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# **The politics of consuming war: video games, the military-entertainment complex and the spectacle of violence**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on Debord's thesis on the society of the spectacle and Evans and Giroux's notion of the spectacle of violence, this paper argues that a powerful discourse on war, organised violence, and global politics has been disseminated through a military-entertainment complex that has commodified militarism and packaged it in such a way to be consumed by a mass consumer market. The paper employs the first person shooter (FPS) video game genre as an empirical context to situate the argument presented, by considering the market for these games, the conditions of their development, and the way they have been marketed. The paper discusses three ways in which FPS video games function as part of a contemporary spectacle of violence: through their intertextual connections to other forms of military entertainment; through the immersive experience they offer; and through the geopolitical position they establish. The paper concludes by establishing the importance of FPS video games as complex, sophisticated cultural artefacts that both draw on, and in some ways shape, wider discourses on war and the military, in the age of the spectacle of violence.

**Key words:** spectacle, militarism, military-entertainment complex, video games, war play

## **Introduction**

This paper takes as its starting point a recent special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* (Volume 34:11-12) on the topic of violence, markets, and marketing with its stated aim of developing “a deeper understanding of how violence unfolds in markets and marketing” (Varman 2018: 910). As noted by many of the contributors, this relationship is one that is significantly underexplored within the disciplines of marketing and consumer behaviour, with the editor of the special issue, Rohit Varman, noting that “Despite the ubiquity of violence, marketing theory seldom examines it and its relationship with markets or marketing practices .... there is no inquiry into how markets are sources of violence and how marketing, as a systemic intervention that furthers markets, contributes to the spread of violence” (2018: 903).

Varman argues that marketing scholars need to consider more seriously the way that various forms of violence are embedded within markets, marketing systems and marketing practice to better understand the political effects of the consumption of violence and the conditions of possibility that might lead increasingly to ‘depoliticised consumers’ who are “entertained by the toxic pleasures of spectacles of violence” (Evans and Giroux 2015: 53). Varman concludes his editorial by encouraging marketing scholars to develop a deeper understanding of how violence unfolds in markets and marketing and to problematise the normalisation of violence in consumer culture.

Building on the foundations laid down in the special issue, the current paper sets out to understand the relationship between violence, markets and marketing through the concept of the spectacle (Debord, 1988/1998). Drawing on Debord’s original thesis on *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967/1994) and his subsequent *Commentaries* (1988/1998) and also on Evans and Giroux’s (2015) updating and reworking of Debord’s work and their argument for a contemporary form of spectacle, the ‘spectacle of violence’, the paper argues that contemporary forms of violent play, leisure and entertainment constitute a critical node in this contemporary form of spectacle and the discourse and practices of domination that it perpetuates.

The paper draws on the military-themed first-person shooter (hereafter FPS) video game genre as an example to illustrate the argument. As one of the most popular and widely engaged with forms of violent play, this paper aims to show how FPS video games occupy a central place within a wider discourse of militarism prevalent in US society and political doctrine. In this regard, we do not conceive of video games as mere forms of play but important cultural artifacts

through which war, violence and militarism are marketed and consumed. Following Dholakia and Reyes (2018), it is argued here that mediated violence, whether in the form of films, video games, or news reporting are “understood as being foundational for social, economic and political consent to ‘real’ violence” (p. 1034).

There has always been a sense in which violence, and perhaps most notably the organised violence of war and conflict, has been a source of entertainment: from the spectacular games that are central to our collective memory of the Roman Empire, to the playing of soldiers by young children, to the more explicit and earliest games used in military training, such as the 19th century game Kriegsspiel, created by a Prussian army officer and based on his experiences fighting in the Napoleonic Wars (Allen, 2011). However, it was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the attendant rise in mass manufacturing, that saw the huge expansion of war-themed consumer products for a mass market, and the beginnings of a modern spectacle of violence. Popular products at this time included adventure books, comics, toys and, in 1893, the first mass-produced toy soldiers, manufactured by Britains Ltd, and modelled on real British Army regiments. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, war-themed toys and consumer products continued to proliferate, and as each new media technology developed, so it was quickly populated with war-themed content: from the radio and cinema, to the home television to the Internet, war, conflict and violence have been popular themes. Indeed, as Paris (2002: 8) observed “... [W]ar and preparation for war [has become] deeply embedded in popular culture, particularly in the cultural artefacts that are created for the youth of the nation – a culture that has transformed war into an entertaining spectacle, and reconstructs battle as an exciting adventure narrative”

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, war-themed entertainment continues to be a highly profitable and popular consumer market. War and violence are now consumed not just through films, literature, games and children’s toys but also as a form of tourism: from firing guns with live ammunition in the Cambodian jungle to war-themed amusement parks such as Tactical Tanks in Sherman, Texas (Stahl, 2010). Elsewhere, in the corporate world, paintballing, military-style boot camps and ‘survival’ weekends have become a common fixture for many executive away days. Today, violence, pain, cruelty and suffering are marketed for pleasure and consumption by a powerful complex of organisations and institutions whose function is not only to make popular and profitable entertainment products but also to directly and actively engage in perpetuating a discourse of fear and the necessity of military violence as a solution; a military normal in which more and more aspects of everyday life are embedded with a militaristic discourse and through

which, resistance and political action are harder and harder to galvanise. In this regard, Giroux (2004) argues that we are witnessing an increasing shift towards what he calls the ‘militarisation of everyday life’ in which more and more aspects of our contemporary (Western) culture have been infused with images, themes, narratives and discourses of war, the military and militarism.

Whilst it might be tempting to understand such popular cultural artefacts as just forms of play, produced to satisfy the needs of a growing consumer market, a number of authors have argued that there is a more complex and politically driven agenda underpinning the persistent use of war and violence for consumer entertainment. Paris (2002), in his detailed exploration of the history of war in popular culture notes a dominant and recurring set of themes across genres and time periods, creating what Dawson (1994) describes as a ‘cultural imaginary,’ in which military deeds and personalities are continually celebrated and elevated to heroic and sometimes even mythic status in order to support the continued use of military force in the pursuit of foreign policy goals. This point has also been made more recently by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2009), who argue that specific forms of war play, and the war toys of different eras have been infused “with specific political ideologies about the meaning of war and society itself during those times” (p. 52). Thus, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, for example, war play and consumption had the dual (power) effect of positioning military service as an exciting career whilst also normalising imperial expansion. That the fighting took place in foreign lands, and often in exotic locations, made the consumption of war all the more palatable: “Such images reflected public interest in conflict and reinforced ideas about the legitimacy of war and the romance of battle” (Paris 2002: 8). In short, there has developed, over time, a “militarisation of popular culture” (Bos 2018: 54). The politics of war play and military entertainment briefly outlined above have yet to be explored in the disciplines of marketing and consumer behaviour. This paper is an attempt to highlight these issues and to draw clearly defined relationships between violence, markets and marketing.

The paper is laid out as follows. The first section sets out the conceptual frame for the paper through a review of Debord’s original thesis on the society of the spectacle followed by a more detailed engagement with Evans and Giroux’s notion of the spectacle of violence. Having established the broad contours of this argument, the paper explores three aspects of the market and marketing of FPS video games in order to add some empirical context to the discussion. This is done first by looking at the market for such games and some of the ways in which they

feed into and perpetuate wider discourses of violence and militarism. Subsequently, the paper looks at the development and production of these games and the increasingly close connections between the gaming industries and various state and non-state military organisations through the notion of the military-entertainment complex. The final section picks up the theme of marketing the military through gaming using the example of the US Army-produced game *America's Army* (<https://www.americasarmy.com>). The paper then goes on to discuss three ways in which FPS video games function as part of a contemporary spectacle of violence: in their intertextual connections to other forms of military entertainment; through the immersive experience they offer; and through the geopolitical positions they establish. The paper concludes by establishing the importance of FPS video games as complex, sophisticated texts that both draw on, and in some ways shape, wider discourses about war and the military, and the need for marketing scholars to further explore the undertheorised relationship between violence, markets and marketing.

### **The spectacle of violence**

Debord opens *The Society of the Spectacle* (originally published in 1967) with the claim that: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (1994: 12). In this famous text, Debord argues that lived experience is increasingly being replaced by its representation through spectacular forms of commodity consumption and an increasingly image-driven culture. In the process, and in a similar vein to Jean Baudrillard, Debord argues that reality and social relations have become a simulation, the original replaced by its copy, and reality mediated through the mass media and consumer markets. However, the spectacle is not merely a collection of images. Rather, Debord argues, it is the dominant form of social relations in advanced capitalist societies: “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (Debord, 1967/1994: 24).

Debord does not argue that the spectacle is a distortion of the world but rather a world view transformed in and through images and spectacles into an objective force dominating social life: “...reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real” (1967/1994: 14). In other words, the spectacle does not stand in opposition to reality but emerges from it and subsequently shapes it through new social and power relations built on spectacular consumption.

Whereas early capitalism was defined by the movement from ‘being’ to ‘having’, the spectacle initiates the transition from ‘having’ to ‘appearing’. In spectacular societies, Debord notes, every aspect of having is now driven by appearance. It is the appearance of the thing and the prestige that appearance confers that drives the economic system and contemporary practices of consumption and social relations.

The importance of appearance has also led, Debord argues, to the elevation of sight as the primary human sense, and the turn to the visual a key marker of spectacular society. As Sturken and Cartwright argue: “The world we inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us. In many ways, our culture is an increasingly visual one ... our values, opinions, and beliefs have increasingly come to be shaped in powerful ways by the many forms of visual culture that we encounter in our day-to-day lives” (2001: 1)

Debord also draws a direct link between marketing, commodity culture and the spectacle – the society of the spectacle is a society of consumption, and of commodity fetishism. The commodity has come to dominate the economy due to the abundance of surplus created by industrial production processes. In the process, more and more aspects of social life are brought under the control of the market. Consumption drives the economy and in doing so “...the commodity emerged in its full-fledged form as a force aspiring to the complete colonization of social life” (1967/1994: 29)

In the original *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord identifies what he sees as two forms of spectacular society: the concentrated and the diffuse. The concentrated form reflects the totalitarian society that is centred around the political power of the individual and emerged in Russia and Germany in the figures of Stalin and Hitler. The diffuse form is most evident in what Debord refers to as the totalitarian bureaucracy of the capitalist economy and free market system of Western societies, most notably the United States.

In his later *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle* written in the late 1980s, Debord updates his thinking and introduces a new form of spectacle, one that combines the previous two and in which the diffuse has absorbed the concentrated. This, Debord calls the ‘integrated spectacle’. The integrated form spread across the globe in the years between the publication of the original and the Commentaries.

“The integrated spectacle shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse, and ever since the fruitful union of the two has learnt to employ both these qualities on a grander scale. Their former mode of application has changed considerably. As regards concentration, the controlling centre has now become occult; never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacle has never before pit its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behaviour and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it” (Debord 1988/1998: 9)

Debord’s central argument is that the spectacle is not an insignificant or unimportant development, merely an excess of consumption and media images, but rather is ushering in new relations of powers, new forms of domination and new forms of social life. He warns that it comes at the cost of history, of direct lived experience and of knowledge of the world achieved first-hand. The spectacle mediates our understanding of the world through its apparatus of power, including the media, the rise of experts, incessant technological renewal, and the increasingly close relationships between state and economy. However, the spectacle is not a natural or inevitable state of affairs: “This spectacle is self-generated, it makes up its own rules ... and it makes no secret of what it *is*, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater comminution of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market” (Debord 1967/1994: 20-21).

The function of the spectacle is to isolate us, to keep us subdued, keep us absorbed on the consumption of the spectacle and of spectacular reality, forever in an eternal present, such that we do not see the ‘unanswerable lies’ or discover the ‘secrets’ that exist behind the image: appearance is all in the society of the spectacle, just don’t be tempted to peek behind the curtain. We are willing to accept the spectacle, or as Debord (1967/1994) more bluntly puts it – our laziness facilitates our acceptance - because we get pleasure from the spectacle and in embracing it, or being too lazy to resist it, we reinforce its domination. Thus, we are not quite the passive dupes that the Frankfurt School would have us believe but it seems for Debord we do sign a kind of Faustian bargain – a willingness to live in the Matrix rather than be exposed to the realities of the ‘real world’.



In his *Commentaries*, Debord (1988/1998) was able to incorporate the spread and development of new media technologies and new practices of consumption that were less prevalent during the time of its original formulation, further reinforcing his view that the spectacle has only grown more dominant and pervasive in the intervening years. Had Debord still been alive to witness the rise of the Internet, smartphones, social media, selfie culture, the environmental and ecological damage that mass consumption has caused, and the political climate of the 2010s and 2020s, he might have been compelled to offer a further commentary, for in many ways his arguments seem even more relevant, prescient and important today than ever before.

Although Debord rightfully addresses the close and in his view, disturbing relationship between state and the economy, what he did not address, in either the original text or the *Commentaries*, was the increasingly close relationship that was also developing between the state, military and defence organisations, the economy and the world of entertainment and visual imagery. Instead, we have to look to others who have drawn this connection.

In *Disposable Futures* (2015), Evans and Giroux extend Debord's thesis on the spectacle to argue that today, through the increasingly close parentships between military, state, economy and entertainment industries, we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of integrated spectacle, a 'spectacle of violence' in which more and more aspects of commodity culture and social relations have come to be informed by a discourse of militarism.

Evans and Giroux (2015: 32) argue that the spectacle of violence "Immerse[s] us, encourages us to experience violence as pleasure such that we become positively invested in its occurrence, while attempting to render us incapable of either challenging the actual atrocities being perpetrated by the same system or steering our collective future in a different direction". Reflecting similar concerns to Debord, Evans and Giroux argue that the commodification of violence through various forms of leisure, entertainment and play, sensationalises violence whilst at the same time normalises it. Furthermore, it "drains from such events any viable ethical and political substance" (Evans and Giroux 2015: 31).

For Evans and Giroux, consumers are not unwilling participants in this spectacle but "eagerly sacrifice any sense of ethical responsibility in order to experience sensations of pleasure from images of human suffering" (2015: 99). Seduced into the pleasure of the spectacle, Evans and Giroux outline two dangers: first, in our devouring of this form of mediated violence, we

willingly displace moral criteria with excitement, pleasure and arousal, and second, as we relentlessly consume violence, our understanding of, and relationship to, real violence is renegotiated. We become increasingly desensitised to it. The distinction between real and mediated violence becomes blurred and less meaningful.

Evans and Giroux see the most advanced form of this process developing in the United States: “Absorbed in privatized orbits of consumption, commodification, and display, Americans in particular vicariously participate in the pleasures of consumer culture, relentlessly entertained by the spectacle of violence” (2015, p. 201). As Eken (2019) suggests, this is a state that is supported by the US political and military establishment. Moreover, as Evans and Giroux (2015) argue, in the United States, the military occupies a position of power and dominance in the social imagination. The military is closely entwined with notions of patriotism and freedom and therefore any criticism of the military is taken by many as an attack on the republic itself. Given its advanced stage of development, this paper will focus primarily on the US context, whilst also acknowledging that the developments discussed in the paper and the spectacle of violence itself, are experienced more globally. In the next section, the market for violence as spectacle is explored through the case of the military-themed FPS video game genre.

### **War play, FPS games, and the market for violence as spectacle**

War and violence have been central themes since the inception of video gaming in the 1960s, emerging, as Mantello (2012) notes, in the context of the Cold War and nuclear stand-off between East and West. Indeed, Deterding (2010) goes so far as to suggest that the Cold War strategy of mutually assured destruction was itself embedded with a gaming logic, because the “... binary logic and finality of nuclear war made it necessary to calculate every possible step and reaction of the enemy in advance, and simulation games built on systems analysis and mathematical game theory promised a scientific solution to this demand” (p. 21). The first computer game, developed in the United States in 1962 was also war-themed. Called *Spacewar!*, it was a simple game in which two players each take control of a spaceship with the sole objective of destroying the other. The creation of creative college students (as were many later digital innovations), the game very much spoke to the contemporary fears of nuclear Armageddon, and the imperative to win the ‘space race’ against the USSR. Ten years later, in 1972, the first video game console for the consumer market was launched. Called the Magnavox Odyssey, it was developed, not by a major technology company, but by Sanders

Associates, a military contracting firm, and sold over 100,000 units in its first year. (Power, 2007).

As computer technology developed, so more and more video games were released, reaching a mass market position by the 1980s when personal computers and a new generation of dedicated video game consoles became more widely available. Even then, as Mantello (2012) observes, war games continued to play on the political and social fears and aspirations of the time: “the Reagan era, its aggressive foreign policy (Afghanistan, Latin America, Lebanon, Iran), its phobia about the evil, primal Other (communism), and its fetishism for high-tech weaponry (Star Wars Program)” (p. 274) all fed into the narratives and themes of the most popular games of the day, such as SNE’s *Ikari Warriors* (1986) and Taito’s *Operation Wolf* (1987). In such games, borrowing from another powerful popular cultural icon of the time, players take on the character of a Rambo-style super soldier, often with an exaggerated hypermasculine hard body, undertaking seemingly impossible missions against swathes of unnamed and anonymous enemies, in exciting and exotic ‘hot spots’ around the world.

As computer processing power increased and the associated costs declined, we see, by the 1990s, the rise of the video gaming market as we know it today and as each new international security threat and conflict broke out, so it was re-imaged and re-imagined on the computer screen for consumer pleasure, with shorter and shorter lead times such that real-war and consumer-war became increasingly blurred. For example, the first Gulf War of 1991, often dubbed the first video game war, was quickly rendered into pixelated pleasure through games such as Sega’s *Desert Strike* (1992), which was released just one year after those events and became the publisher’s biggest selling game to date, spending several months in the best-seller charts (Hitchens et al 2014). Perhaps the most extreme example of the blurring of boundaries between real war and virtual war is the online game, *Kuma/War*. First released in 2004, the game is regularly updated with new missions that reflect real world events. Thus, in 2011, less than a week after the killing of Osama Bin Laden by US Navy Seals in Pakistan, gamers were able to ‘relive’ the experience in Episode 107 of the game, called ‘Osama 2011’ (Hitchens et al 2014). In 2013, episode 108 *Fall of Sirte*, included the death of Muammar Gaddafi.

Gaming is now by far the most lucrative of all entertainment industries, with US box office earnings for films down to \$42.5 billion in 2020, and earnings for music events worth \$20.2 billion (www.wepc.com. Last accessed 15/01/2021). According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), in 2020, there were an estimated 214.4 million video game players in the US, with 75% of American households possessing at least one video game device. ‘Shooter’ games were the third most popular genre. Within the gaming market, military or war-themed FPS is a major genre, accounting for 26.9% of all games sold in the US in 2018 (www.wepc.com. Last accessed 15/01/2021). Moreover, it is estimated that 80% of male gamers aged between 18-34 and 61% of men aged 35-54 play FPS games on a regular basis (ESA).

Two of the most popular and successful franchises in this genre are *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor*. *Call of Duty* debuted in 2003 and is published by Activision. There are currently 16 games in the *Call of Duty* franchise and over 300 million copies have been sold worldwide ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Call\\_of\\_Duty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Call_of_Duty)). The series, like many others in this genre, originally focused its gameplay on World War 2 settings, capitalising at the time of its release on a wider turn to a celebratory discourse on World War 2 and its greatest generation (Godfrey and Lilley, 2009). More recent titles have moved to the near future, setting their stories against a backdrop of terrorism, organised crime, the fight for scarce natural resources, and even nuclear war. *The Medal of Honor* series has followed a similar arc. First released in 1999, and published by Electronic Arts, this franchise currently consists of 17 titles and has sold over 35 million copies ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medal\\_of\\_Honor\\_\(video\\_game\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medal_of_Honor_(video_game_series))). Like *Call of Duty*, its early titles centred on World War 2, allowing players to take part in many of the most famous battles of this War, from the D-Day landings to Stalingrad. More recently, it has shifted attention to the recent past with campaigns set in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Both franchises employ the same kinds of narratives, game features, characters, and thematic tropes. In each, the player takes on the role of one or more elite special forces’ soldiers tasked with assorted missions including infiltration, assassination, assault, and defensive operations, utilising a vast array of military technologies. Single player ‘campaigns’ typically adopt a hero’s journey narrative, split into ‘Acts’ in which a new and inexperienced recruit (the player) is tutored in the skills and technologies of advanced military warfare by a gruff and battle-

seasoned mentor. These campaigns take players on a journey through a series of geographies of war with explicit missions to be completed and set-piece battles to engage in. Whilst each plays out themes of sacrifice, betrayal and loss, typically the game ends in victory for the player and their Western allies, although as with any good franchise, there is always a hint of what is to come in the next thrilling instalment.

What most distinguishes the FPS genre of games is that it allows the player to virtually embody the character that they are playing. This aspect of simulation requires the player to live through the experiences of the character on the screen. Rather than simply watching the action unfold the player participates in it. This is done through a form of virtual embodiment in which the player takes on the role and identity of the protagonist, seeing the world through their eyes, from a first-person perspective. This means engaging in a range of military skills and operations that involve, at various points, killing, torture, witnessing scenes of death, pain and destruction, making decisions on who to kill and in what fashion. The immersive nature of this genre, and of being a virtual soldier, invest the games with significant meaning and also require the player to negotiate the geo-political context of the game, a theme that will be revisited in the discussion section of the paper.

In positioning the player in the role of a soldier, video games create a simulation of military activity that is exciting, engaging, interactive, and deeply immersive, but also safe and detached from the true reality of war: the copy replacing the original. Indeed, it is the interactive and immersive nature of video games that makes them especially interesting and important as a critical node in the contemporary spectacle of violence. Video games offer an embodied experience of war play but one in which imagination is curtailed by a tightly woven and controlled storyline and game world in which activities have been pre-coded and through which the player is steered to predetermined outcomes, informed by US military doctrine. This embodied experience is made more explicit through the *first person* perspective that such games adopt, with the player literally looking down the barrel of their character's weapon.

### **The Military-Entertainment Complex: creating the spectacle of violence**

Central to the development of the major military-themed FPS franchises is a complex set of relationships and networks that involve not only game studios but also academic research centres, state institutions, the military, defence contractors, and multiple areas of the

entertainment industries whose approval, cooperation and expertise are crucial to creating these violent spectacles. Mantello (2012) identifies the beginnings of this relationship in the early 1980s when the US military observed that a particular consumer video game, *Battlezone* (1980), made by Atari for its *Atari 2600* console was hugely popular with many of its young recruits. It also observed a number of similarities between the game and its own “costly yet claustrophobic tank simulators” (Mantello 2012: 274). At the time, military simulators typically cost in the region of \$30-35 million but were continually constrained by the limits of the technology and expertise available in the military (Ottosen 2009). Therefore, the military commissioned Atari to make a more complex version of its *Battlezone* game that could be used for military training purposes. That simulator, known as the Bradley Trainer, was not hugely successful but paved the way for a relationship to develop between the military, defence industries and commercial gaming studios (Stahl, 2010).

Throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the military frequently adapted and modified commercial video games for military use. For example, the popular FPS game *Doom* (id Software 1990) was adapted by the US Marine Corps Modelling and Simulation Management Office to train Marines in squad-based combat scenarios (Lenoir, 2000). In turn, this Marine ‘mod’ (modification) was then made available to the home gamer. In 2001, the US Department of Defence adapted the popular FPS, *Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear* (Red Storm Entertainment 1999), as a simulator for urban warfare (King and Leonard, 2010). It then contributed to the development of further games in the franchise which again it adapted for training purposes (ibid.). By the late 1990s, games studios had become more financially viable whilst the US military had seen its own budgets cut as a result of the end of the Cold War. As such, the US military: “began not only to adopt or adapt civilian games for training purposes but also to directly collaborate with private-sector studios to create customized war games” (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter 2009: 101).

So close has the relationship become that numerous writers have dubbed it as some variation of the notion of a ‘military-entertainment complex’ (Graham and Shaw, 2010), defined by Shaw as “the assemblage of sites, institutions, and networks that produce war video games (2010: 793). This choice of label intentionally seeks to highlight both the closeness of these concerns and, echoing former US President Dwight Eisenhower’s original intent when famously coining the label ‘military-industrial complex’, as a warning of the potential dangers

of leaving such relationships unchecked. Specifically, with increased synergies between the military, defence, and entertainment industries, so a more ingrained and overtly military ideology is embedded in these games, and related forms of popular culture. In this regard, as Evans and Giroux (2015: xii) observe: “The spectacle of violence takes on a kind of doubling, both in the production of subjects willing to service the political and economic power represented by the spectacle and increasingly in the production of political and economic power willing to serve the spectacle itself.”

The culmination of the increasingly close relationships, in the United States, between entertainment industries, the Pentagon, the military, and contractors resulted in the establishment in 1999 of the University of California’s Institute for Creative Technology (ICT). Initially funded by the Pentagon and US Defence Department to the sum of \$45 million, this rather unassuming sounding academic institution is in fact the location from which the military-entertainment complex has established a permanent base of operations and out of which a number of significant advances have been made. As noted by Stahl (2010), the ICT is a network not just of researchers and military personnel, but also attracts talent from across the entertainment industries: “Toy manufacturers help in generating ideas for futuristic weapons. Hollywood screenwriters brainstorm about potential terrorist plots. Academics suggest strategies for urban combat and psychological operations. Gamemakers devise new methods for soldier training. Set designers help build virtual environments.” (Stahl 2010: 117).

Perhaps the most widely recognised product of this collaboration was the military simulator, *Full Spectrum Warrior* (2000), and its popular consumer variant. Designed originally as a simulator to help develop military leadership capabilities in combat scenarios, the consumer variation sees players take on the role of a member of an elite group of US special forces operatives fighting a rogue state (the fictitious country of Zekistan) that is financing and harbouring terror cells plotting against the West (Stahl, 2010).

More recent simulations include a training package on hostile negotiations with Afghan warlords, simulations of future war employing futuristic weaponry, and one of its more recent

accomplishments, the virtual reality simulator, *Dark Con*. This immersive simulator allows players/trainees to develop their reconnaissance skills. As retold by Coker (2013: 131):

“Playing the role of a scout, his task is to determine what danger, if any, is posed by the occupants of an abandoned building complex near a river. The mission involves negotiating a damp tunnel littered with detritus (human and other). Every sound is faithfully reproduced from the hissing of pipes to the thumping of the generators that power spluttering red lights. Every sight is reproduced, from seeping spigots to shadowy alcoves, as well as the sound of rats scattering at one’s approach. Immersed in this environment the scout hears dogs barking in the distance and vehicles thundering across the road above. These are all sensory cues, and they are all calculated to increase emotional tension and trigger a response.”

For Bourke (2014), one of the great contributions of the ICT to military simulation has been its emphasis on multisensory stimuli, which allows for more immersive and emotional experience: its researchers finding that emotional connection is necessary to increase the value of military simulators as training devices. Indeed, Shaw (2010) suggests that this emotional-affective research hit new heights with the development of a prototype collar that releases certain scents depending on the subject’s location in the simulator. Many of the key features of these simulations have found their way into commercial games, and with the advent of virtual reality products such as Oculus Rift, will likely become even more immersive and sophisticated as the technologies develop (Dholakia and Reyes 2018).

Another key aspect of the military-entertainment complex is the crossover of expertise between the different fields. For example, former military personnel now act as advisors or consultants to games studios when developing new titles. Hank Keirse, a former US Army Colonel, advised of the development of *Call of Duty 4*, claiming that video games teach young generations about the sacrifices and heroic acts undertaken by military personnel (Payne 2012). Going even further, Steven Spielberg, who was involved in creating the first *Medal of Honor* game (coming off the back of his successful World War 2 movie *Saving Private Ryan*, released in 1998), not only employed a retired US Marine Captain, Dale Dye, to advise on the game design (Bourke, 2014), but also put the game’s development team through a military style boot camp so that they could appreciate the feel, sound and texture of military equipment and weapons (the same boot camp that he made the cast of *Saving Private Ryan* experience prior to filming) (Godfrey and Lilley, 2009). In a recent reversal of this practice, Dave Anthony, a



former producer and writer for the *Call of Duty* franchise was invited by the US Pentagon to join the Atlantic Council, a Washington think-tank that advises on the future of conflict.

Commercial games studios now also regularly draw on private military partners to assist in the development of their games. In the case of *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts, 2010), during the pre-launch promotional campaign the studio released a series of short videos detailing their official partnerships with a range of military equipment and weapons manufacturers. In these videos Greg Goodrich, Studio Head and Executive Producer of the Medal of Honor franchise, explores the functionality and application of assorted weapons and technologies to demonstrate the authenticity of the game's deployment of them and to secure the endorsement of these manufacturers (Robinson 2016: 263).

Whilst not a product of the ICT, perhaps the most successful example of the partnership between the video games industry and the military is the commercial video game series *America's Army* (American Army, 2002), to which we now turn our attention.

### ***America's Army: marketing the spectacle of violence***

*America's Army* is a free-to-play online military FPS game, developed by the United States Army that “provides civilians with an inside perspective and a virtual role in today's high-tech Army. The game reflects the bedrocks of Soldiering to include adherence to Army Values, the importance of training and individual development, as well as the necessity of teamwork and leadership for success in small unit actions and missions” (<https://www.americasarmy.com/press>. Last accessed 14/05/2020)

As an example of the military-entertainment complex in practice, *America's Army* was developed by the Modelling, Virtual Environment and Simulation Institute at the US Naval Postgraduate School in partnership with a range of leading gaming studios including Epic Games and GameSpy Industries and in collaboration with Nvidia, Dolby, Lucasfilm and Industrial Light and Magic. Originally released on Independence Day 2002, it is still one of the most played and most popular online military FPSs available and has undergone multiple updates and has seen the launch of three further titles in the franchise: *America's Army: Special Forces* (2003), *America's Army 3* (2009) and, the latest iteration, *America's Army: Proving Grounds* (2015). The current game, *America's Army: Proving Grounds* enables players to experience what is describes as “small unit tactical manoeuvres and training that echoes true-

to-life Army scenarios” in the role of an “11B Infantryman as part of a Long Range Combined Arms – Recon (LRCA-R) unit, a full spectrum capable team that embarks on special operations missions behind enemy lines” (<https://www.americasarmy.com/press>. Last accessed 14/05/2020).

The stated aim of the game is to: “educate the American public about the U.S. Army and its career opportunities, high tech involvement, values, and team-work” (Allen 2011: 43). According to Nichols (2010), the original idea for the game came about in the late 1990s when the US Army began missing recruitment targets. Recognising that many of its youngest recruits were spending much of their time playing video games and citing FPSs in particular as one of their inspirations for enlisting, the game was created to intentionally target this demographic and to stimulate interest in a military career through exposure to this form of war play. As such, the game is very closely tied to the ethos, practice and activities of the US Army. Through a spectacular example of co-branding, the Army promotes the game and the game promotes the Army, even to the point of inserting recruitment adverts during the loading screen whilst players wait to join a mission.

In the game, new players are required to undertake basic training to both familiarise themselves with the game mechanics but also as an opportunity to communicate the expected behaviour of an enlisted Army soldier. Indeed, throughout the game, points are awarded into categories based on the seven core values of the US Army - loyalty, duty, respect, honour, selfless service, personal courage, and integrity. The importance of this ‘honor system’ as it is called in the game is reinforced by the use of real-life former and serving military personnel, called Real Heroes, who feature in the game and have their own biographical page outlining their military achievements. In addition, an online forum for the game (<https://forum.americasarmy.com>) allows players and military personnel to share stories, experiences, tactics and so on creating closer links between the military and potential recruits. Following the launch of the game, the US Army also released a series of branded toys, action figure and comics.

For Nieborg (2010) *America’s Army* is four different games in one: an advergaming, an edugame, a testing tool, and a propaganda game. As an advergaming (adventure game) it is an exciting and realistic FPS that can be played with little regard for actual military service whilst still subscribing to many of the conventions of the military shooter: “the fetishization of weaponry, the focus on infantry and close quarters combat, and the emphasis on rankings and multiplayer

competitions” (Nieborg 2010: 59). As an edugame (educational game) and testing tool it is a simulator used by the military for training purposes. Not just for close quarters combat but, as Allen (2011) observes, it has also been used to teach new recruits’ basic military skills such as navigation, map referencing and even first aid. As a propaganda game for military service, the game seeks to communicate the values, beliefs and culture of the military through the narrative and game mechanics and the branding of the military as a form of entertainment spectacle.

It is this last emphasis that has attracted most criticism and concern. King and Leonard (2010) argue that the game represents a “powerful pedagogical vehicle’ exposing those who play the game to the “ideological, political, historical, and racial lessons that guide US hegemony around the globe” (p. 94). In part, this is achieved through some simple mechanics in the game. For example, players only have the option to play as a US soldier (although to all other online players, you are rendered as the enemy). Schulzke (2013) argues that by forcing all players to play as US military personnel, the game promotes ongoing operations in the War on Terror by presenting only one distinct viewpoint, that of the US military. Any attempt to diverge from the specified path, through actions such as friendly fire (shooting teammates or civilians), results in punishment and the loss of points and a subsequent move down the leader board or the removal of a perk or ‘achievement’. Interestingly, when other games have sought to allow players to adopt the identity of the enemy other, these features have often been met with resistance and, in some cases, subsequently removed. For example, in *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts 2010), the game’s online multiplayer feature originally made it possible for gamers to play as the Taliban against the US. However, opposition from politicians, military and veteran societies, and some parts of the media resulted in many major game retailers refusing to stock the game until the feature had been disabled (Robinson, 2016).

In most of these games, the only time that it is permissible to occupy the subject position of the enemy Other is when it is carefully embedded within the main campaign of the game. For example, in *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2* (Activision 2009) the player can choose to take part in the massacre of civilians at a Russian airport, an act that becomes a central plot device for the rest of the game. What is the purpose of such scenes? In one sense they push the narrative forward and set up the motivation but also the justification for the retribution that will follow. However, by closely aligning with real or imagined terrorist acts, they also operate to maintain the Western fear of terrorism that is reported so frequently in the media, and further

reinforce the perceived need for decisive Western military activity. They legitimise military force both in the game and in the real world:

“By creating clear and identifiable (external) threats to the Western way of life, they reinforce the myth of the superiority of Western civilisation and political systems while maintaining a high level of consent toward particular policies enacted by Western governments such as the “War on Terror”” (Cassar 2013: 334).

Other key features of the game include the way that death and injury are portrayed. As well as never being able to play as ‘the bad guy’, the game also ignores the pain, suffering and visceral reality of what bullets, knives and bombs do to the human body. In *America’s Army*, injury is acknowledged by a momentary drop of blood in the player’s display and death by a silent collapse to the floor. There are no “blood-curdling screams or limbs blown off ... Bodies tend to disappear as if raptured up to heaven” (Shaw 2010: 797). In part, this decision was informed by the wider marketing strategy, with the game targeted at young teens, and so needing a ‘T’ rating in the US.

The absence of the reality of war makes for a sanitised, clean version of the battlefield, reducing the moral complexity that is the difference between real war and virtual war. As Salter (2011: 371-2) has observed in this regard, the claims to authenticity in such games, with their attention to the mechanics of firing weapons, the tactics, landscapes of war and even the clothing and accessories employed stand in stark contrast to the “clean, almost sterile way” (Ibid.) in which death and injury are rendered on the screen. For Allen, *America’s Army* is ‘a self-conscious attempt to produce a militarized gaming subject’ (2011: 46).

Has the game been successful in its aims? Well certainly it remains a hugely popular video game in its own right and there is also evidence that it works well as a military training device. Mantello (2012), for example, cites evidence from military personnel who claim to have attributed the saving of a fellow soldier’s life to the virtual experience of the game. As a marketing and recruitment tool, Bourke (2014) cites a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study that found that nearly a third of Americans aged between 16 and 24 expressed a more positive view towards the military as a result of playing the game; while another survey found that 60% of new recruits to the US Army had played the game more than five times in the week prior to enlisting (Bourke 2014). From the military’s perspective, as a marketing tool, Shaw (2010) estimates that the military spends on average \$15,000 attracting each recruit. At an

annual maintenance cost of £6 million dollars (out of a total marketing and recruitment spend of \$7.7 billion) the army only has to attract 400 new recruits to recoup its investment in the game.

Moreover, the success of the game has led to a broader marketing and recruitment strategy in which the US military has gone on to target the wider lifestyles and interests of its key target market. This has included sponsorship deals with NASCAR events and also sponsoring gaming events and creating its own e-sports team: USArmyEsports. Although, in 2020, the US Army had to withdraw its esports team from Twitch, the popular online gaming site, due to reports that it was enticing players to visit its recruiting website with the promise of what turned out to be fake giveaways (Uhl, 2020). Variants of the game have also made their way into the US school system where the basic game structure, mechanics and visuals are adapted to courses in engineering and other technical subjects, always in a military context (Mead, 2009). The US military also now recruits gamers into research positions to help develop more realistic and engaging spectacles of violence for an already receptive intake of new recruits who have grown up on gaming.

## **Discussion**

Having outlined the market for the conditions of development and the marketing of military-themed FPS games, the paper now turns to discussing the ways in which these cultural artefacts work within the discourse of militarism that predominates in the US. In particular, three issues will be discussed: the place of these games in the intertextual network of images through which the spectacle of violence is transmitted; the immersive experience of this form of violent consumption; and the geopolitical implications of the spectacle of violence.

### *The intertextual network of mediated violence*

In their intertextual connections to other forms of mediated war consumption such as films, TV shows and media news reporting, military-themed FPS games perpetuate many of the dominant narratives, tropes and visual imaginaries of the wider discourse of militarism that Evans and Giroux argue underpin the spectacle of violence. For Coker (2013), video games and other visual representations of war have become the dominant form of war representation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As in Debord's original formulation, mass media and commodity culture are the instruments through which the spectacle of violence exerts its control. And, as we come to enjoy increasingly realistic representations of war as a form of play and leisure activity, so

these simulations blur with the representation of real war rendered on our screens through the television news such that virtual war is presented and experienced in a similar vein to the way real war is reported and, at the same time, real war is increasingly being rendered like a game. As such “both worlds become aesthetically married to each other” (Salter 2011: 361). Indeed, in many of these games, such as *Call of Duty: World at War* (Activision 2008), original media reporting is incorporated into the narrative during cut scenes in the campaign, thus adding another layer of authenticity.

For Shaw (2010) the blurring between real war and virtual war makes it hard to know whether video games are becoming more like war or whether war is becoming more like a video game, both in its execution and in its mediated re-presentation and consumption. This intertextual network of images and imaginaries is persuasive in its rendering of a particular representation of war, because:

“...when the same militaristic identities and assumptions are reiterated by numerous media channels and asserted by many institutions, the chances for their reproduction rise. In societies on a war footing, militarization becomes part of everyday life, from downloading a free mission from the Kuma War site to CNN reporting the daily threat level ...the boundary between the barracks and the living room is thus imploding” (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter 2009:117).

At the technological level, the image becomes the principal connection to the world, replacing direct experience. Thus, we come to know more about the world, but only through the spectacle and so on its terms: our citizenry is regulated by the spectacle: “The flow of images carries everything before it, and it is similarly someone else who controls at will this simplified summary of the sensible world; who decides where the flow will lead as well as the rhythm of what should be shown, like some perpetual, arbitrary, surprise, leaving no time for reflection, and entirely independent of what the spectator might understand or think of it” (Debord 1988/1998: 27-28)

In short, what is being argued here is that through the representation of war and violence across a multitude of different visual media, a dominant discourse is reinforced, one that perpetuates the spectacle of violence. For Debord, the “spectacle’s instruction and the spectator’s ignorance” (1988/1998: 28) are mutually reinforcing rather than one leading to the other. Other critics and writers have made similar arguments, Stahl (2010: 3), for example, argues that the

contemporary military entertainment industry seeks to “control public opinion by distancing, distracting, and disengaging the citizen from the realities of war.” Hedges (2002) argues that a ‘myth of war’ circulates in society, one peddled by politicians, historians, the entertainment industries and other ‘myth-makers’ and is essential in order to justify: “the horrible sacrifices required in war, the destruction and the death of innocents. It can be formed only by denying the reality of war, by turning the lies, the manipulation, the inhumanness of war into the heroic ideal (p. 26). McSorely (2013) extends this argument by suggesting that the seemingly mundane and banal forms of entertainment through which we consume war - such as video games, Hollywood film, and popular fiction - serve the political function of making war an acceptable and necessary act. Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter (2009), drawing on the work of Hardt and Negri (2004) argue that today we are seeing the banalisation of war, in which, “daily life and the normal functioning of power [have] been permeated with the threat and violence of warfare (2004: 13 cited in Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter 2009: 100). Joanna Bourke expresses alarm at the way ‘violence-as-fun’ has crept into our everyday lives in unexpected and for the most part undetected ways. We have unwittingly become, she cautions, ‘citizen-soldiers’, implicated in actively perpetuating a norm of militarization (Bourke, 2014: 1).

To return to Debord, the power of the spectacle fosters an “experience of permanent submission” (1988/1998: 28), and an acceptance of what it shows. When what it shows is the normalisation of violence, then we need to better understand the mechanics of this form of submission. To this we now turn.

### *Immersion and the fog of war play*

The military-themed FPS, through its embodied immersive gameplay creates a simulation of the lived experience of combat and military violence. Indeed, it is precisely the attempts at realism and authenticity that make these games persuasive: with carefully reconstructed military tactics and weapons, beautifully built and detailed geographies of war, heroes and villains that play to – or help construct - our stereotypes and fears. All delivered by professional actors reading from scripts prepared by Hollywood screen writers, it is their believability that brings these games to life and makes them seem real and so thoroughly consumable.

The depth of engagement and immersion that contemporary forms of war games produce lead to a level of participation in, and experience of war, albeit in mediated and virtual form, that can encourage more submissive subject positions in relation to the use of military force

(Mantello, 2012). Evans and Giroux (2015: 32) argue that the spectacle of violence “immerses us, encourages us to experience violence as pleasure such that we become positively invested in its occurrence, while attempting to render us incapable of either challenging the actual atrocities being perpetrated by the same system or steering our collective future in a different direction.” Through our increasing immersion in the spectacle of violence, we are becoming desensitised to the real implications of war and violence. It is part of a wider process that Lutz (2009) has referred to as the ‘military normal’, a situation in which discourses of war, conflict and the military permeate all aspects of everyday life. As Mantello argues, “these forces seem capable of completely overwhelming alternative and often more truthful representations of warfare and contemporary world politics” (Mantello 2012: 272). Debord did not anticipate the developments in gaming when elaborating his thesis on the spectacle of the society, and so drew on the more passive entertainment forms such as television and film. Had he lived to witness the rise and popularity of video gaming, he may well have pressed his argument about the political dangers that the spectacle possesses much further and much harder.

The recurring and persistent narrative themes and visual imagery within these games also signal their interchangeability and exchangeability and underscore their commodified form. In an age in which our relation to the wider world is increasingly ‘manufactured, manipulated and above all, mediated’ (Hoskins 2001: 334) we are witnessing a commodification of world events, past, present and future, into conveniently structured narratives in which the murkiness and fog of war is replaced by a uniform and linear narrative which, as Gish (2010) argues, destabilises our understanding, or rather concretises it. So pervasive and seductive has the spectacle of violence become that we have developed “a taste for violence” (Evans and Giroux: 2015: 9), and have even learnt to appreciate its aesthetic qualities. And herein, perhaps, lies the rub. Evans and Giroux (2015) argue that the spectacle of violence creates subjects who are cultured to find pleasure in violence, and in so doing submit themselves to its prevalence in wider fields of life. As such, the spectacle becomes a form of domination that, in the case of militarism, operates primarily through the mass media and entertainment industries, underpinned by the military-entertainment complex.

For the ‘consumer-citizen-soldier’ (Stahl, 2010) mediated experiences of war in military-themed FPS games, may come to constitute a particular understanding of and relationship to war and the military; one that can be frightening and intense but also always exhilarating and rewarding. The experience that these games offer, shapes and informs an understanding of the event and by extension our subject position in relation to it. But, as Debord warns us, the



spectacle produces its own truths, and in so doing creates a generalised veil of secrecy such that "... it is no longer possible to believe anything that you have not learned for yourself, directly" (Debord 1988/1998: 19).

### *The politics of war play*

The networked and interactive nature of war play informs and is informed by a wider geopolitical discourse that the spectacle of violence perpetuates: one that emphasises a predominately US notion of democracy and military superiority. Military-themed FPS games almost universally adopt an Anglo-Western political and ideological perspective, and through their narrative themes and visual imagery, also work to legitimise and naturalise the use of violence as the solution to international crises - whether they be political, cultural or even natural as in the case of the more recent games in the *Call of Duty* franchise. For example, in *Call of Duty Ghosts* (Activision 2013) a near future scenario unfolds in which oil has become a scarce commodity, and the security of it the primary economic driver for the war that ensues between nation states and commercial military providers.

As Gagnon (2010) observes, military-themed FPS games not only echo the militarism found in news reporting and other forms of popular culture, but also those of "various foreign policy hawks who have supported George W. Bush's response to the terrorist attacks of New York and Washington, thereby (re)producing a mindset that has often pervaded the U.S. national security debate since 9/11" (p. 5). Such games invite consumers to experience international conflict and foreign policy through the lens of the global War on Terror in which the virtuous West is situated against the vile and evil Other (Robinson, 2019). The two normally come into conflict due to an unprovoked and aggressive attack on the West and the solution, the only solution as diplomacy is never an option in such games, is high-tech spectacular war. This implies that the only real solution to world affairs is war, and that the West occupies a position of moral and military superiority. In doing so, they make war and military action normative, and present only a single geopolitical truth.

This is further affirmed in these games through the depiction of Western forces, and their allies, as organised, professional, heroic and charismatic and the enemy other as disorganised, cruel, immoral, cowardly and incompetent. Recent games in this genre have positioned a number of different countries or groups in the role of the enemy other: China, Russia, and Middle Eastern

and African states. In this selection such games “draw upon and are reflective of contemporary US geopolitical intrigues” (Bos 2018: 57). Such games also feed America’s “fears, anxieties, and insecurities” by promoting a “tabloid imaginary” of post-9/11 geopolitics (Gagnon 2010: 6).

As Power notes, games put a “friendly, hospitable face on the military, manufacturing consent and complicity among consumers for military programmes, missions and weapons .... representations of war and combat in digital games help to suture consumerism to citizenship ‘within a militarised ideology’ (2007: 278). That is, as a form of spectacle designed for entertainment and leisure, these games connect us to a reality from which we are detached but in righting wrongs, in making the Other pay for offences against the West, and for ensuring the ultimate superiority of the West, games offer a “therapeutic way to work out 21<sup>st</sup> century angst by battling the bad guys” (Power 2007: 284).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to show how military-themed FPS video games, far from just being a form of entertainment or leisure, occupy a central place within a wider discourse of militarism that is prevalent in US society and political doctrine, and to draw attention to the relationship between violence, markets and marketing by recognising such games as complex, sophisticated cultural artefacts that both draw on, and in some ways shape, wider discourses about war and the military. As part of a wider spectacle of violence, they help create a new ‘consumer-citizen soldier’ subject position (Stahl, 2010), that regularly immerse the player in the experience of war without ever knowing war’s reality. They provide a history, a context and a set of narrative tropes on which to draw when considering the state use of violence and through the pleasure and enjoyment they provide, increasingly naturalise and normalise war as the boundaries between real war and the simulation of war become more and more blurred. Celebrating and recreating war for consumer pleasure is far from new, indeed, some suggest there may even be a ‘natural’ link between games and warfare (Schulzke, 2013), but what has been argued above is that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century a new form of spectacle, the spectacle of violence, has emerged drawing on contemporary digital technology that create even more immersive, interactive and realistic re-presentations of war.

As one of the most popular forms of contemporary popular culture, the war-themed FPS occupies a central role in both creating and disseminating the ‘cultural imaginary’ (Dawson

1994) of this spectacle, creating a regulatory and normalising effect which “help to suture consumerism to citizenship within a militarised ideology (Power 2007: 278). In making war an exciting and pleasurable experience, it works to both legitimise and normalise warfare amongst consumers. Moreover, the establishing of closer connections between the military and entertainment industries and faster and tighter feedback loops between the two, combined with the perceived benefits for the military of utilising gaming for recruitment, training and propaganda aims, suggests that this partnership is likely to continue, further strengthening the military-entertainment complex.

Evans and Giroux (2015) argue that the presence of the discourse of militarism in everyday life leads to the production of violence and fear as key societal motivations that enable the legitimisation of institutional forms of militarism, such as in schools, communities, and popular culture. The conditions of possibility that enable this form of domination emerge through the spectacle of violence and a “market-driven culture that advocates for consumerism, militarism, and organized violence, circulated through various registers of popular culture extending from high fashion and Hollywood movies to the creation of violent video games sponsored by the Pentagon” (Evans and Giroux 2015: 60). In other words, it is a market-driven spectacle of war and violence that maintains the state of permanent war and the discourse of militarism, creating and perpetuating the fear of violence that is the foundation of the justification of increasing state control: “The market-driven spectacle of war demands a culture of conformity, complicit intellectuals obedient to established relations of powers and its version of history, and a passive republic of consumer” (*ibid.*)

Through considering the market and marketing of military-themed FPS video games, and exploring their conditions of development within the military-entertainment complex, this paper sheds light on the discourse of militarism that such games perpetuate. It also draws attention to the relationship between violence, markets and marketing by arguing that marketing and consumption have to be recognised as central elements in this discourse in which violence is rendered unremarkable and acts of extreme violence are consumed for pleasure: “As brutality become more commonplace in entertainment, unfamiliar violence such as extreme images of torture and death – whether fictional or real – becomes banally familiar, while familiar violence that occurs daily is barely recognized and relegated to the realm of unnoticed and unnoticeable” (Evans and Giroux 2015: 61)

In closing we return to this journal's special issue on markets, marketing and violence. Varman (2018) asks, what are the consequences of marketing's engagement with violence? This paper offers one possible answer that turns on the power effects of military-themed video games and the way in which they convey political and ideological messages, as part of a wider spectacle of violence. On first play, our attention centres on the immediacy of the action, the excitement, tension and challenge of the game, on perfecting the game mechanics and of beating our high score or collecting all of the rewards. But like many media artefacts, these games leave an impression on us, a form of 'narrative persuasion' (Festl et al. 2013: 395). We are invited to enjoy the excitement of war but to do so in a carefully coded and managed ways. The violence that is presented to us on the screen is sanitised, clean, full of self-justified purpose, and without ambiguity. In other words, it is made 'virtuous' (Der Derain, 2009).

Recognising the power effects of these games, as part of a wider spectacle of violence, the marketing and consumption of these games needs to be taken seriously, not just as a market and form of entertainment, but as a powerful node in the militarisation of everyday life. Games cannot simply be dismissed as a trend in the history of digital media. In the same way that television and cinema have been recognised for having power effects on and through their audiences, so it is that gamers, despite many media images to the contrary, are not passive dupes. Games convey powerful messages and the close relationship between the gaming industry, the military and defence contractors in the production of the military-themed FPS creates a need for careful and detailed scrutiny of this area of inquiry. That they seek to establish a norm of military action and legitimise the use of military force is an issue that needs further consideration, research and debate. Marketing scholars have a role to play in this debate as they are particularly well placed to explore the markets for and the marketing of these games as well as the various practices of consumption that they entail.

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