Selective Realism: Filtering Experiences of War and Violence in First- and Third-Person Shooters

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Abstract

The present article develops the concept of selective realism to understand how design features and narrative frames of first- and third-person shooters (F/TPS) exclude attention to salient, yet unpleasant, features of warfare such as problematic forms of violence, long-term psychological impacts, or socio-political blowbacks. Identifying four specific filters that frame player experiences, I argue that the resulting selectivity is significant because it is characteristic of the F/TPS genre as a whole that, through its wide dissemination, impacts upon the cultural framing of actual warfare. The article illustrates features of selective realism, before it conducts in-depth analysis of the titles *Spec Ops: The Line* and *The Last of Us* to show how critical game design can invite a conscious unraveling of the generic frames and the ideological positions these invite. The article concludes with a reassessment of arguments regarding alleged socio-political impacts of war- and violence-themed computer games.

Keywords

Introduction

The present article focuses on photorealist computer games that render three-dimensional worlds accessible to players in a first- or third-person perspective.[1] Particularly, I direct attention to titles that simulate wars or other forms of violent conflict.

On the background of established approaches to realism and authenticity in first- and third-person shooter games (F/TPS), the term selective realism is introduced to conceptualize how generic narratives and game mechanics selectively exclude negative and challenging aspects of war and violence and this way invite for pleasurable experiences of play that avoid difficult ethical decision in ambiguous moral terrain. I identify four specific filters that systematically invite the formation of ideologically biased conceptualizations of war and warfare, before I turn to counterexamples such as Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013). I argue that these two titles to varying degrees enable attention to the complex and often unpredictable consequences of war and violence, and that they therefore challenge and partly re-appropriate the established conventions of the first-/third-person shooter (T/FPS) genre.

Authenticity and Realism in Computer Games

Forms of realism in computer games have been problematized earlier. Galloway (2004), for instance, argues that the concept of representation alone is insufficient to deal with issues of realism in gameplay. Games, he writes, "are not merely

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[1] For generic distinction based on games' varying audio-visual styles see Järvinen (2002).

watched, they are played". As such, he continues, "they supplement this debate [on realism] with the phenomenon of action. It is no longer sufficient to talk about the visual or textual representation of meaning. Instead the game theorist must talk about actions, and the physical or gameworlds in which they transpire". This focus includes attention to the ways through which games' cybernetic feedback loops render available authentic short- and long-term consequences of player actions and decisions.

Galloway (2004) develops a distinction between three forms of realism in digital games: "realistic-ness" referring to the general accuracy of the audio-visual representation, "social realism" pointing to the believability of character interactions and narrative, and "behavioural realism" indicating the authenticity of movement and object physics. Breuer, Festl, and Quandt (2012) further develop Galloway's typology and adapt it to the genre of the first-person shooter. They distinguish between "representational realism", "behavioural realism", and "narrative realism" (pp.218) and connect each type to particular aspects of game mechanics, design features, and narrative devices. Taking note of these important advances, I will here point to the fact that, regardless which type of realism in war- and violence-themed, photorealistic F/TPS-games one decides to focus upon, these do not only emerge as inherently selective, but in addition apply similar filters to predispose player experiences. These filters let only certain aspects of a preceding reality emerge in an authentic fashion while they systematically exclude others.

An underlying selectiveness of digital games and simulations has been addressed in earlier research. Writing about computer games with a World War II setting, Salvati and Bullinger (2013) introduce the term "selective authenticity" to describe "how game designers draw upon a chain of signifiers assembled from

historical texts, artefacts, and popular representations" (pp.154) to scaffold playful explorations of possible pasts and tie them to established master narratives. In contrast to the term selective realism, selective authenticity directs focus to *what is presented* to the player and how for instance the excessively detailed representation of technological gadgets, cinematic conventions in cut-scenes, and remediated documentary material frame possible player experiences. The present article, on the other hand, directs attention to *what is not represented* - what remains beyond the generic frames of war- and violence-themed F/TPS games, yet what nevertheless constitutes salient aspects of past and present wars.

In war- and violence-themed photorealist F/TPS computer games, the degree of authenticity with which certain sides of past conflicts are made accessible is often the basis for criticism or praise. However, the particular filters applied to selectively highlight certain and veil other aspects of war are seldom made explicit. Köstlbauer (2013) for instance provides a list of core elements that, according to him, constitute "the claim of realism and authenticity" (pp.170) of historically inspired digital war games. He exclusively mentions surface features such as the design of cockpits and other machinery, landscapes, weaponry and other equipment, as well as simulated physics and enemy behaviour as most salient, yet excludes without further ado such aspects as civilian casualties, PTSD, or unintended socio-political and economic long-term consequences of military actions.

In a similar vein, Schulzke (2013a) argues for the capacity of computer war games to function as "historical simulations, which re-create real events and locations" (pp.261). In his analysis of how the *Vietcong* and *Modern Warfare* FPS-series simulate cold war history, however, he reduces the socio-political, cultural,

and economic complexities of the period to battle-related object physics and AI-behaviour. His subsequent claim that "historical simulations' greatest strengths from a historiographical perspective are their ability to immerse players in convincing environments that allow players to re-enact history" in a way impossible "when only conveyed in writing" (pp.264) stands as a postulate without support in his empirical analysis. Even though, Schulzke repeatedly concedes that FPS-games stylize events to make them "fit with fictional narratives" (pp.271) and that they therefore have a "potential for distorting history" (pp.270) and "overlook many unpleasant realities of war" (pp.265), he never productively engages the underlying selectivity of what he terms a realistic simulation of historical incidents.

The purpose of the present article is not to demand a comprehensive all-encompassing form of historical simulation (which is impossible), but to argue for the necessity to make conscious and critically investigate the conventions of F/TPS-games that tacitly predispose player perceptions and performances. War- and violence-themed AAA-titles such as the *Call of Duty*-series, the *Battlefield*-franchise, or the *Medal of Honor*-games reach massive global audiences and immerse players in virtual settings for hundreds of hours. As such, the fact that all these games apply similar filters that selectively highlight only certain aspects of warfare and violence deserves scholarly attention. The point of criticism raised in this article is that the particular filters of the F/TPS-genre systematically structure player experiences in a way that glorifies warfare and soldiery and that supresses unpleasant, yet salient features and consequences of military and other violent conduct. As a result, the genre plays into and reinforces cultural imaginaries of war that frame military-based approaches to conflict resolution as less problematic,

more efficient, and more virtuous than they in reality are (Der Derian, 2009; Stahl, 2010).

Simulating War Experiences: Filters, Frames, and Selectivity

According to Uricchio (2011), any "simulation is capable of generating countless encounters that may subsequently be fixed as representations" (pp.333). As such, he continues, "a simulation is a machine for producing speculative or conditional representations" (pp.333). Arguing in a similar direction, Bogost (2008) defines simulation as "a representation of a source system via a less complex system [that] informs the user's understanding of the source system in a subjective way" (pp.98). In their approaches both Uricchio and Bogost assert selectivity as a defining feature of simulation and alert to possible ideological imports of a conditional reduction of complexity in simulated environments.

The concept of selective realism developed in the present article draws upon Uricchio's and Bogost's definitions and identifies the design features and narrative devices employed in the F/TPS-genre to filter player experiences of war and violence. The filters identified below point to the systematic nature with which the conditionality (Uricchio) and reductive nature (Bogost) of game-based simulations of war and violence insert an ideological bias into the various representations emerging from contingent practices of play that connect these games to war-prone discourses and interests. As such, the present article provides Keogh's (2013) assertion that "military shooters [usually] deploy simplistic, romantic, and jingoistic depictions of the modern, high-tech battlefield" (pp.2) with an analytical basis.

On the basis of what has been said so far, the following filters predisposing player experiences and performances at the level of both procedural and narrative rhetoric of the F/TPS-genre can be identified: 1) the violence filter, 2) the consequence filter, 3) the character filter, and 4) the conflict filter. I will describe each of them in turn.

The *violence filter* determines which forms of violence are depicted and can be enacted by the player throughout the game. The F/TPS-genre usually excludes the possibility of friendly fire and since the various battlefields normally are "conspicuously void of civilians" (Keogh, 2013, pp.2) collateral damage rarely figures as a prominent feature. If civilian deaths are presented, their fates are disconnected from player involvement and usually presented as the consequence of the opponents' actions and decisions. The only violence that is enabled is strictly battle-related and targeted at opposing soldiers or paramilitary forces this way excluding such documented war-related abuses as rape, the killing of children, or the unintended targeting of non-combatants with heavy weapons. In sum, the depiction of violence in T/FPS-games can be gritty and explicit, but its nature and effects are strictly limited to battle-related conduct and soldiers' bodies. This way, the genre plays into discourses that sanitize warfare and present it as a struggle limited to soldiers and armies.[2]

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[2] *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Activision 2009) might be seen as a counter-example to this trend of sanitizing warfare. In the optional game map 'No Russian' the player takes control over a US secret agent who, to be able to infiltrate an ultra-nationalist Russian terrorist group, participates in a massacre of civilians at an airport. However, the fact that the atrocity is planned and initiated by the game's main adversary and that the participation by the player is explained with the

The *consequence filter* determines the range of short- and long-term consequences of violence and warfare that are depicted in F/TPS-games. The genre severely de-emphasizes negative long- and short-term impacts both at an individual and collective level. As such, the consequences of severe acts of violence usually exclude such features as crippled player- or non-player characters, severely traumatized characters, or protagonists suffering from PTSD. Also negative effects at a societal, economic, and political level including unintended blowbacks of military endeavours are normally deemphasized this way reiterating understandings of war as efficient and surgical operations without individual or collective long-term costs.

The *character filter* determines which in-game protagonists can acquire an identity other than combatant and gain a voice to explain their point of view in an accessible and relevant manner. Also the biased presentation of individual heroism and sacrifice are predisposed by this filter. Usually, players are invited to align with and ally themselves to soldiers and/or special agents working on behalf of ultimately benevolent forces. Even though many games of the genre raise doubts regarding the true intentions of characters issuing missions and players are often forced to change sides, the overall structure of sympathy will, in the long run, make the player ultimately ally with and serve a good cause. Possible 'errors' committed at earlier stages of gameplay are then explained with a lack of knowledge or brainwashed characters. In F/TPS-games, opponents usually remain largely invisible, without recognizable identities or traits, yet can emerge

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intention of averting an even graver threat, aligns also this map to the general violence filter described above. Also the game's 'Favelas'-map includes civilians, the killing of whom leads to an automatic failing of the mission.

potentially anytime from anywhere posing a constant deadly threat. Some games feature recognizable main adversaries that are often presented in cut scenes to explain their intentions. In these scenes, however, these characters are made to appear caricatured and their evil plans and actions (including torture of player characters or allies) facilitate processes of moral disengagement (Hartmann and Vorderer, 2010) and serve as the implicit legitmatory frame for the in-game violence committed by players.[3]

Lastly, a *conflict filter* limits possible understandings of, and solutions to, in-game conflicts. In the F/TPS-genre the main conflict is usually presented as necessitated by ruthless and inhumane opponents the remorseless nature and actions of whom disallow for any other response than severe violence. Peaceful alternatives such as negotiation, compromise, or even surrender are efficiently excluded with reference to the inhumanity and brutality of the adversaries. Also at the level of the various secondary and tertiary conflicts, the genre excludes nonviolent alternatives. The game mechanics of the genre set violence as the default mode of interaction. As such individual game-maps can usually only be completed by eradicating all opposing non-player characters.

Ramsay's (2015) study on how *Call of Duty: World at War* (Activision 2008) "recalibrates essential elements within the American narrative of World War

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[3] Taken together, the violence, consequence, and character filters of the F/TPS-genre give rise to a meta-filter that systematically deemphasizes the roles and fates of individuals not belonging to a particular hegemonic masculinity. This gendered filter implicitly privileges the perspectives and performances of male soldiers and excludes the experiences of women, non-military males, children, or LGBT-persons (Pötzsch, 2015).

II" provides several examples of how the filters identified above selectively frame virtual war experiences. Ramsay (2015, pp.96) argues, for instance, that the F/TPS-genre "intensifies perceptual binaries between war and peace, us and them, good and evil" (pp.107), presents "a soldier's death […] as the 'ultimate' sacrifice in war" (pp.109), and includes "neither civilians or friendly fire" in their simulated battlefields (pp.109). In sum, Ramsay writes, the FPS-genre "distills war into a series of contested environments explored primarily through the use and deployment of military hardware" (pp.96). Even though Ramsay directs particular attention to FPS-games in World War II settings, her findings provide a good illustration for the modus of operation of the four filters identified above.

Analyzing the FPS-genre, Breuer, Festl, and Quandt (2012) as well as Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay-Vogel (2014) play on a similar chord. Their studies identify series of "moral disengagement factors" (Hartmann, Krakowiak, and Tsay Vogel, 2014, pp. 310) embedded in game narratives that make in-game violence performed by players appear acceptable and enjoyable. Both studies argue that generic FPS-titles selectively present enemies, victims, as well as consequences and alternatives to violent actions, and this way disregard key aspects of warfare with the objective to enable pleasurable experiences of play.

As a consequence of the generic filters identified above, the engines of photorealist F/TPS-games provide privileged attention to easily accessible and largely unproblematic surface phenomena such as object physics, weapons, equipment, avatar movements, and team interaction, and discourage engagements with the challenging, ambiguous, and contingent sides of violence and suffering in war. Even though players interactively influence the course of events and are exposed to cybernetic feedback loops providing some meaning and consequences

to their actions, the selective frames of the F/TPS-genre systematically structure possible actions and perceptions and this way exclude unpleasant and challenging, yet salient, aspects of warfare. Arguably, this conventional selectivity is necessary to enable pleasurable experiences of play. Given the wide dissemination and intensive use of the genre, however, a complete neglect of potential socio-political and cultural implications connected to the generic rhetoric identified above would be short sighted.[4]

The selective realism of games such as those belonging to the highly popular *Call of Duty*-franchise, the *Medal of Honor*-series, or the *Battlefield*-sequels is a powerful convention of the photorealist F/TPS genre. Most games belonging to the genre follow comparable patterns and tie players to a similarly limited paradigm of possible in-game perceptions and performances. Apart from active ways of playfully engaging and possibly subverting the generic filters introduced above, also critical and politically conscientious game design can

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[4] Through their selective realism, the F/TPS-genre invites for particular dominant forms of interactive engagement that play into and potentially reinforce pre-established discursive "frames of war" in the sense of Butler (2009). This, however, does not mean that these games determine players who are forced to slavishly adopt an intended discursive position or enact the invited performances. Rather, the examples provided above point to textually and procedurally created potentials for meaning and action that are actively negotiated by players individually and in groups. As such, textual and procedural analysis of game design, mechanics, and narratives merely identify dominant frames that are created to guide reception into a particular direction, but do not make claims to how these potentials are actualized in various contexts of play.

negotiate these frames (Flanagan, 2009). Critical play and radical game design can question and challenge hegemonic positions and performative as well as perceptual frames in that they re-appropriate, or highlight the effects of, conventionalized mechanics and design features with the objective to consciously promote alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and (en)acting. The next section will take a closer look at two war- and violence-themed games that follow this critical trajectory.

Engaging selective realism in critical game design: *Spec Ops: The Line* and *The Last of Us*

In her book on critical play, Flanagan (2009) investigates computer games that, through their procedural rhetoric and/or narrative frames, challenge and potentially innovate established design practices and generic conventions with the objective to put computer games at the service of a progressive politics. She argues for the importance of politically conscientious and self-reflective game design to enable an active reshaping of game industries and cultures beyond focus on mere entertainment and market shares. As such, and in line with Galloway's (2006) and Bogost's (2007) thought, she promotes computer games as an artform that can critically comment upon, and facilitate the change of, established societal and political practices. In the following, I will show how two recent narrative third-person shooters – Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) and Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013) – respond to her call and chart new grounds in the development of photo-realist, violence-themed, narrative computer games.

Spec Ops: The Line (Yager Development 2012)

From the outset, *Spec Ops: The Line* appears like a straightforward generic third person shooter. Taking control of US special-forces soldier Martin Walker, the player enters the town of Dubai that has been devastated by a gigantic sandstorm to contact survivors and his former partner John Konrad, a highly decorated war hero who disappeared with his entire battalion during a relief effort in the city.

From the beginning of the game onward, also most of the generic filters identified above are apparently in place. The US team comes under constant attack by enemies that are "suitably othered" (Heron and Belford, 2014, pp.17) and that retain what Pötzsch (2013) in relation to film terms a "ubiquitous absence" – they remain largely invisible and without identity or clear affiliation, but pose a constant potential threat that can actualize any time from virtually anywhere. The game mechanics do not leave players any other option but to fight and kill their way across the various maps and do not open for negotiations or other alternatives to a violent eradication of all opponents. Initially, civilian fates and perspectives are equally deemphasized as are possible negative short- and long-term consequences of the deployed violence.

Even though *Spec Ops: The Line*'s mechanics apparently render a very conventional game experience that is centred upon map-based fighting sequences, the carefully devised narrative problematizes and ultimately subverts the generic procedural rhetoric and its constitutive filters. Upon fighting their way through the remains of Dubai, players are repeatedly exposed to the devastating consequences of the acts of violence unleashed by Walker to complete missions and reach his constantly changing objectives. These acts gradually tear down the moral and mutual trust of Walker's team and often backfire and lead to increased resistance

that enforces yet harsher and more devastating measures by the main protagonist. By these means the game illustrates at the level of procedure the logics of violence as a vicious circle composed of mutually enforcing conduct and counter-conduct and this way subverts the frames of war set by a consequence filter.

The game mechanics of *Spec Ops: The Line* only occasionally open for player choices regarding the means through which in-game success is achieved. Usually violence against opposing combatants is the set default mode that is actualized in various map-based player performances and the only fully-fledged characters encountered by players are Walker and his men. The narrative frames John Konrad as the generic main adversary whose apparent evil intentions and acts implicitly legitimize all the means chosen by Walker and executed by the player. As such, the game successfully draws upon the violence, character, and conflict filters characteristic of the F/TPS-genre and narrowly predisposes player perceptions and performances.

As the game progresses, however, *Spec Ops: The Line* to a growing extent problematizes these generic conventions. The player's trust in the main protagonist is increasingly strained as the decisions of Walker are made to appear more and more erratic and idiosyncratic. He, for instance, constantly changes and extends the mandate of his team and becomes less and less prone to listen to the cautioning comments by his partners. In addition, the game relentlessly exposes players to unintended consequences of their violent actions and, by means of sudden recontextualizations, enforces a constant reassessment of the assumed moral and ethical choices by the main protagonist. As a consequence, Walker's ability to make the right decisions is increasingly questioned. By these means, argue Heron and Belford (2014), Yager's game "encourages meta-textual introspection" (pp.4)

and invites players to problematize their position within the frames of conventional game mechanics of the military F/TP shooter.

As the game progresses, Walker's appearance and actions are made to resemble less and less those of the typical lone hero of the genre and more and more represent "a downward spiral [that] exposes the insanity inherent in every shooter's playable character" (Keogh, 2013, pp.12). According to Keogh (2013), "Walker becomes increasingly unhinged as the game progresses. His dialogue shifts from depersonalised orders to dehumanizing taunts. His visible presence on the screen shifts from controlled military operative to a mud- and blood-covered murderer" (pp.11). This reconfiguration of the character and consequence filters brings forth the long-term psychological impact of massively deployed violence that is usually selectively eschewed in the games belonging to the F/TPS genre.[5]

To provide a concrete example: to reach the objective of *Spec Ops: The Line*'s eighth chapter, *The Gate*, the player has to overcome a superior enemy force that is not any longer comprised of generic insurgents, but of US soldiers belonging to main adversary Konrad's 33rd battalion. At this point, the game provides Walker with the opportunity to launch an airborne attack with white phosphorous to wipe out his opponents and clear the way through the map. In

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[5] It has to be noted that also the main player character of the generic shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, Alex Mason, partly resembles a wretched hero. In the end, the game even tacitly hints at his responsibility for the murder of John F. Kennedy. However, while Mason has been brainwashed to function as a terrorist tool by an unambiguously evil main adversary, Walker's gradual decline is presented as a direct result of the acts of war that he has witnessed and chooses to continue participating in.

contrast to many other games featuring so-called moral decision-making, *Spec Ops: The Line* does not provide players with the opportunity to choose on Walker's behalf and thus allow them to bring the player character's actions in line with their own moral and ethical positions. Rather, through the use of scripted events, the game makes the point that a war situation makes moral choices if not impossible, so at least irrelevant in case one aims at military success on the battlefield, and then forces the player to enact Walker's decision and bear the terrible consequences of this engrained logic of war to achieve in-game progress.

Walker decides to use white phosphorous regardless the criticism launched by one of his team members regarding the terrible nature of weapon. The brief dialogue between them questions the possibility of making moral decision in war situations at all. As such, rather then cushioning the player with false ethical options, the game remorselessly exposes war as a system that narrows down individual options for action until only wrong decisions can be taken. When charged by his team mate who states "There is always a choice!", Walker simply responds "No, there really is not!". This way, the main protagonist puts effective emphasis on one of the main points of the game – once one engages in war and violent conduct the number of possible alternatives for action quickly diminishes. The game then makes players enact this meaning potential precisely by tying down possible in-game performances. As such, the main assertion that choices in war, and by way of proclaimed analogy in the military shooter, merely resemble false choices is made explicit at the level of narrative and is then performatively reiterated at the level of procedural rhetoric.[6]

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[6] For the issue of moral decision-making in games see for instance the criticism launched by Heron and Belford (2014) who argue that moral decisions in FPSs and

After deciding to use the weapon players are enabled to eradicate a huge number of opponents from the air. The visualisation resembles the footage from drone or aerial attacks familiar from various theatres in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, or Yemen and is, according to Keogh (2013, pp.9), carefully devised to resemble *Modern Warfare*'s *Death from Above*-mission (image 1). During the attack, a reflection of Walker's face repeatedly becomes visible on the screen monitoring the devastation as if to underline his direct involvement and responsibility for the attack (image 2). After having successfully cleared the area, players navigate Walker and his team through the remainders of the map and are forced to experience the terrible consequences of the deployed violence.
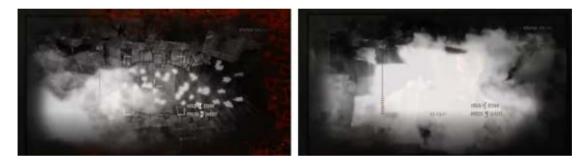

Image 1-2: Eradicating enemies from the air.

Firstly, the men encounter dead and dying American soldiers. Upon the request to give them treatment, Walker replies (correctly due to the nature of white phosphorous) that these men "are already dead". When proceeding further toward their objective, however, Walker (and vicariously the player) finds out that he did not only kill opposing soldiers, but also a huge number of civilians that were

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RPGs often are "somewhat cartoonish" and "more about locking and unlocking content paths than they are about presenting the player with complex, nuanced scenarios to contemplate" (pp.2). For a comprehensive treatment of the issue of ethics in computer games see Sicart (2009).

undistinguishable from combatants due to the inaccuracy of the drone's footage. In particular one image of the still smoking remains of a woman desperately clutching her child makes a lasting impression on the player character (and supposedly on the player, as well) (images 3-4). The white phosphorous sequence ends with Walker urging his men to move on stating that "we will make these bastards pay for what they've done", thus attempting to deflect his own responsibility for the atrocity.

Images 3-4: Witnessing the victims of the white phosphorous attack.

The white phosphorous incident is revisited during the final sequence of the game when Walker finally reaches the inner chambers of his main adversary's stronghold. Upon entering the room, Walker sees Konrad finishing a life-size painting that in a slightly distorted manner represents the woman clutching her child while being burned to death (image 5). Walker then accuses Konrad of being responsible for the incident, but is put off with the words "No, Walker, you did this". Walker is increasingly confused and follows Konrad who disappears behind the painting. There Walker finally discovers the ultimate truth – Konrad is dead. He had apparently shot himself a long time ago.

Image 5: Traumatic flashback? Konrad's painting.

This final discovery turns the received plot structure of the genre on its head. Rather than eradicating the main adversary and saving the day, Walker himself emerges as the mad officer he was initially sent out to apprehend and as ultimately responsible for the havoc and destruction surrounding him. The ensuing exchange between a reappearing hallucination of Konrad and Walker that is supported by a series of flashbacks, entirely reframes preceding in-game events that can now be read as the defence mechanism conjured up by a brain tormented by post-traumatic stress disorder due to long-term exposure to tremendous stress and constant experiences of violence and death. Taken together these sequences profoundly recalibrate all the constitutive filters of the genre.

Konrad asserts among other things that Walker's motives were egoistic and not the result of altruistic heroism - "the truth is, Walker, you are here because you wanted to feel like something you're not… a hero" – before he pinpoints the convenience of Walker's hallucination: "I'm here because you can't accept what you've done. It broke you. You needed someone to blame so you cast it on me - a dead man". With the fates of Konrad and Walker finally merging, *Spec Ops: The*

Line ultimately subverts the myth of the male, white soldier as glorious hero and saviour so central to the American and increasingly also European military imaginary. Not heroic sacrifice, but madness and guilt are thus brought to emerge as the main aspects of contemporary soldiering and as the necessary consequences of long-term exposure to severe violence and stress.

In *Spec Ops: The Line*, violence not only fundamentally disrupts individual psychologies and the moral of the team, but also provides an explanation for subsequent retaliations directed against Walker's men, thereby pinpointing the logics of war as a mutually enforcing vicious circle. In reconfiguring the selectivity of its realist style to include psychological damages, blowbacks, and long-term political and communal effects Yager's *Spec Ops: The Line* makes a profoundly critical contribution that undercuts dominant ideological positions and frames of the military shooter precisely by recalibrating the constitutive filters of the genre.

Due to a lack of relevant in-game choices, *Spec Ops: The Line* creates a growing frustration on behalf of players following and engaging in the narrative. As Heron and Belford (2014) observe, after the white phosphorous incident the loading screen messages "become increasingly meta-textual and introspective" (pp.18). Rather than providing the usual hints and instructions, the short messages gradually establish "formal links between player and character" (pp.18). Sentences such as "The US military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?", or "Can you even remember why you're here?" as such emerge as directed at an increasingly hallucinating Walker as well as at players who gradually become aware of their own complicity in the depicted atrocities.

The foreclosure of morally benign player options on the one hand points to a fundamental lack of true choice when serving as a soldier on the battlefield and underlines the inherently atrocious nature of the actions demanded of players when engaging in F/TPS gameplay with the objective to achieve in-game progress. On the other hand however, as Keogh (2013) notes, this design feature "places all the blame on the player while absolving the developer" from a complicity in the glorification of violence and soldiering that is otherwise characteristic of the genre (pp.14). Consequently, Keogh concludes, *Spec Ops: The Line* "should not be read as a statement against the military shooter genre's existence, but as a reaction against the totalising myths of technological and ethical superiority that military shooters (and their players) uncritically perpetuate" (pp.14).

In successfully recalibrating the constitutive filters of the genre, the thoughtful interplay between game design and narrative of *Spec Ops: The Line* enables an active challenging of dominant perceptual, cognitive, and discursive regimes of war. In questioning the epistemological conditions upon which decisions to engage in violent conduct to achieve certain aims are based, and in highlighting the ultimate contingency and ambiguity of these, Yager's game challenges one of the main tropes of military- and violence-themed F/TPS-games – the violent lone hero in the guise of predominantly US/Western white, male soldiers who is magically put in the position to make an unequivocal distinction between the good guys to be protected and the evildoers to be eradicated. In highlighting, challenging, and effectively subverting these epistemological conditions and cultural frames of war, the game "subversively repurposes the conventions of the military shooter to draw attention to the ideologies embedded within these conventions" (Keogh, 2013, pp.13). By means of a critical and self-

reflective narrative that creatively re-appropriates familiar game design and mechanics, *Spec Ops: The Line* delivers a profound comment to contemporary media-fed cultures of violence.[7]

The Last of Us/Left Behind

The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013) is narrative third-person shooter set in a post-apocalyptic USA were a fungus infection has transformed most of the population into flesh-eating monsters and forced the remaining survivors to live in heavily guarded quarantine zones spread across the country. Players assume control of Joel, a middle-aged smuggler who lost his teenage daughter during the initial phase of the outbreak. The story is set 20 years into the apocalypse and centres upon Joel who has to escort Ellie, a teenage girl apparently immune to infection, to a research facility to enable the development of a cure to the global disease.

At first glance, the choice to focus on a science fiction-horror game set in a fictitious future to make a point about the selective presentation of war and violence in photorealistic computer games may seem odd. However, the present article is about the selective filters that render both war and other forms of violent conflict in narrative F/TPS-computer games suitable for pleasurable experiences of

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[7] *Spec Ops: The Line* does not engage with a metafilter that genders war experiences. For this specific filter see for instance Pötzsch's (2015) reading of *This War of Mine* (11Bit Studios 2015). In contrast to war-themed titles, F/TPS action and adventure games with fictitious settings regularly feature female or LGBT protagonists, yet usually refrain from recalibrating the violence and consequence filters to better account for their respective perspectives on war and violent conflict.

play. As such, what matters to this inquiry is not the authentic simulation of specific historical events alone, but also the ways through which acts of violence in general are selectively framed, and how this framing can be challenged or problematized through critical game design. Given the fact that *The Last of Us*, in spite of its fictitious setting, renders a photorealist three-dimensional world accessible to the player, and that the game, according to Schulzke (2014), represents a virtual dystopia that meaningfully comments upon current political trends and developments, a critical analysis of how the game relates to, reiterates, and potentially subverts the frames of the F/TPS-genre appears justified.

Similar to *Spec Ops: The Line*, Naughty Dog's game does not give players much leeway to bring character performances into correspondence with own moral standards or convictions. The game functions more like an interactive novel where players' skills are used to overcome concrete obstacles (in a usually violent manner), while cut-scenes, quick-time events, and speech options between Joel and Ellie drive forward the narrative and gradually reveal new aspects of the main protagonists' evolving psychologies. In contrast to *Spec Ops: The Line*, *The Last of Us* employs this lack of player choice not to underscore the systemic, rather than individual, nature of evil in war and violent conflict, but to provide a subtle psychological portrait of the main protagonist, Joel, who is brought to emerge less as a selfless hero or successful father-figure reloaded, but emerges as an inherently egocentric and egoistic actor with a lack of sense for overarching responsibilities. Hence for instance Joel's predetermined 'decision' to rescue Ellie in the end rather than allowing her to be sacrificed for the sake of developing a cure for the global disease. Throughout the game the character filter is subtly reconfigured to raise doubts regarding the heroism of Joel's actions and decisions.

The Last of Us has been acclaimed as a highly evolved narrative game that plays out as a psychological drama between the two main protagonists (Voegtle, 2013) and that uses a dystopic setting to issue a critical comment on authoritarian tendencies in contemporary societies (Schulzke, 2014). While fully agreeing with Voegtle that the game, and in particular the DLC *Left Behind*, sets standards regarding the narrative potentials of gameplay, I am more doubtful of Schulzke's assertion that the game makes a critical comment extrapolating contemporary socio-political tendencies into a not too far away future.

The fact that the game uses a worn generic trope - a catastrophic event that over night destroys all established institutions and unravels received power relations – and thus establishes a post-apocalyptic context 'ex machina' significantly reduces the critical import of *The Last of Us*. By taking recourse to a sudden breakdown of order that is unequivocally connected to a clear external cause, the game looses its ability to meaningfully comment upon key tendencies in contemporary society and politics such as rapid ecological detriment, economic downturns, growing inequalities, or resurgent practices of warfare at a global scale. Instead what could be termed a consequence filter in reverse creates a political void and casts player characters into a fixed setting thereby asserting an inherently anarchic and non-communal human nature comparable to the point made in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*. Through its peculiar consequence filter, *The Last of Us* avoids the difficult task of critically scrutinizing key contemporary tendencies and fails to highlight the processes of negotiation as well as the ambivalent moral and ethical choices necessitated by a gradual transformation of societal structures, institutions, and value systems.

Throughout the game, Joel and Ellie repeatedly engage in brief dialogues and exchanges of thoughts that provide an increasingly sophisticated picture of the main characters psychological developments and mutual relations. Naughty Dog did a profoundly convincing work when scripting the narrative and used significant resources for character development. The fact that Ellie has moods of her own and reacts in a multitude of ways to even cursory treatment underscores the believability of both characters and, as among others Voegtle (2013) has argued, sets new standards for character design and development in narrative computer games. The game design also gradually recalibrates the character filter in increasingly including the perspective of Ellie on the in-game events.

However, at several occasions throughout the game a dissonance between a recalibrated character filter and more traditional consequence and violence filters becomes palpable that increasingly undermines the credibility of the main characters. This is due to a conventional third-person shooter game mechanics and level design that only insufficiently take the psychological and physiological consequences of gross direct violence into account. In addition, a predominantly tacit conflict filter enables a moral disengagement in the sense of Hartmann and Vorderer (2010) that renders the violence committed by Joel, and to a growing degree also by Ellie, unproblematic.

To provide just one brief example, toward the end of the autumn episode Joel is severely wounded after falling on a metal pole that pierces his lungs. This event then triggers the winter episode, where players take control of Ellie and have to find supplies and shelter to keep Joel alive. During these activities Ellie is captured by a group of cannibals who threaten to slowly dismember her in case she does not join them. After escaping, Ellie kills the leader of the opposing group in

an extremely bloody incident while players again assume control of Joel, who just awoke from his comatose sleep and now rushes to Ellie's rescue.

Several elements of this episode challenge the credibility of the established game world precisely by filtering the consequences of the depicted violence. Firstly, after having been shot, stabbed, beaten with metal poles, and viciously attacked by monstrous infected beings for the better time of 6 months, suddenly a fall on a metal pole causes major injuries to Joel. Secondly, given the severity of his wounds, it appears mildly speaking surprising that he immediately after waking up again, has the physiological capacity to not only shoot but beat to death several of his opponents and being himself repeatedly beaten, stabbed, and shot. Thirdly, the harrowing violence and abuse Ellie is exposed to appears utterly exaggerated. At the same time, the traumatic nature of her experiences is not adequately reflected in the development of her character. Rather than for instance falling at all silent, waking up repeatedly at night screaming, or having traumatic flashbacks that challenge a clear distinction between reality and dream – all well known symptoms of severe post-traumatic stress disorder -, after the incident she engages in the same lively communication with Joel as before. Fourthly, the total inability of any side-character to provide even the most basic support for a young girl in distress paints an at all too dark picture of human condition that appears characterised by profound mutual distrust and an engrained inability of communal engagement for the benefit of others than oneself and one's most immediate associates. On the other hand, potential sexually motivated forms of abuse are selectively excluded.

Images 6-7: Atrocious acts and experiences without long-term consequences.

In *The Last of Us* the deployment of generic consequence and violence filters causes an ambitious storyline to enter into an unhappy marriage with a conventionalized game mechanics that partly undermines the narrative potentials of the game. The map-based disallowance of any form for interaction with NPCs except violence directly translates into strained credibility of character psychologies and creates overly dystopic settings that seem to entirely foreclose any form of cooperative communal engagement (with the exception of the utopian community led by Joel's brother where all internal differences and antagonisms seem to have been magically resolved). As such, as long as the relation between narrative and third-person shooter game mechanics is concerned, Naughty Dog's game profoundly differs from Yager's *Spec Ops: The Line*.

As argued above, *Spec Ops: The Line* consciously employs conventional third-person shooter game mechanics to highlight, and subsequently unsettle, the discursive effects of generic filters through a carefully devised narrative. The objective of this rhetorical move is to make players enact the very limitations constitutive of the genre. This way, the game comments upon, and dislodges, perceptual and cognitive regimes of war and unravels established myths regarding the nature and effectiveness of warfare and the allegedly heroic role of (predominantly western) soldiers. In Yager's game, narrative and procedural

rhetoric work hand-in-hand to subvert generic frames and to issue a critical anti-war message.

In *The Last of Us*, on the other hand, the conventional mechanics of the game constantly threaten to undermine the consistency of the evolving story that is highly dependent on authentic character development and players' empathic and narrative engagement. Here, the generic selectivity of the violence and conflict filters repeatedly create ludo-narrative dissonances (Hocking, 2007; Halvorsen, 2014) that over time wear down the credibility of the main characters' psychologies and that undermine the critical potentials of a recalibrated character filter. As Kollar (2013) puts it in a critically acclaiming review: "More notable problems with *The Last of Us* manifest as it leans more on the traditional trappings of third-person shooters — fights against waves of enemies or arenas full of waist-high cover where your only recourse is to kill everyone in your way. These sequences sit at odds with the rest of the game." As such, he continues, *The Last of Us* "achieves incredible emotional high points about as often as it bumps up against tired scenario design that doesn't fit its world".[8]

Games and Politics: A Conclusion

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[8] I have to briefly highlight some of the advances made by Naughty Dog with the release of the DLC *Left Behind*. Here, conventional third-person shooter mechanics are successfully re-appropriated for a different purpose, namely the (at least initially) non-violent exploration of diegetic space and, more importantly, the exploration of the evolving psychologies of, and relation between, two teenage girls. As such, the DLC facilitates a questioning of the character and violence filters constitutive of the F/TPS-genre.

In his study of *America's Army 3*, Allen (2011) suggests that a form of "enemy abstraction [is] evident in war gaming practices" (pp.39). He argues that war games in general, and *America's Army* in particular, posit an "unreal enemy" (pp.39) that is historically, geographically, ethnically, and socially decontextualized and therefore becomes a means through which the real enemy can be discursively constructed. Employing Baudrillard's thought, Allen (2011) asserts a "'precession of simulacra,' in which the unreal enemy precedes, and perhaps aids the realization and creation of, the real enemy" (pp.47).

Also Huntemann and Payne (2010) argue that military computer games negatively affect the public. Summing up their concerns regarding a "convergence of interactive media and national defence interests" (pp.3) in such games, they write that "[m]oving from spectator to participant, from detached spectacle to immersive experience, has far reaching implications for how citizens imagine the role of the military in contemporary society". Stahl (2010) argues in a similar direction when he postulates a prominent role of "war-themed games" (pp.110) in a "transition to interactive war" (pp.4) that results in "a culture that progressively integrates the citizen into the momentum of the war machine" (pp.110). Indeed, the glorification of violence and the selective veiling of its devastating effects, are prominent features of the F/TPS-genre. However, the potential effects of such games on individuals or collectives cannot be simply postulated, but have to be accurately explained.

Schulzke (2013b) has recently presented an overview over different types of analysis of military computer games. Even though he limits his study to games that have either been developed or used by the military, his findings retain relevance also for studies of other war- and violence-themed computer games. Schulzke

rightfully asserts that most studies of these games' potential impacts merely assume them to be harmful and "fail to explain the mechanisms that may produce this harm" (pp.60).

To assess how the F/TPS-genre predisposes players' perceptions and performances, the formal properties of these games have to be analysed empirically and the dominant tendencies of meaning and action these invite have to be outlined and brought into connection with hegemonic discursive frames and positions. This way, tacit cultural "frames of war" (Butler, 2009) can be made explicit and subjected to critical scrutiny in an empirically valid manner. The present study conducted such an analysis and developed the concept of selective realism to grasp the game mechanics and narrative devices behind a tacit ideological bias characteristic of the genre. In introducing a set of filters that frame virtual experiences of war and violence in digital games, the article showed how F/TPS-games invite reductive understandings of the nature of war, violence, self, and other by narrowly framing possible in-game perceptions and performances.

However, as the example of *Spec Ops: The Line* has shown, in recalibrating generic filters critical game design can reach beyond mimetic issues of accuracy of movement, bullet trajectories, and depictions of weapon types, rank, or apparel, and direct attention to the intricate logics and moral complexities of conflicts and the often unintended and counterproductive consequences of violence. In war and violent conflict the truly difficult ethical questions have to be resolved before the fighting starts, and after it ends. The main problem of generic military shooters might be that these games excessively focus on the violent action that takes place after difficult decision in complex and maybe even irresolvable terrain have been made, and that they stop before the multidimensional effects of violence have to be

assessed and dealt with. Through their selective filters generic shooters simplify issues of violence and war, and invite for a streamlined and sterilized perception of military action.

The blindness for the intricacies and multidimensional consequences of violent action is coupled with a blindness for the opponents and their varying rationales, complex subjectivities, and competing frames of reference that might explain their behaviour and draw attention to nonviolent alternatives to conflict resolution. Both forms of selectivity are present in *The Last of Us* and undermine the advances made through a recalibration of the character filter in Naughty Dog's game that includes the perspective of a young girl into an interactive narrative of violent conflict.

The procedural and narrative frames of massively consumed generic F/TPS-titles that were identified in the present article might play a central role in these games' potential bellicose impacts. A careful analysis of the design features and narrative devices behind these games' various filters can tie Allen's (2011) postulated precession of an abstract enemy and Stahl's (2010) asserted "reprogramming of the citizen subject" (pp.110) to a sound empirical basis and, thus, respond to Schulzke's (2013b) demand for concrete explanations as to how exactly the genre predisposes potentially negative impacts. The concept of selective realism and its constitutive filters can facilitate such endeavours at a theoretical as well as a methodological level and, as such, inform practices of game design and development to create realist games "that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice" (Galloway 2006, pp.75).

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