‘Brutal Games: Call of Duty and the Cultural Narrative of World War II.’

Abstract: World War II is the conflict that features most in First Person Shooters (FPSs) but despite the rapid growth of this sector of the entertainment industry, the way in which the war is recalibrated within this format has been at best ignored, at worst dismissed. Concentrating particularly on Call of Duty: World at War (Activision, 2008), this article establishes how the FPS distils war into its most basic components—space and weaponry—and considers the possibility that the FPS exposes aspects of warfare that have been obscured within representations of World War II in other media.

In The Story of G.I. Joe (William Wellman, 1945), war correspondent Ernie Pyle gives names and backstories to the otherwise anonymous American soldiers trudging past him on a dusty road in Tunisia. Among them are Joe McClowski, who used to pull sodas in the corner drug store, Harry Fletcher, a budding lawyer, and Danny Goodman, who supplemented his income by working at the gas station while studying medicine. ‘Here they are,’ says Pyle (played by Burgess Meredith), 'guns in their hands, facing a deadly enemy in a strange and faraway land.' Explosions fill the sky as Pyle finishes talking, punctuating his speech. Pyle’s description and this scene encapsulate three elements central to representations of World War II in American media. The first is the citizen soldier, the ordinary Joe, Harry or Danny, forced into swapping civilian life for a ‘baptism of fire’, as Pyle puts it, in foreign lands far from home. The second is implicit in Pyle’s
description - the idea of World War II as not only a necessary war, but also a virtuous one in which good and evil are easily distinguishable and the American G.I. is unequivocally on the side of the former. The imagery of soldiers, weapons, and their spectacular effects are distinctive aesthetic markers that in turn define the third element—the visual construction of the war. In the last two decades, the citizen soldier has come to epitomize an entire generation, identified as the ‘Greatest Generation’ because of its involvement in a conflict broadly characterized as a ‘Good War’. From the books of journalist Tom Brokaw, who popularized the term ‘Greatest Generation’, to those of historian Stephen Ambrose, through films such as Saving Private Ryan (Steven Spielberg, 1998), U571 (Jonathon Mostow, 2000), Windtalkers (John Woo, 2002), Flags of our Fathers (Clint Eastwood, 2006) and television series such as Band of Brothers (HBO, Playtone, DreamWorks SKG, 2001) and its recent follow-up, The Pacific (2010), America’s popular narrative of World War II situates the G.I. as both primary protagonist and victim of the conflict. With a few exceptions (including Quentin Tarentino’s Inglourious Basterds (2009), which adopts a gleeful, revisionist approach to the conflict), the dominant narrative of the war highlights the nobility of fighting for ‘the man next to you’, and celebrates the masculine bonds of brotherhood forged within the faraway and extreme spaces of the battlefield. The visual construction of the conflict is shaped through hypermediated exhibitions of contemporary digital technologies used in both film and television, forming an aesthetic signature based on the combination of a compelling recreation of the ‘look’ of wartime media and impressive displays of
technical virtuosity. But while America’s citizen soldiers fought to save one 
another and the world in the World War II books, films and television series of the 
last two decades, gamers have been fighting a different kind of war in digital 
games. I explore the ongoing evolution of the three central components 
identifiable in Wellman’s film in other forms of visual media elsewhere, but my 
concern in this article is with how the citizen soldier, the idea of World War II as 
America’s ‘Good War’, and the war as a visual construct are reconfigured within a 
digital game form that is part of the fastest growing sector of the entertainment 
industry—the First Person Shooter (FPS).¹

Since the beginnings of the digital games industry, World War II has been the 
conflict of choice for games set in real-world conflicts. The dominance of World 
War II is particularly evident in the FPS. A recent study conducted by Johannes 
Breuer, Ruth Festl and Thorsten Quandt concentrating only on FPSs found that of 
those games set within a clearly identifiable conflict released between 1992 to 
early 2011, World War II games are in the clear majority at around 62%. Games 
set in the Vietnam War account for the next highest percentage, trailing in at 
16%.² Breuer, Festl and Quandt attribute the dominance of World War II in the 
FPS to a perceived lack of moral ambiguity and controversy in the conflict, making 
it commercially attractive to game developers, particularly in America.³ Games 
writer Scott Sharkey puts it a little more bluntly, referring to World War II as ‘a 
‘mythical “just war”’ in which good and evil are easily distinguishable, and the latter 
can be destroyed without guilt - with Nazis ranking ‘just above robots and 
zombies on the list of evil things we can guiltlessly cap in the head.’⁴ However,
gamers themselves suggest other reasons for the dominance of World War II in the FPS. The scope of World War II means that the games can be set in a number of environments ranging from jungles to beaches to urban cityscapes, facilitating different styles of gameplay. Playing as a sniper in the ruins of Stalingrad, for example, offers a different gaming experience compared to the close-quarter combat of the Pacific islands. In terms of weaponry, the unprecedented array of weapons available during World War II makes it ideal for the FPS, because, as one gamer puts it, 'it's harder for a game designer to translate the subtle differences of modern weapons.' In other words, space and weaponry emerge as the primary components of what makes a ‘good’ FPS in discussions of World War II games. But if World War II is particularly suited to the FPS, what is the FPS doing for the cultural narrative of World War II? What happens when the three elements that define the cultural narrative of World War II - the citizen soldier, the ‘Good War’ and the war as a visual construct – are translated via a media technology that distils war into a series of contested environments explored primarily through the use and deployment of military hardware?

In order to answer these questions, I focus on one FPS in particular—Call of Duty: World at War (Activision, 2008). I begin with a brief overview of the development of the Call of Duty series in order to outline the place the series occupies within the mediated milieu of representations of World War II and to establish a context for World at War. Next, I move on to consider how World at War functions as a simulation of World War II, and to examine the impact of gameplay on the citizen
soldier, the ‘Good War’ and the visual construction of the war. Unlike representations of World War II in film and television, which have their share of academic champions, the FPS is frequently dismissed as having little to offer the history of World War II. Jerome de Groot, for example, observes that there is ‘nothing to be learned’ from the kind of history presented within the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* franchises. Historian Niall Ferguson in turn goes so far as to state that he ‘hates’ both series. My purpose in this article is to examine not only how the FPS recalibrates essential elements within the American narrative of World War II, but also to investigate the possibility of whether the games facilitate engagement with aspects of the story of the conflict ignored or overlooked by representations in other media.

**Call of Duty: Making War the Hero**

In order to understand the gaming industry’s version of the cultural story of World War II and to establish what *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003–present) contributes to the popular narrative, it is necessary to explore, very briefly, the background to the franchise’s development. The history of *Call of Duty* is inextricably entangled with that of its principle rival in the FPS market, *Medal of Honor* (EA Games, 1999–present) which is in turn connected to *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998). Steven Spielberg approached publisher Electronic Arts (EA) with the core ideas and mission structures for the first *Medal of Honor* while in post-production on *Saving Private Ryan* in 1997. As the company that suggested in the early years of its inception that the PC was more than ‘a medium for blasting aliens’ and
posed the question ‘can a computer make you cry?’, EA was particularly compatible with Spielberg’s vision of a game that would allow the gamer to enter the same world as the soldiers in *Saving Private Ryan*. Up until the release of the first *Medal of Honor* in 1999, the majority of World War II games were strategy based, with the notable exception of *Wolfenstein 3D* (ID Software, 1992), which popularized the FPS format and pioneered many of the features of the form. In contrast to the detached perspective of strategy games, or the cartoon aesthetic of *Wolfenstein*, the *Medal of Honor* franchise opted for a different level of authenticity by integrating archive footage from the war and quotes from veterans to create a more fully rendered and complex gameworld. *Medal of Honor* was the first game to demonstrate that the FPS was capable of sustaining meaningful emotional engagement with World War II. As one tagline for the game puts it: ‘you don’t play, you volunteer.’ Despite the fact that Spielberg’s direct involvement ended with the first game, the influence of *Saving Private Ryan* is evident through all the World War II instalments of *Medal of Honor* in their veneration of the citizen soldier and replication of the film’s trademark desaturated visuals.

Following the release of the third installment of the franchise, *Allied Assault* (2002) however, most of the team responsible for the development of *Medal of Honor*, including all of the project leads, broke from EA and developer 2015 Studios after disputes over game design to form their own studio—Infinity Ward. With backing from publisher Activision they released the first *Call of Duty* in October 2003. The first *Call of Duty* was one of twenty-three games set in World War II released that year, most of which were strategy games. The only other significant World War II
FPS in 2003 was *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, which was widely criticized for its weak gameplay. The critical failure of *Rising Sun* is an indication of the industrial pressures on developers of attempting to release a game a year, but it is also possible that in the quest for historical authenticity and the drive to venerate the soldier, the developers of *Medal of Honor* lost sight of the importance of play to the gamer. In contrast, gameplay was a focus for the first *Call of Duty*, which reinvigorated the FPS format through a series of technical innovations, including regular, autosaved checkpoints conveniently spaced to forestall the necessity for constant quicksaves, thus preventing tedious replays through swaths of gameplay to reach the same point. The importance of this particular innovation for the gamer cannot be overstated. Tom Bissell describes the act of saving the game for gamers as ‘an imperative as biologically intense as food or sleep.’ Making *Call of Duty* easier to play broadened the appeal of the game to include casual gamers as well as those more proficient at gaming. Winning over eighty game of the year awards, including gaming’s first BAFTA, significant at the time as a belated acknowledgment of gaming as an important part of the general mediascape, the first *Call of Duty* ‘redefined realism and the concept of war gaming to balance it better with fun . . . the reason we all play games.’

But in addition to technical innovation and a focus on the mechanics of gameplay, the first *Call of Duty* also introduced changes to the mainstream narrative of World War II, which continue throughout the franchise. For the most part, *Medal of Honor* reflects the dominant cultural story of the war by concentrating mainly on the actions of the heroic individual American soldier. In contrast, *Call of Duty*
refracts World War II ‘through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from
an alliance of countries’, as activision.com puts it. *Call of Duty* serves as a
reminder that it was not only America who fielded armies of civilians who
sacrificed their ordinary lives for the demands of their governments, and who
faced a baptism of fire in foreign lands. As the first game shifts geographic
locations or fronts, it forces the gamer to adopt a new ‘character’—American,
Russian or British—and a different outlook on the war. The Russian campaign, for
example, reintroduces the battle of Stalingrad as a pivotal battle within World War
II. The role played by Russia in the defeat of the Germans in World War II has
been consistently downplayed in the American cultural narrative of the war since
the Cold War. Yet historians such as Norman Davies describe the efforts of the
Western powers as a ‘sideshow’ when compared to the war on the Eastern
Front.\(^{13}\) Forcing the gamer to switch between soldiers of various nationalities not
only broadens perspectives of World War II, it also dilutes the possibility of
individual heroism. Playing as a single individual allows the gamer to collect
weapons and accumulate skills, which in most FPSs, including *Medal of Honor*,
means that the gamer’s avatar is practically invincible by the end of the game.
Because Infinity Ward made the unusual decision to compel the gamer to switch
between characters within the same game, *Call of Duty* counters the archaic
notion that the actions of the individual matter on the industrial battlefield and
instead emphasizes how the destructive impartiality of mechanized warfare
renders the skill and prowess of the lone soldier obsolete.
The dilution of heroic individuality in *Call of Duty* has an additional consequence. In the absence of a central soldier as a focal point for identification, the game shifts attention onto the spectacle and magnitude of industrialized warfare. As games magazine *Computer and Video Games* (*CVG*) puts it, the *Call of Duty* franchise made ‘war’ itself the hero, rather than the citizen soldier.\(^{14}\) The first *Call of Duty* marshalled cinematic standards of realism to generate a sense of the scale and chaos of total war. The gameworld created by Infinity Ward for *Call of Duty* consists of vast backgrounds brimming with visual and sound effects that are far from, and unrelated to, the immediate vicinity of gameplay. The spectacle of industrialized warfare, a key component of World War II’s aesthetic signature in visual media, is thus used within *Call of Duty* to situate the gamer as a ‘a ‘tiny man trapped in miles of exploding chaos’ and to generate an unusual sense of extreme vulnerability in the gamer, as opposed to the feelings of invincibility more common to the FPS in general.\(^{15}\)

While the first *Call of Duty* reintroduces soldiers of other nations to the cultural narrative of World War II and redeployes cinematic spectacle to counter the notion of individual heroism, the game nevertheless reconstitutes an aspect crucial to the current configuration of the American soldier in popular narratives of the war—the idea of the soldier as a member of a ‘brotherhood’ forged in the extreme spaces of combat. *Call of Duty* was the first FPS to feature sustained, plausible behavior in Non-Player Characters (NPCs). For much of the game, the gamer fights alongside a squad whose members support one another and the gamer. They provide covering fire, warnings, and even put themselves at risk to save the gamer
and other members of the squad. Each individual has a distinct personality that emerges during the course of the game, facilitated by a feature dubbed by the developers as ‘battlechat’, which allows the NPCs to talk to one another and to the enemy. The creation of a squad that does not require controlling or ordering, comprised of distinct individuals, contributes to the sense that the gamer is fighting as part of a group and not as an isolated soldier. In deliberate contrast to *Medal of Honor*’s overriding emphasis on the lone soldier, the first *Call of Duty* was released with the tagline, ‘in war, no-one fights alone.’

The first *Call of Duty* established the game not only as a franchise, but as a valuable brand within Activision’s suite of properties. As of this writing, the series consists of ten games, four of which are set in World War II, as well as numerous expansion maps and packs. As with the first *Call of Duty*, the World War II games of the series continue to reconfigure the central elements of the American cultural narrative of the conflict through emphasizing the international scope of the war and reducing the possibility of individual heroism, but at the same time, the franchise features multiple connections and references to the cultural story of the war as it plays out in other media as markers of authenticity. Actors from *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* (HBO, DreamWorks SKG, Playtone, 2001) feature in the games, for example, and some moments are deliberately modelled on scenes from war films. The opening cutscene for the Stalingrad sequence of *World at War*, for example, clearly references the opening scene of *Enemy at the Gates* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001). Such references place the *Call of Duty*
games not only within the historical framework of World War II, but also within the framework of the evolving mediated narrative of the conflict.

*Call of Duty*'s own position within the mediated framework of World War II is outlined in no uncertain terms by Activision’s marketing. Bobby Kotick, Chief Executive Officer of Activision, describes *Call of Duty* as ‘one of the greatest entertainment franchises of all time’ and as ‘one of the most viewed of all entertainment experiences in modern history’. The sales figures and audiences commanded by the series go some way to support Kotick’s promotional hyperbole. Releases of new installments of the franchise exceed opening weeks for cinematic blockbusters in terms of promotion, scale and initial profits. On average, 6.5 million people play a *Call of Duty* game online per day, making the franchise as much a social networking phenomenon (an aspect of the game that offers a potentially rich area for future exploration) as it is a gaming one. It should be noted, however, that the *Modern Warfare* installments of *Call of Duty*, which are set in hypothetical conflicts of the near future, are a large source of the franchise’s overall revenue. Despite the critical and commercial success of the first *Modern Warfare* (*Call of Duty 4*, released in 2007), *Call of Duty 5: World at War* marked a return to World War II; a move that was greeted with skepticism by both gamers and critics alike. ‘I'm tired of defending Stalingrad, tired of storming the beaches of Normandy, and I'm tired of freaking nazis (sic)’ was one typical response aired on gaming forums before the release of the game. Yet despite the initial misgivings of some gamers and commentators, *World at War* outsold *Modern Warfare* by more than two to one in the first week of sales in the UK. The game
eventually went on to sell over eleven million copies worldwide, ending not far behind the first *Modern Warfare* in terms of overall sales.\textsuperscript{21}

As the last *Call of Duty* to be set in World War II, *World at War* continues the franchise’s recalibration of the American cultural narrative of the conflict, but it does so at a moment when the ongoing presence of World War II in the FPS was under scrutiny. *World at War* expands *Call of Duty*’s global perspective of the conflict to include not only the Russian campaign, which features in both *Call of Duty 1* and *2*, but also the war in the Pacific. While there are a number of games set in the Pacific arena of World War II, most of these are flight simulators or strategy games based on naval battles. The most notable exception is *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, but like many of the previous games in the *Medal of Honor* series, in *Rising Sun* the gamer fights through covert operations as a member of the Office of Strategic Services rather than engaging in the pitched battles that characterize the war in this arena as an ordinary soldier. The makers of *World at War* therefore suggest that the experiences of the U.S. marines in the Pacific have been marginalized. As *World at War*’s military advisor Lt. Col. Hank Keirsey puts it, ‘nobody knows how brutal and tough and gritty and demanding and environmentally challenging the fight in the Pacific theatre was.’\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, the Russian campaign is described by Keirsey as having a different level of brutality because at different stages of the conflict, both the Russians and the Germans were fighting to defend their home territories. Because of its choice of theatres, *World at War* is described by Mark Lamir, head of Treyarch, as a ‘scarier *Call of Duty* than we’ve ever seen’ with a ‘grittiness’ that made even the developers
‘uncomfortable.’ As a result, the tension between gameplay (always a focus for the franchise) and context is evident in both the game itself and the discourse that surrounds it. The push-and-pull between exciting gameplay and the viciousness of the war in these two arenas is illustrated through the descriptions of *World at War* on Activision’s website (activision.com), which promises that *World at War* delivers ‘harrowing’ but ‘dynamic’ gameplay with ‘volatile action’ that nonetheless has ‘added depth’. As a game that supposedly explores the more brutal side of World War II, *World at War* is an ideal example of what happens to the citizen soldier, the idea of the ‘Good War’ and the war as a visual construct when these three elements are translated via a technology that introduces ‘play’ to the cultural narrative of the conflict.

**World at War**

Like all games set in real-world conflicts, *World at War* encourages what Patrick Crogan refers to as a particular kind of play with the mediated past: ‘play in and with a reconstruction of historical temporality drawn from the narrative modes of more traditional media such as historical discourse, historical archives, war films and documentaries.’ The way in which *World at War* ‘plays’ with more traditional modes of historical discourse, such as television documentary, is evident from the start of the game. Each campaign is introduced with a sequence of historical facts and statistics that flash onscreen over maps and stylized graphics depicting images such as the Japanese rising sun, or the Nazi swastika, both integrated with archive footage of the war itself. Some of the latter is
relatively explicit. The game’s opening sequence, for instance, includes images of the attack on Pearl Harbor and archival footage of mass executions conducted by the Japanese, together with information on the mobilization of American industry in support of the war effort. Such scenes are known as cutscenes and, as Rune Klevjer points out, they must be regarded as ‘an integral part of the configurative experience’ of gameplay, often performing functions that ‘cannot be taken care of through other means.’

In the case of *World at War*, the opening cutscenes contextualize gameplay. The importance of context in the FPS is often overlooked, particularly in the popular press, where generalized anxieties about violence in shooters make no distinction between them, conflating games like *Halo* (Bungie Studios, 2001), which has a science fiction setting, with *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty*. A study conducted by Joel Penney comparing two groups of gamers, one with a preference for science fiction games and one preferring games set in real-world historical settings, found that context was of primary importance for the latter group. Gamers who play FPSs set in World War II regard them as a source of ‘authentic historical experiences’ and report a deeper emotional engagement with the games as a result.

Penney’s findings are borne out by one reviewer, who suggests that the setting of *World at War* makes the FPS ‘arguably more emotional’ than those set in contemporary conflicts and that the cutscenes make it easier for the gamer to imagine him/herself in the ‘skin’ of the characters of *World at War* because of the inclusion of actual footage of soldiers.

In line with the rest of the franchise, *World at War* requires the gamer to imagine him/herself within the ‘skin’ of more than one soldier. In addition to the
documentary-style opening cutscenes, *World at War* also ‘plays’ with filmic modes of storytelling in scenes that form part of the narrative trajectories of the two principle playable characters. As Private Miller, the gamer fights his/her way through the Pacific campaign with the American Marines accompanied by rescuer and mentor Sergeant Roebuck, voiced by Keifer Sutherland. In single-player mode, *World at War* opens in the Pacific on Makin Island on the night of 17th August, 1942. The gamer begins in a position of vulnerability as a prisoner of war captured by the Japanese. Bound, weaponless and helpless, the gamer is forced to watch the brutal execution of a fellow prisoner in one of the game’s most violent and disturbing scenes before being rescued by American forces. Later, the gamer is compelled to abandon the Pacific theatre during the battle for Peleliu Island (which takes place two years after the events on Makin Island) and to return to 1942 as the game shifts to Russia. Running more or less parallel to Miller’s journey in terms of historical temporality, but not gameplay, the gamer also plays as Private Dmitri Petrenko during the Russian campaign. The Russian campaign begins with the gamer once more in a position of extreme helplessness, gradually regaining consciousness while German soldiers fire into the bodies of dead and wounded Russians lying in the debris of a fountain in the afore-mentioned reference to the opening sequence of *Enemy at the Gates*. Hiding amongst these bodies is Sergeant Reznov, voiced by Gary Oldman, who becomes the gamer’s comrade-in-arms for the duration of the Russian campaign. Roebuck and Reznov act as mentors throughout the game; the familiarity of their voices adding an additional dimension of intermediality to gameplay. ‘After all, ‘who wouldn’t go to
war with Jack Bauer?’ asks one reviewer, referring to Kiefer Sutherland’s role in the series *24* (Fox Network, 2001–). Another notes that Sutherland and Oldman’s voice skills enable the gamer to be drawn ‘into the intense mindset of these soldiers.’

Filmic cutscenes such as the ones described above are particularly significant because they are the only moments when the gamer has no control over what happens to Miller or Petrenko. But there are also cutscenes *within* gameplay in single-player mode when the gamer is forced to relinquish control of the game. Again, these occur at moments in the overarching narrative when Miller or Petrenko is helpless—when Petrenko is trapped under a burning beam in a house in Stalingrad, for example, or when Miller is shot and wounded during the escape from Makin Island. Unlike some FPSs, *World at War* does not allow the gamer to skip through these scenes. Instead, the gamer is forced to relinquish control until Petrenko or Miller is rescued and gameplay continues. The game designers therefore utilize the sense of frustration the gamer may feel when forced to surrender mastery of the game as a small reflection of the frustration and fear soldiers might experience in situations that render them powerless. These particular moments in *World at War* blur the boundaries between filmic sequences and gameplay, creating something James Newman refers to as ‘experiential cohesion’. I’d like to push Newman’s notion a little further to suggest that in *World at War*, the cutscenes also generate experiential cohesion between past and present as the archive footage and filmic sequences connect with the gamer’s immediate experience of gameplay. Both filmic and documentary cutscenes
illustrate that ‘play’ with different modes of mediated storytelling serves a particular purpose within *World at War*. The cutscenes contextualize gameplay and provide a narrative framework, but they also allow the gamer to get under the ‘skin’ of soldiers in extreme situations. The merging of past and present is illustrated by game reviewer Chris Watters’ observation that the various facts and statistics presented in the cutscenes can only be appreciated as abstractions until the gamer actually plays the game. For example, the odds on survival for Marines on Peleliu (one in five) only start to ‘hit a little closer to home’ when the gamer plays through this campaign and experiences the near-overwhelming barrage of Japanese artillery while witnessing allies and squadmates falling to surprise banzai attacks and sniper fire.31

Watters’ observation illustrates that events of *World at War* are not filtered via the second-hand perspective of characters, but are experienced directly by the gamer. The citizen soldiers in *World at War* cannot, therefore, be considered in the same way as those represented in other visual media. Roebuck and Reznov are the most fully realized characters in the game yet even they serve a purpose that sets them apart from characters such as Wellman’s G.I.s, or Captain Miller and his squad in *Saving Private Ryan*. Roebuck and Reznov act as guides, directing the gamer through the game. In this sense, they are enabling features of the gameworld, as functional as the compass in the corner of the screen directing the gamer towards the location of the objective of a particular campaign. The central characters of *World at War*, Miller and Petrenko, are the least realized. They are by necessity abstractions; ciphers through which the gamer experiences the
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gameworld. James Newman goes so far as to suggest that for the controlling player during sequences of gameplay, the very notion of ‘character’ is inappropriate and misleading. Instead, Newman posits that ‘character’ in gameplay is better considered ‘as a suite of characteristics or equipment utilized and embodied by the controlling player’ (my emphasis).32 As Newman goes on to note, in their recollections of gameplay in games such as World at War, gamers do not talk of playing or directing Miller or Petrenko, but of ‘being’ in the game.33 The citizen soldier in World at War is replaced by the civilian gamer who gains specific first-hand experience of World War II by playing through simulated versions of the Russian and Pacific campaigns. By simulation I mean the reproduction through a particular material technology of part of a complex system or set of systems in order to extract and highlight the relationships and behaviors of its perceived essential components. I am, therefore, not drawing on Baudrillard’s conceptualization of the term here. My definition has more in common with Gonzala Frasca’s: ‘to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behavior of the original system.’34 World at War is a simulation of World War II that reduces the conflict to two basic components: space and weaponry. The way in which gamers relate to these elements of the gameworld is as important, if not more so, than the gamer’s relationship to World at War’s soldiers.

Espen Aarseth, and Mary Fuller together with Henry Jenkins, offer useful ways of understanding the significance of the construction of space in World at War. According to Aarseth, it is the ‘preoccupation with space’ that distinguishes digital
games from all other forms of cultural media. Aarseth draws on Henri Lefebvre’s distinction between representations of space and representational spaces to construct a hypothesis of the representation of space in games as symbolic and rule-based. Central to Aarseth’s approach is the notion that space in games is the means by which gameplay is achieved, because the rules of the game are inseparable from the gameworld. Fuller and Jenkins, on the other hand, map Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of spatial stories onto what may appear to be two apparently disparate texts: Nintendo’s *Mario Brothers* (1983–present) and a collection of written accounts of the European discovery and colonization of the ‘New World’ in the 16th and 17th centuries. Fuller and Jenkins argue that their very different protagonists enact de Certeau’s transformations of *place*, characterized as a stable site existing only in a conceptual sense until it has been experienced and colonized, into *space*, the meaningful location of an experiential event. De Certeau’s distinction between the map, described as an abstract representation of space, and the tour, which details a personalized journey through space, is applicable to both the explorer and the gamer, who each construct individualized accounts of geographical encounters. Fuller and Jenkins’ argument is premised on the notion that the nature of the transformation of place to space and map to tour involves an active, if not aggressive, desire for the possession and consumption of new territories.

The navigation of space is consequently essential to games of all kinds. It is particularly significant in the FPS, which requires that the gamer move through space at speed and with dexterity, generally while under fire from the enemy. In
*World at War*, stillness is actively punished by the game mechanics, particularly in single-player mode. If the gamer takes cover in one place for too long or moves in the wrong direction, the game will spawn enemy NPCs in increasing numbers until the gamer is overrun (‘spawning’ referring to the creation, during gameplay, of characters or objects). The gamer may also be prevented from moving in particular directions by features of the environment itself—ditches, tangled shrubbery or doors that will not open, for example. *World at War*, like the other games in the *Call of Duty* series and many other FPSs, is therefore not an open-world game but one in which the gamer is directed through particular routes or corridors within the gameworld. Space in the game is controlled and manipulated by the game designers in order to facilitate a channeled, linear trajectory through the game’s narrative world, illustrating Aarseth’s assertion that games do not so much *represent* space as invoke it as a symbolic fabrication, since it is the difference between the rules of the fabrication and the rules of ‘real space’ that makes gameplay possible. While some view the construction of space in *World at War* as restrictive, games designer Eugene Jarvis’s general observation on the purpose of rules in digital games suggests an alternative viewpoint. For Jarvis, ‘games are about limitations. Not only what you can do but what you can’t do. Confining your world and focusing someone in that reality is really important.’ In *World at War*, the focus of the gamer is directed onto the violent conquest of space. Fuller and Jenkins’ conceptualization of the aggressive consumption of space is thus exemplified by *World at War*, as whatever the mode of play or campaign, the basic goal is first to successfully traverse the corridors of the game.
and then to take control of specific spaces before completing the required objective.

The FPS consequently introduces an element into the gamer’s relationship to space in the gameworld not taken into account by either Aarseth or by Fuller and Jenkins: weaponry. Neither Miller nor Petrenko appear onscreen as fully rendered avatars during World at War. Instead, the gamer is always represented as an arm or a hand, which is invariably in possession of some form of weapon. In this sense, the gamer ‘is’ a weapon rather than an avatar in World at War and Miller and Petrenko really only have significance in that each offers, as Newman suggests, ‘a suite of characteristics or equipment’ in the form of different sets of weapons and different scenarios in which to deploy them. The gamer can ‘carry’ two weapons at a time and although these are predetermined at the start of each campaign in single-player mode, they may be changed for weapons found on the battlefield during the course of the game. In online multi-player mode, achievements in the game ‘unlock’ access to different weapons and the gamer is allowed far more choice, facilitating customized gameplay. Whatever the mode of play, the world of the game is viewed over the barrel or through the sights of a weapon and the choice of gun influences the way in which the gamer engages with the gameworld. Selecting a sniper rifle over a trench gun during the Peleliu campaign, for example, facilitates a different kind of strategic interaction with the environment during which the gamer might choose to hang behind the squad, providing covering fire before moving up and switching to the trench gun for close combat.
As a result, even critics of the FPS such as Niall Ferguson reluctantly admit that the FPS has the potential to teach gamers about World War II weaponry. Others point to the fetishization of weaponry—what Ed Halter refers to as the ‘artillery nerd-factor’. Evidence of the ‘nerd-factor’ can be found in discussions of weapons in gaming magazines and online forums, and in the displays of gameplay in the video clips of World at War posted on sites such as YouTube. While the fetishization of weaponry is not by any means unique to digital games (the Military Channel has a number of series devoted to weapons, for example, and promises ‘if it goes bang, we’ve got it’), knowledge of weapons in the FPS has a powerful cultural currency for gamers; a point frequently overlooked in discussions of the form. Understanding what weapons are best suited to what scenario or mode of play is described by Matthew Payne as ‘vital, if not sacred’ knowledge that enhances individual status within gaming communities. Writing on real-world soldiers in World War II, Glenn Gray observes that the gun serves as ‘an extension’ of the soldier, helping to ‘cement the wall of comradeship that encloses him and ties him to his own side.’ In a similar way, the knowledge, use and choice of weaponry is not only a reflection of the gamer’s individual style of gameplay, but can also be regarded as an extension of personality that informs social interactions with other gamers. The guns once held in the hands of the citizen soldiers of World War II thus have a tangible significance in the lives of gamers in the present.

The thorough integration of space and weaponry in World at War preserves and intensifies a perception of war as conducted in places that are both ‘strange’ and
‘faraway’, as described by Pyle in *G.I. Joe*. The jungles of the Pacific and ruined cityscapes of Russia and Germany are infused with spectacular explosions, black smoke and fire, all of which combine to create an extreme and extraordinary environment of chaos and excitement distinct from the humdrum spaces of peace. The profound division between the spaces of war and those of peace in *World at War* is not endemic to the FPS’s visual construction of the geographies of conflict. Sharp aesthetic distinctions between warfront and homefront characterize American visual representations of World War II—a result of America’s status as one of the few Allied countries to emerge with almost all of its cities and landscapes untouched by the damage of a total war. The depiction of the spaces of war as both alien and distant allows for what Bernd Hüppauf identifies as a clear ‘spatial and temporal distinction’ between war and home that maintains the illusion that ‘the resurrection of the peaceful world is a matter of traversing time and restoring reason.’ The elemental structure of simulated warfare in FPSs like *World at War* and its reduction of warfare to weaponized spaces inhabited only by soldiers is a powerful affirmation of the perceptual binaries between war and peace, us and them, good and evil inherent in the war’s visual construction. The FPS consequently reinforces a myth central to the American cultural narrative of World War II—the idea that war can be separated from peace and that the former is a legitimate means of achieving the latter.

The spatial division between the spaces of home and those of war contributes to the impression that it is possible to wage war honorably, with soldiers bearing the brunt of war’s impact. That the citizen soldier’s ‘baptism of fire’ in Europe and in
the Pacific islands also generated violence and chaos for civilians is a fact rarely acknowledged in America’s war story. Because the soldier is the primary protagonist of the American narrative of World War II, the effect of the conflict on civilians is at best understated, and at worst overlooked entirely. Given that civilian casualties in World War II far outweighed military casualties on all sides, the gradual erasure of civilians from the spaces of war is perhaps one of the most critical absences in the visual construction of World War II, and it reaches its apotheosis in the FPS. In World at War, the spaces of war are entirely devoid of civilians, and the damage of war is evident only on the environment or on the bodies of soldiers. It is worth remembering, however, that the absence of civilians in World at War is due at least in part to the technical difficulties and expense involved with integrating different forms of Artificial Intelligence (subsequent games set in more current conflicts have made the attempt to include civilians), whereas no such reason exists for the widespread marginalization of civilians in representations of World War II in film and television. Nevertheless, World at War is an extreme iteration of narratives of the conflict that reduce World War II to nothing other than combat and its effects on soldiers. Although World at War claims to reveal the more brutal aspects of World War II, the game limits this exposure to combatants and ignores the civilian face of suffering. Ninety-five thousand civilians died on Okinawa. However, the only death to register with any significance in the Okinawan campaign in the game is that of Miller’s mentor, Roebuck, or of his squadmate, Polonsky. Depending on the gamer’s choices and skill levels at this stage of the game, he/she can save only one out of the two, and
the outcome of either’s death is the same—whoever survives urges the gamer and the squad to show no mercy and kill all the remaining Japanese soldiers in the fight that marks the climax of the Pacific campaign for the gamer. *World at War*’s final Pacific mission reflects another trope within America’s national war story—that victory must always be total—but it fails to address the cost of victory to civilians and suggests instead that the cost is borne entirely by soldiers.

The absence of civilians in *World at War*’s Russian campaign is perhaps even more critical than in the Pacific, where some islands really were devoid of non-military personnel. The scale of Soviet losses is described by William Hitchcock as one of the most ‘incomprehensible facts’ of World War II. Of the estimated twenty-three to twenty-six million Soviet deaths, “only” around 8.7 million were soldiers. To put that in perspective, the total U.S. Service deaths for all theatres in World War II came to around 405,400. As Hitchcock points out, all these figures of loss are indicative of great sorrow and suffering, but they do illustrate the differences in the scale of the war on the two fronts. Unlike the soldiers of America and Britain, many Russian soldiers witnessed first-hand the impact of the German invasion on their own country and partially as a result, the Russian advance into German territory was a ‘tidal wave of rape, beatings, wanton violence, looting, destruction, murder.’ But while Reznov’s exhortations to ‘show no mercy’ and to ‘kill them all’ echo much of the anti-German rhetoric evident in Russia in 1945, it is only on German *soldiers* that the Russian soldiers take their vengeance in *World at War*. The buildings and rooms through which the gamer fights his/her way in both Stalingrad and Berlin in *World at War* are eerily empty of
civilians. In the Russian campaign of *World at War*, it is once again a soldier’s death that is positioned as the ‘ultimate’ sacrifice in war, as Petrenko dies just before the Russian flag can be raised above the Reichstag. Although Petrenko’s death serves as a vivid reminder of industrialized warfare’s negation of individual heroism and the random nature of the industrialized battlefield, it also emphasizes the soldier’s suffering over the civilian’s. The absence of civilian suffering in a game designed to be an ‘adrenaline-filled, epic struggle’ (as activision.com describes it) is perhaps unsurprising, but the magnitude of the civilian losses associated with *World at War*’s two campaigns throws the size of the chapter that is missing from the broader cultural narrative of World War II into sharp relief. Although *World at War* replicates existing absences in the archival footage and cinematic representations of World War II, it also intensifies them. The faraway places of World War II are transformed within the game into exclusive, extraordinary spaces known only to the soldier, infused with spectacle and intense excitement.

If the rules of the game are embedded within the gameworld, then the ideology of *World at War* is similarly enmeshed in the game’s symbolic representation of space. As there is no way to navigate the landscape of *World at War* except to fight through it and as these battles involve neither civilians nor friendly fire, it has been suggested by some that games like *World at War* justify an aggressive militaristic ideology. Richard King and David Leonard, for instance, argue that the absence of civilians and even of ‘civilization’ in the spaces of FPSs like *World at War* justifies the ‘intervention, control and mastery of unused space’, echoing
the argument made by Fuller and Jenkins that certain representations of space dovetail with an aggressive impulse to conquer and control territory. A similar line of reasoning leads to the assumption that games like *World at War* literally turn civilian gamers into soldiers who enact their own violent transformations of place to space, but without a military context to direct and contain them. This point of view is endorsed by David Grossman, a retired Lieutenant Colonel from the American military, who argues that the FPS mirrors the military’s method of ‘operant conditioning’—a method of training based on a repetitive ‘stimulus-response’ cycle which ultimately enables soldiers to kill reflexively. It should be noted, however, that the military’s own adaptations of the FPS format are designed to inculcate behaviors such as tactical decision-making under pressure and teamwork, rather than to teach soldiers to shoot or kill. *America’s Army*, an online, downloadable FPS currently in use by the American military as a recruitment tool, is intended to teach the gamer about ‘the rules of engagement, lifesaving, laws of war and Army values.’ While there are studies that attempt to establish a causal link between violence in digital games and a tendency toward violent behavior in the real world, there are also those that demonstrate that the behaviors instilled by the FPS have less to do with learning how to kill and more to do with the ability to process and respond to potentially overwhelming amounts of information while under pressure. But both positions tend to obscure the FPS’s most significant contribution to the cultural narrative of World War II—the idea that war is, for some soldiers and at least for part of the time, fun.
The idea that war can be ‘fun’ for soldiers is one that runs through the memoirs of veterans of numerous wars, including World War II, but it is an aspect of the history of the conflict that is difficult to accommodate within the narrative of a ‘Greatest Generation’ of citizen soldiers sacrificing their lives in the service of freedom and democracy. Joanna Bourke identifies a persistent theme in the memoirs of veterans from World War I through to the Vietnam conflict—the ‘enjoyment of killing’ in both men and women. Veterans of World War II are no exception. Historians Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer recently uncovered a series of transcripts of conversations among German POWs covertly recorded by the British intelligence service that reveal the excitement and pleasure the soldiers took in killing. The phrase ‘great fun’ is repeated frequently in discussions of air strikes, with one POW describing killing as ‘our before-breakfast amusement’ and another referring to an attack on a town, including the slaughter of livestock and civilians, as ‘great fun.’ But it was not only German soldiers who found war ‘fun’. American veteran Glenn Gray, for instance, identified the ‘mad excitement of destroying’ as one of war’s ‘secret attractions.’ Even Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent immortalized in Wellman’s film, observed that ‘it would be wrong to say that war is all grim’ and admitted to finding the experience ‘vastly exhilarating.’ Despite the overall impression created by the majority of films and television productions of World War II in the contemporary mediascape, fear, horror, sorrow and brotherly love are not the only emotions to be found in combat. Satisfaction, joy and fierce exhilaration are equally valid emotions, sometimes existing in conjunction with those less difficult to explain. Roger Ebert, who began
an impassioned debate with a public claim that games could never be ‘art’ because they are incapable of generating empathy, nevertheless acknowledges in his review of *Saving Private Ryan* that ‘weeping is an incomplete response, letting the audience off the hook.’

*World at War* is light on the emotional accoutrements which have come to be associated with the conflict through films such as *Saving Private Ryan*. The idea of war as a traumatic experience for soldiers has become normalized within the cultural narrative of World War II, but in making war the hero rather than the individual soldier, *World at War* illustrates the tension between acknowledging that, as Ed Halter points out ‘war is hell, but in digital game form, it is also ‘fun as hell.’

The FPS offers the opportunity to engage with those emotions left unexplored by other representations of World War II. Instead of fighting for the man next to you or for abstractions such as freedom or democracy, the pared-down structure of the simulation of *World at War* suggests other reasons for fighting: simple survival in the Pacific, for example, or for home and country in the Russian campaign, or even just fighting for the joy of fighting. Fighting for the fun of it is illustrated by the ‘reward’ for finishing *World at War* in single-player mode—the unlocking of a bonus level involving Nazi Zombie soldiers, a neat combination of the two elements Scott Sharkey describes as ‘things we can guiltlessly cap in the head’ in the introduction to this article. *World at War* acknowledges and trades on the exhilaration of warfare, allowing the gamer to indulge in the thrill of combat without any risk. While detractors of the FPS suggest that it is precisely the engagement with the joys of war without jeopardy that desensitizes gamers to
real-world violence, the FPS’s cycles of dying and respawning to fight once more serve as a valuable reminder that, as Joanna Bourke observes, the ‘characteristic act of men at war is not dying, it is killing.’

**Brutal Games, Brutal Truths**

According to Vietnam veteran William Broyles, ‘war is a brutal, deadly game, but a game, the best there is. And men love games.’ As a recent commercial for *Call of Duty: Black Ops* suggests, it is not only men who ‘love’ war. The ad’s use of civilians, including a smartly dressed business woman who steps delicately over the rubble of the battleground in stilettos with an M16 assault rifle slung over the same shoulder as her handbag, is an acknowledgement that the demographic for the FPS is no longer restricted to adolescent males. In *World at War*, the mechanics of gameplay removes the character of the citizen soldier with his burden of sacrifice, sorrow and trauma from the narrative of the war and instead allows the gamer to directly experience his/her own ‘baptism of fire.’ Games writer Winda Benedetti suggests that the FPS may be ‘more honest’ than other forms of visual media in its representation of war precisely because it removes the soldier and reveals ‘who it’s all really about – *us*’ (original emphasis). The emotional shading of the cutscenes and the guidance provided by mentors Roebuck and Reznov combine with the visceral responses and excitement of gameplay to allow the gamer to experience the push-and-pull of the tension between the idea that ‘war is hell’ but also ‘fun as hell’. As a result, *World at War* exposes aspects of the
battlefield obscured elsewhere in the national narrative of World War II. Most significantly, the FPS's introduction of 'play' into the cultural narrative of the war forces a confrontation with the uncomfortable truth that both men and women might love war just as much as they hate it.

*World at War* breaks down the visual construction of World War II into component elements, with the configuration of the spaces of conflict facilitating a particular kind of gaming experience that involves moving through controlled narrative channels in order to achieve specific objectives. World War II weaponry and its effects consequently have a different resonance in *World at War* than they do in media such as film and television, because they are pressed into service as essential components of gameplay itself. In the FPS, weapons take on personal significance for the gamer, as the choice of gun in *World at War* impacts the way the gamer experiences the game. The virtual guns that gamers hold in their hands consequently influence the individualized narratives gamers construct of their experiences within *World at War*’s simulated versions of events from World War II, and knowledge of World War II weaponry has real-world social implications in gaming communities. The reliance of *World at War* on archival footage and films of the conflict results in a replication of the deep divisions between the ‘strange and faraway’ spaces of war and those of home that characterize the American visual structure of World War II, while the demands of *Call of Duty*’s trademark style of play, involving relentless movement through weaponized spaces filled with the thrilling manifestations of mechanized warfare, intensify the polarization between war and peace and reinforce the conviction that the latter
may be maintained by the former. Civilians have been steadily marginalized in popular representations of World War II throughout American media, but *World at War* completely eradicates non-combatants from the spaces of war, supporting the perception that it is possible to wage war ‘cleanly’. As a result, although the ideological trappings of the ‘Greatest Generation’ involved in fighting a ‘Good War’ are largely absent from *World at War*, the idea of World War II as a righteous war is nevertheless preserved in the very structure of *World at War*’s gameworld. The dominance of combat in representations of World War II is not particular to the FPS, but games like *World at War* intensify the reduction of total war to fighting between soldiers. *World at War*, however, ameliorates what Norman Davies identifies as the ‘Americocentric’ perspective of World War II that characterizes representations of the conflict in other media by including the Russian campaign and restoring the Eastern Front to the cultural narrative of the conflict.  

The ways in which *World at War* both draws on and recalibrates elements that have been central to representations of World War II since the war years are an indication not only of the FPS’s relationship to other media, but also of the form’s contributions to the evolving cultural narrative of World War II. Given that the FPS maintains a vital presence within the current mediascape, it is no longer sufficient to focus on film and television when studying mediations of World War II. As Vietnam veteran Tim O’Brien observes, ‘war is hell, but that’s not the half of it.’ The FPS offers the opportunity to engage with the other half of the story of war – the brutal truth that war is not only about brotherly love, sacrifice and trauma, but
that fierce exhilaration and joy in killing are also part of the cultural narrative of World War II.66

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