movies, which putatively represent the war itself. The ludic rallying cry of cinematic realism is thus a form of *hyperrealism*, Jean Baudrillard's term for the funhouse-mirror effect of postmodern culture in which representations represent other representations to such an extent that the original reality becomes inaccessible. That what we are trying to represent is war adds yet another dimension to the conundrum: war has traditionally been viewed as a primary experience that remains unrepresentable to those without firsthand experience of it.⁴

Baudrillard's work is resoundingly ignored in much of game studies. When it is mentioned, it is usually in the context of dismissal. The editors of the *First Person* collection, for instance, remind the reader that Baudrillard's version of simulation is not the one that operates in the discourse of computer simulation: "The simulation discussed by him is a cultural phenomenon, not a computational one—and as such is fully existent in old media as well as new" (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 71). Similarly, Marie-Laure Ryan disparages Baudrillard's version of the virtual; she offers Pierre Lévy's *Becoming Virtual* as a more positive and useful alternative (25–47). Baudrillard's courting of controversy (most noticeably the provocation of 1991's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*) and his playful alternation between nostalgically bemoaning the loss of the real and playfully celebrating its demise practically guarantee that the name "Baudrillard" will conjure as much a style as a set of ideas (as well, perhaps, as the idea that style itself is an idea). Nonetheless, I think that it is precisely because Baudrillard's version of simulation is a cultural rather than a merely digital phenomenon that it has important implications for computer game studies. Ludology does occasionally fall into the trap of divorcing games

from the cultures that produce them; if these cultures include simulation as a nondigital condition as well as a digital occurrence, it need not mean that discourse about the digital must limit itself to simulation as a pure feat of computer engineering. Moreover, I do not think it necessary to assume Baudrillard's entire argument, at least not in any wholesale fashion, in order to take seriously (or seriously enough to play with) his version of simulation as the basis of the postmodern condition.

I bring up Baudrillard because I want to investigate not only how WWII FPSs represent the Second World War (though I am interested in this as well), but also in how they simulate it.⁵ I find Baudrillard helpful in thinking through this difference. "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have . . . But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending" (3). Representing war—whether in literature, film, or a game like *Risk*—allows a clear distinction between war and its representation. The first half-hour of *Saving Private Ryan* may well represent war in a particularly jarring and graphic manner, for instance, but it is nonetheless presenting us with something that is absent. A viewer may be shocked, but they will not be shot. Of course, a gamer is in no physical danger from *Battlefield 1942* either (carpal tunnel syndrome excepted), but the gamer is using the controls of the game to perform via the avatar approximately the same kind of behaviors that would occur during combat on a battlefield in 1942. In other words, the game corresponds to Gonzalo Frasca's game-based definition of simulation: "To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system" (223). In WWII FPS terms, the source system is mechanized mass combat between 1939 and 1945, while the different system is the game. Unlike reading about war, simulating it involves behavior that reproduces what goes on in combat (or, admittedly, a particular game's representation of combat; as we will see, representation and simulation may be separated for study but usually occur together in practice).

The game-simulation of WWII combat, in fact, simulates combat as constructed in previous first-person shooter games. Second World War shooters thus do not so much attempt a representation of the Second World War as they attempt to domesticate the chaos of violent history into a simulacrum of other games of the genre. Rather than offer a reflection, however distanced and qualified, of the reality of combat, the games produce a simulacrum of violence—a reflection of FPS gaming itself. In Baudrillard's first three "phases of the image" (6), an increasingly tenuous relationship with reality remains; in the fourth and final stage, any relationship has been lost and we have entered the realm of simulation.

Likewise, WWII shooters represent Second World War combat in terms of the established conventions of the FPS genre. Combat simulation thus means the simulation of other combat simulators: to restate the problem in Frasca's terms, the "source system" that the games model is the genre of the FPS more than it is either the reality or the representation of actual Second World War combat. FPS games as a genre reflect and relate to one another at the expense of their relation to history.

If I were to be thoroughly Baudrillardian in my analysis, I would have to deny that WWII FPS games have any relationship to the actual ground combat of the Second World War at all: the fourth phase of the image "has no relation to any reality whatsoever," in his hyperbolic phrasing (6). But, as stated above, though it is important to separate simulation from representation in theory, in the practice of playing and designing games the differentiation is never completely clean. I do think it possible to look at these games' representations of their historical subject matter and to make distinctions between them, and to do so begs the question of whether there is a reality that the critic can access in order to compare the games' representation to the critic's understanding of that reality. The US Garand rifle, for instance, either does or does not use the same ammunition as the standard-issue German carbine (it doesn't), and this historical fact either is or is not so represented in the games.

In order further to explore this differentiation between representation and simulation, I will now look individually at several examples of the WWII shooter game and ask first how they represent their subject matter. The idea here will be to critique the games' relationship to the war in a similar manner in which a film critic might question the representation of historical reality in a World War II movie. Having done this, I will then turn to the complementary matter of simulation and ask how these games' status as games makes their relationship to history and combat different from other modes of representation.

Return to Castle Wolfenstein (2001) has the oldest pedigree of the four games under consideration here. The original *Castle Wolfenstein* game was designed for the Apple II and released in 1983, but its sequel, *Wolfenstein 3-D* (1992), made gaming history as the first true FPS game. The single-player campaign of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* remains true to the id Software paradigm of an isolated alpha-male character, in this case the Army Ranger/secret agent B. J. Blaskowicz, who must single-handedly bring down every Nazi secret weapons program, from the historical V-weapons project to a more historically spurious occult research project that aims to resurrect a medieval Teutonic warrior for the Aryan cause. Compared to *Wolfenstein 3-D*, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* uses represen-

tations of actual weapons and differentiates between types of ammunition. Though it still relies on indiscriminate Nazi slaughtering as a guilt-free form of catharsis for the player, its rank-and-file German soldiers are portrayed as fairly ordinary in their concerns: they complain about the cold and the lack of bathing water, for instance. The involvement of occult and science fiction elements allows the game to genre-cross into horror: the player several times walks into firefights between Germans and monsters, either of whom will turn to attack Blaskowicz. The overall effect is significantly less cartoonish than the older *Wolfenstein 3-D*, but the game does not really set itself the task of representing Second World War combat.

Medal of Honor was originally released as a console game (PlayStation, to be precise) in 1999. Its PC update came out in 2002 as *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*. Insofar as no zombies appear, it confines itself to much more realistic representation than *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, but its missions still concentrate on covert activities and thus the isolated actions of one individual soldier operating outside of the normal boundaries of military operations. The main character, Mike Powell, is a Ranger working for the OSS, much like his *Wolfenstein* predecessor. Though there are several missions in the single-player game that involve operating as a team with other soldiers controlled by the computer AI, the game still emphasizes corridor-crawling and the unaided elimination of scores of enemy troops.

Battlefield 1942, released as a computer game in 2002, is the most uncharacteristic game of the four under consideration. First of all, it is primarily a multiplayer game. It can be played in single-player mode, but its strength lies in its attempt to represent large numbers of troops engaged in approximations of historical battles throughout World War II. Yet its battlefields are strangely unpopulated: storming a beach, for instance, whether in France or in the Pacific, is usually a matter of three or four attackers unloading from landing craft to face half a dozen or fewer defenders. This does not necessarily make the experience less lethal, but it does represent the war as something fought by very small groups of men. Compared to the chaos of the Omaha Beach episode in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, with its dozens of AI-controlled soldiers running, ducking, and dying all around, *Battlefield 1942* gives us a relatively controllable situation. Moreover, *Battlefield 1942* is also the game that most directly foregrounds its status as a game: it uses a point system to determine victory and uses “spawn points” as places where dead avatars can rejoin the game. It uses a character class system borrowed from role-playing games: players choose what type of soldier they want to be from a set of preexist-

ing types, though all types are fully capable of jumping into any available tank or airplane and operating it to the best of the player's ability.

Call of Duty (2003) is the most recent game and constitutes a kind of updating of *Medal of Honor*. It adds several touches of realism: weapon types are more carefully differentiated and sighting becomes a much more important part of the game. More importantly, however, the emphasis shifts from representing the heroic exploits of a single man operating on his own to a more ordinary soldier in the midst of trying to keep himself alive while fulfilling his military objectives. Teamwork is important: the player receives orders during battle (though significantly the player cannot issue orders) and must strive to coordinate the avatar's actions with those of the AI-controlled comrades. *Call of Duty* is also the most realistic simulation of the four, if by realistic we mean the one that will most quickly kill the avatar when he disregards seeking cover and charges straight for the enemy guns.

Thus as far as realistic representations of Second World War combat are concerned, we can rank the four games in terms of ascending realism in an order that corresponds to their chronological dates of release: *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, *Battlefield 1942*, and *Call of Duty*. Even granting that realism is a problematic term in this context, and that *Wolfenstein's* lack of realism is as much a matter of its genre crossing with gothic and science fiction as with choices by the game designers, it seems that the short-term trend in WWII FPSs has been to move away from the isolated, implausibly heroic soldier that characterized the early days of the FPS genre (i.e., *Doom* and its children) toward a grittier, less cartoonish representation of what Stephen Ambrose termed *citizen soldiers*: the nonprofessional Allied soldiers, many of them draftees, who won the war less through conspicuous acts of gallantry than through immeasurable amounts of hard work. In a sense, then, in less than half a decade the World War II FPS has gone from *The Sands of Iwo Jima* to *Band of Brothers*.

Yet, representation is not all there is to it. Games also simulate combat; consequently, they cannot adequately be accounted for merely by analysis of their reception. They can be read, and in this sense, they remain texts. Nevertheless, reading them is contingent on playing them, and playing them is an active rather than a passive process (I am avoiding the problematic term *interactive*—the nontrivial activity necessary to progress through a game distinguishes games from more traditional texts, whether we characterize this activity as truly interactive or not). We need, to borrow Gonzalo Frasca's terms, to look at input as well as output (224). Moreover, we need to consider the political and ideological repercussions

of these games' particular renderings, through both representation and simulation, of history and war into ludic play.

Despite the gradual inclusion of such multihyphenated terms as *military-industrial-media-entertainment network* into political and cultural discourse, academic discussion of games still by and large steers clear of the games' involvement with the nongaming world. But one does not have to be Senator Joe Lieberman railing against *Grand Theft Auto* as a symptom of the decline and fall of American culture to claim that games have ideological status. Though it is probably easiest to see this in representation—i.e., to read the game for ideological content and implications along the same lines used when reading a novel or a film—simulation is ideological as well. Were it not, of course, the US Marine Corps would not have used a form of *Doom* for combat training, nor would the US Army provide a freely downloadable FPS game on its website (*America's Army*) as a tool not only for training, but also for recruiting.⁶ For, in the era of simulation, training begins before recruitment, if we can still maintain a difference between them at all.

Simulation games, especially the first-person variety employed in shooters and flight simulators, place the player and the avatar in the same space. In a rejection of Aristotelian logic worthy of the most thoroughgoing poststructuralist, the player simultaneously both is and is not in the situation that is simulated. When playing the British portion of the single-player *Call of Duty* campaign, for instance, the player is both Sgt. Evans and the player himself or herself. The player thus identifies with the main character in an unprecedented literal manner: I am Sgt. Evans, and he is I. Accordingly, having a developed persona for Evans is unimportant, even distracting, inasmuch as Evans's characteristics would inevitably differ from my own. This may explain why no FPS character has rivaled in personal popularity the third-person shooter character of Lara Croft (despite the FPSs having all but entirely supplanted the third-person shooter in top-ten games lists in the last few years). Moreover, the player in a sense does the things that the character does: *I* shoot the German soldiers coming at me. More technically speaking, by so doing, or failing to do so adequately, I learn the behaviors that Sgt. Evans needs to cultivate to stay alive and remain an effective soldier. This is significantly different from representation: I do not learn about how to be an infantryman from reading Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, but I learn much more than an FPS will ever teach me about what a World War II soldier's daily life consists of, the psychology of small groups of men in combat, the relationship between identities of characters in the war and their lives previous to the war, and many other philosophical and existential insights

into the mundane lives of infantry troops in the Pacific Theater in the Second World War. I probably come away from the novel with a richer understanding of the immense and mostly unarticulated complexities of the war, along with a considerably less romanticized vision of an infantryman's basic job, but I do not leave the book having performed behaviors that simulate any aspect of this job.

With an FPS, on the other hand, I/my avatar have repeatedly performed actions that bear a more than representational relationship with real-world actions. Granted, shooting a computer-generated enemy is not the same thing as shooting an actual human being (which is what keeps most gamers out of jail), but it does train the player for the real thing. If it does not, not only *Marine Doom* and *America's Army* but also the considerably more expensive military flight and combat simulators that are not available to the public become massive wastes of government resources. This is not a slippery slope argument; I am not claiming that playing a combat simulator makes the player more or less likely to engage in violent behavior outside of a game environment, nor even that he or she would necessarily be more effective were the training to be put to the test.⁷ I am simply claiming that simulation involves training people to perform behaviors that are designed to translate as seamlessly as possible into other, nongame situations, and that what and how the game simulates is never free of ideological content.

Ideology is less a matter of overt political content and more a matter of what goes without saying in the simulation and representation that constitute these games. One of the more interesting places where simulation and representation overlap is wounds—both the type that the avatar receives and those inflicted on other, AI-controlled characters. In both representing and simulating the avatar being hit, all four of these games play it rather mild. All use a variation on the hit points system, an inheritance from the predigital *Dungeons and Dragons* role-playing games: all damage to the player's avatar is nonlocalized and abstracted as a subtraction of a certain amount of life force. The avatar does not get hit in the leg or in the head; he just gets hit, and getting hit does not affect his ability to continue in combat. The number of times an avatar can be hit and survive depends on the particular game, weapon, and skill level selected, but generally, an avatar can be hit several times before dying, even if access to instantly-healing health packs is impossible. It is interesting to consider how nearly universal this mode of representation is in FPS games; despite the presence of sophisticated and speedy processors, as well as amounts of memory that were unbelievable only a few years ago, FPS games still use a blatantly simplistic method of representing the central matter of be-

ing hurt in combat: they represent being hit by bullets as a gradual bruising, and the bruising does not affect the avatar's ability to fight on.

From the simulation side, there is again a surprising amount of agreement among the games about what happens when someone is hit in combat. The pain and shock of receiving a wound is simulated by a jostling that momentarily disturbs the avatar's ability to aim. When hit several times by an automatic weapon, the avatar may be so shaken around that the player will be unable effectively to return fire (in this case, simulation disturbs the performance of a behavior by providing a kind of negative feedback: avoid getting shot because it screws up your aim). Again, this is patent understatement: being hit by a bullet, even in a non-"vital" location, generally ends the combat effectiveness of a soldier.⁸ Even if a soldier can and does fight on after being wounded, it is difficult to claim that he or she suffers no ill effects after the moment of being hit. Again, this level of abstraction is certainly not due to the technical limits of processor power or memory capacity. The effects of wounds seem simply an issue that World War II FPS games are not interested in either representing or simulating.

This may be due, at least partially, to social factors—something best characterized as either tact or taste. Players do not want to see their avatars eviscerated, and they do not want to hear represented the cries of desperately wounded soldiers. Second World War shooters are more restrained than their fantasy-based counterparts, wherein taunting and being blown to bloody chunks of meat by a multibarreled rocket launcher are all part of the fun. It may also be that the games want to maximize their sales by avoiding the M rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB).⁹ But allowing the benefit of the doubt, or at least admitting that such issues are often overdetermined, it is also possible that the games avoid the representation and simulation of wounds because of the games' relationship to history. Though the avatars are fictional, the games are all based, however loosely, on historical events.¹⁰ The people represented by the computer-rendered figures are, or were, real people, and the graphic destruction of something that represents an ancestor or older relative, especially when such death agonies are billed as entertainment, is perhaps too much for a game.

Interestingly, though, cinema has apparently felt itself to be placed under no such taste restrictions. The World War II films of the last decade have flaunted their ability to represent modern weaponry's gory effects on the human body. In fact, the graphic portrayal of combat in such films as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Windtalkers* (2002) can be constructed as part of their homage to the war's veterans. Representing in realistic terms the

suffering undergone by the soldiers results, for some viewers, in a greater realization of their sacrifice. Apparently, this rationale does not apply to games. World War II FPSs also avoid the somewhat cartoonish but nonetheless visceral representations of violence prevalent in fantasy-based FPSs like *Doom* and *Unreal Tournament* (1999). In fact, there's been some discontent among the fan base on this issue: several mod programs are available for both *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* that promise more realistic gore. But if these games eschew graphic violence, it is not because of a lack of precedence in both filmic and ludic predecessors. Rather, I think it is a symptom of rendering the war as ludic: in order for the war to function as a game, it must be controllable. Surprising things can happen, but not things so unexpected that they seem illegal or unfair. Being dismembered by your own artillery through no lack of skill on your own part, for instance, though certainly part of modern war, is not part of the postmodern war game. That casualties tend merely to slump over and that their bodies soon disappear is a kind of sentimentalizing of the war and one, I would contend, that fits rather well with an era of tight government control of media representations of both combat and the bodies of US casualties, all in the face of dwindling military recruitment.

Whatever the reason, death and wounds are to some extent sanitized in these games. Whether intended or not, the result is that heroic behavior becomes relatively common because it is relatively risk free. It is much easier to charge an enemy position if the player knows that the avatar can stand to be hit two or three times and if the player suspects that the enemy is guarding a nice stack of instantaneously effective first aid kits. The fact that crippling wounds simply do not happen does as much as the absence of civilians and the lack of physical and psychological breakdowns to move the war back toward the ludic. It is central to the project of reconceptualizing the Second World War as a premodern, non-total war, and thus making it playable. It may well be the cost of fun.

When game designers set themselves the task of turning World War II, or even World War II movies, into an FPS game, it becomes necessary to represent total war as ludic, i.e., precisely what Huizinga says it could not be. In a sense, then, the process of converting violent history into game is a form of remediation. Just as much as the games remediate film, they also remediate the concept of *game* itself—what Huizinga calls the “play element.” The war is represented as a contest between equals—a skill-based *agon*—and thus as supporting the notion that it fulfills a “cultural function” (to use Huizinga's language cited at the beginning of this article). The games remediate nostalgia for premodern warfare and displace it into an earlier version of the modern. They take a cultural nos-

talgia for the supposedly stable binaries of World War II and put those binaries to work on the battlefield. Under such a construction, the Allies generally prevail in ludic contest because they are more skilled (this resting at least partially on the hunched shoulders of the player). This conclusion is possible only with a revisionism that symbolically relocates World War II in the premodern: World War II is thus the final and finest hour of non-total war rather than a post-ludic bloodbath. It is the war that the Greatest Generation should have fought, if not the one they actually did.

In order to explore the consequences of this situation, I want to return to Baudrillard. Baudrillard's version of simulation emphasizes the replacement of reality: the simulation in its third phase "masks the *absence* of a profound reality" (6; emphasis in original). In the fourth and final phase, there is no longer a reality whose absence may be masked. Simulation represents without presence, substituting the simulacrum for the thing itself. Ultimately, for Baudrillard, there will be (perhaps there already is) no thing itself. The thing as such has withdrawn behind the curtain, leaving us only reflections without an original. To put this in terms of World War II FPS games, the games reflect other FPS games much more than they reflect the historical war. A perfect representation of World War II combat in game form is an impossibility, but it seems quite clear that when game designers are faced with a set of choices between making a better simulation (in military-industrial terms) of reality and of making a game that more easily fits into the established parameters of what an FPS is supposed to do, the latter choice wins every time. Though weapons are more accurately modeled and games are finally beginning to take account of how much stuff one person can possibly carry,¹¹ World War II shooters are still basically the next generation of *Doom*, only this time with uniforms.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, from the first Gulf War, in which a pilot returning from his first bombing mission was asked how it had gone. "It was so realistic," was his reply. The story is perhaps based on the response of a Gulf War F-16 pilot who answered the question with, "This is really tough but it's not as intense as my Red Flag missions were" (Greeley). Red Flag is the US Air Force's program for simulated air combat. It is difficult to conceive of a better illustration of Baudrillardian simulation. Real combat is not as intense as simulated combat; real combat is judged according to the extent that it reproduces the simulated experience. The most troubling aspect of World War II FPS games lies in their tendency to provide a veneer of military-historical hyperrealism to a core of digital "business as usual." Paradoxically, the more realistic they appear, especially to an audience brought up on *Doom* and its inheritors, the more

likely it becomes that their simulations may substitute for the experience of combat itself.

This is the case on both a historical and a military level. Historically, because of the participatory nature of these simulations, as well as the seduction of authenticity, there is a tendency to substitute game play for history. This is true on the level of event: I trust that few players of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* will take literally the fictional Nazi attempt to resurrect the dead, but it is not difficult to imagine players mistaking the Pegasus Bridge episode of *Call of Duty* for an accurate representation of this pivotal battle on June 5–6, 1944. This brings us to the level of scale. The actual battle for Pegasus Bridge involved just under two hundred British glider troops. The game represents these forces with no more than a dozen figures. Though the bridge itself is meticulously rendered, the numbers of men fighting for the bridge is greatly reduced. This is most probably a technical limitation: the rendering of many moving three-dimensional figures is extremely demanding on even the best computer equipment. But whether this is a concession to hardware, software, or gameplay limitations, the impression it leaves is misleading.

World War II shooters leave the player with the idea that war is a precision game featuring agonistic contests between small groups of men. These contests are resolved on the basis of the skill of the participants. Speed and accuracy with infallibly reliable weapons make the difference between victory and defeat. A post-ludic war is presented as an exercise in controlled agonism. Ideologically, the games construct the war as an exercise in marksmanship, efficiency, and heroics. Skill, not numbers or morale, wins the day.

In order to illustrate the counterhistorical effects of this representational choice, I want briefly to delve into recent military history and tactical policy for the US armed forces. In 1948, the US Army began studying the results of World War II combat in order to improve its arms program and to consider the feasibility of body armor. Projects ALCLAD and SALVO produced some surprising results. First, actual combat in the war had taken place at short ranges. Second, the number of casualties a unit inflicted was directly proportional to the number of bullets it fired. In other words, accuracy had nothing to do with it. Whoever put the most lead in the air won. The eventual result of these studies declared that the best infantry weapon would be a light fully-automatic rifle firing a small bullet. Smaller bullets have less range, but that was not much of an issue: they are also lighter, so a soldier can carry more of them and fire more in combat. By the mid-1960s the US armed forces had adopted the M-16 as a direct result of these studies.

World War II FPSs do not reproduce these results. Again, they give the player a skill-based contest in which accuracy is paramount. Though it would be possible simply to critique the games as imperfect simulations because they do not reproduce the conditions of what they seek to simulate, in many ways this is beside the point. These games are not actually trying to simulate combat. Rather, they are trying to use history to produce playable games. The danger, though, is that this playing with history will produce a Baudrillardian simulation in which the experience of playing the game substitutes for a representational knowledge, however incomplete, of combat. In a sense, then, these games are so good at being simulations, and more specifically simulations of other simulations, that their function as representations becomes compromised. Moreover, the better and more involving simulations they are, the more they are likely to become replacements for representation. If simulating other simulations is more compelling than attempting to represent what it is they simulate, why bother to represent at all?

In appearing to simulate combat while neglecting to represent history, World War II FPS games give us just-less-than-total war, a representation of mass combat that is symbolically relocated to the pre-Ludendorff era to make the games align themselves more readily with such games as *Doom* and *Unreal Tournament*. Though they may overtly pay tribute to the actual people and events of the Second World War, they also domesticate the tragedy and brutality of the war. They attempt to inject the world of computer games with the reality of history, but in so doing they also make history unreal.

Notes

1. Rudyard Kipling, "Recessional," quoted in Huizinga (90).
2. Hart cites 55,014,000 total deaths in the war, of which 30,503,000 (55%) were civilians (455).
3. www.callofduty.com. Accessed 28 July 2005.
4. A phenomenon that in another context I have called *combat gnosticism*. For a sympathetic presentation, see also Fussell 267–97.
5. Lev Manovich presents a contrast of simulation and representation that centers on the question of space (111–15).
6. James Der Derian, whose particular designation for the military-entertainment complex I have used, takes up (and plays) *Marine Doom* in *Virtuous War* (88–89).
7. See Penny for a more detailed investigation of the links between simulation and behavior.
8. "Any soldier hit by a bullet is likely to be taken out of action" (Hedges 55). Hedges

- es's Chapter 4 (41–55), though focused on contemporary warfare, makes sobering reading when contemplating the realism of combat computer games
9. Admittedly *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* rates an M (Mature, defined by the ESRB as 17 or older), most probably for its gothic undead and cutscenes that allude to torture, but the other three games are rated T (suitable for ages 13 and older).
 10. Even *Castle Wolfenstein* has its real world analog in Wewelsburg castle, the seat of Heinrich Himmler's quasi-mystical SS cult.
 11. The most recent game of the four I am citing, *Call of Duty*, allows the avatar to carry only two weapons, while the earliest game, *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, follows more established FPS doctrine by allowing the avatar to carry a truly prodigious amount of destructive material. Interestingly, *Halo*, a recent (2001) science fiction FPS, uses a *Call of Duty*-style limitation on carrying capacities. Significantly, the effects of fatigue are even more ubiquitous in war than the effects of wounds and go all but completely unrepresented in game simulations.

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