

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Video Games in Modern Hybrid Warfare Strategies: A Review

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Abstract: Within forty years, the gaming industry has developed to become a highly influential economic activity. As the graphics and the immersion in the video game world develop fast, the virtual world has acquired the capacity to direct and guide the behaviour of users. Particularly, violent video games have been associated with political opposition and social turmoil. The paper uses a systematic review approach to investigate the possibility of video games as a tool of hybrid warfare. The evidence suggests that video games are among the most persuasive forms of interactive media, capable of provoking aggressive behaviour and influencing perceptions, making them a potential tool in hybrid war strategies. Although unconventional warfare is somewhat of a trend in the history of warfare, modern technology has come in with contemporary ways of executing war without necessarily changing the nature of war. This evolution is reflected in combat-based games, which are enriched with realistic graphics and virtual experiences. On the whole, the paper explains that the opportunities of video games as instruments in hybrid warfare are more effective.

Keywords: Video Games, Hybrid Warfare, Six Days in Fallujah, Cognitive Domain, PUBG

Introduction

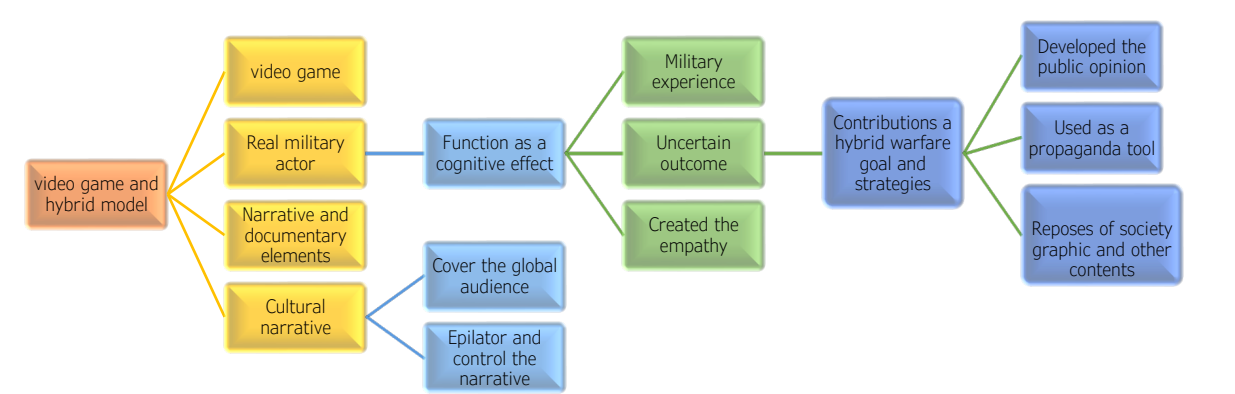
Over the last two decades, warfare has undergone significant changes, during which hybrid warfare has emerged as a primary paradigm. This type of conflict gives limited resource adversaries the potential to use disruptive military, political, economic, civilian, and informational (MPECI) goals. The term was first coined by Hoffman in 2007 to describe the employment of simultaneous and multiple strategies that would maximise their effects (Mäyrä, 2019). The cognitive approach and all military tools are used in the form of economic, political, and technological coordinates as combined elements to target the civilian population, leadership, and state institutions, divided into divisions to break the societal structure of the state, which is highlighted in the chart. This is recognised as hybrid warfare, also referred to as the grey zone under peace and traditional war, because procedures and designs are adopted to identify explicit acts of war, as explained in Figure I.

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Figure I
Created based on models of war video games, the hybrid warfare model under the cognitive domain

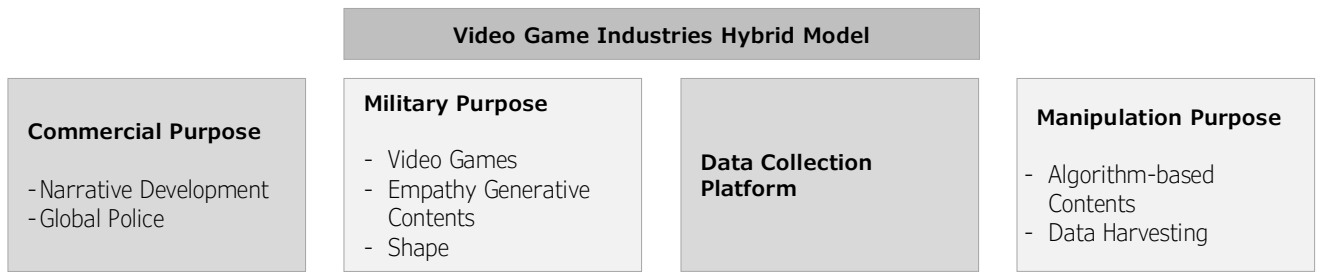


Hybrid Warfare

In the digital era, hybrid warfare uses both traditional and non-traditional tactics to accomplish political, economic, and military goals without officially declaring war or attacking any military power. The modern hybrid approach is even more focused on psychologically targeted operations that utilise propaganda tools to manipulate public opinion, damage social structures, and destabilise public institutions, utilising media technologies. NATO defines hybrid warfare as the coordination of a variety of instruments of power that capitalise on ambiguity, non-linearity and the cognitive aspects of warfare (Alberts, 2001) Its general aim is destabilisation by a strategy of uncertainty and pressure. Hybrid warfare is especially useful for weaker actors because it operates in the "grey area" between peace and openly waged war. By confusing attribution, it limits victims from recognising where aggression comes from and responding in an authoritative manner (Foster, 2016). Video games like Valiant Hearts: The Great War, Special Force 2, and Alpha Protocol. They have initiated hybrid war propaganda by highlighting past and current challenges to the country's economic, political, social, and security stability, as well as its hegemony and dominance.

Furthermore, prolonged pressure can paralyse decision-making, trigger over-reaction, or open up possibilities for further instrumental exploitation (Aziz, 2025) Identified five major characteristics: expansion of the MPECI toolset; expansion of potential targets; synchronisation of tactics; exploitation of attributional uncertainty; and diversification of attacks to reduce visibility (Cullen, 2016).). Hybrid tactics tend to combine conventional and unconventional instruments, such as psychological operations and information operations, in the realms previously thought outside of warfare. This uncertainty can have cascading socio-psychological effects, as in the case of Russia's actions in Georgia and Crimea, where disinformation fueled panic and sapped civilian and military will. Theoretically constrained rational behaviour only serves to describe how such uncertainty undermines decision-making by increasing pressure and decreasing confidence (Dequech, 2001). The accompanying chart of hybrid gaming industries also outlined the fundamental information that games and their associated elements provide, including information elements, strategies, and direct cognitive consequences, as shown in Figure II.

Figure 2
Basic Model of Video Games



Effects of Video Games

Along with hybrid warfare, video games have become influential platforms to influence behaviour. Originally a form of escapism, they are now causing concerns over addiction, desensitisation, and exposure to violence. Researchers have suggested that they are distinguished from passive media such as television by their immersive and interactive nature, which enables them to have more profound behavioural effects (Pattison, 2024; Bogost, 2007). The cognitive and emotional engagement of users is affected by the realistically enhanced videos of modern video games. The concept of play as a purposeful representation has been co-opted by game design, with early examples being advertising spots such as McDonald's in Lunar Lander. Over time, video games have become more powerful than traditional advertising due to repeated and prolonged exposure (Pattison, 2024). This is further compounded by the trend towards online multiplayer gaming, which combines the socialisation of the game with more extended play periods. Military and political interest in the persuasive potential of violent video games is high. As Gabriele (2009) points out, these games are involved in political contestation and unrest, while games such as Full Spectrum Warrior and America's Army foreground the blurring of military training tools and entertainment products (Payne, 2016). Scholars point out that this convergence means that video games are tools of persuasion and recruitment, and their immersive qualities make them more effective (Williams, 2010). As a result, video games can act as virtual mediators within hybrid warfare - the convergence of propaganda, civil unrest and unconventional warfare strategies (Ottosen, 2010). Video games are the most persuasive interactive medium, where reality and fiction work best together. Having powerful rhetoric messages in graphics, the video games are escalating behaviour and are used as a tool of hybrid war. Much research work has been done on video games regarding the issues of time spent, content and representation. Still, there are many more design elements and symbols in the game graphics to be identified that persuade their users unconsciously. Moreover, video games have been discussed by many researchers in relation to behaviour and military themes. Still, there is less literature available to predict that such video games can be used as a tool of hybrid war.

Research Objectives

- To identify the potential use of games in hybrid warfare
- To examine how video games are being used as a tool of hybrid warfare

Research Question

- How video games are being used as a tool of hybrid War?

Significance of the Study

As video games become increasingly important in shaping modern warfare and understanding how hybrid warfare functions, it is essential to explore the technology as a tool of hybrid warfare. Games can be used to influence opinion, propaganda, and psychological operations. They can also be used for training, recruitment, and data collection as they allow an interactive format. Through an analysis of these roles, the study acknowledges how warfare strategies are changing and how states can equip defences against such a non-traditional threat.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, the gaming industry has expanded quickly, and it now generates more revenue overall than the movie and music industries combined. These industries experienced significant structural growth during the COVID-19 era in several key areas, including the formation of well-organised power relations, the sharing of knowledge, culture, and ideology, the belief in and advancement of technology, and more. MarketWatch, 2021. The video game sector is surpassing two billion dollars, according to gaming platforms. The gaming industry is promoting and reshaping players' attitudes and beliefs towards the political agenda. Video games have always used real-life conflicts and history to build stories. Franchises like

Call of Duty and Medal of Honour have used simulations focused on American military operations as the backbone for their campaigns over the last century, while the more recent "serious games" movement has attempted to use the interactive medium to draw attention to contemporary issues.

For example, *Darfur is Dying* was created to raise awareness about the atrocities in Sudan and *Ayiti: The Cost of Life* was about the difficulties Haitian families face (Knowlton, 2009; Hess, 2007; Yuan, 2023; Ferri, 2009). These examples show the blurring of lines between entertainment, education, and political messaging. With new advances in graphics, interactivity, and immersive design, video games have become even more powerful. The astounding level of realism achievable through modern technology means that the lines between fiction and reality are being more and more blurred, drawing users in more profound ways that elicit emotions and influence perceptions. This effect is amplified through the use of sensationalist content, where the blurring of lines between reality and fiction makes audiences more vulnerable to the story they're being told. Some scholars have suggested that, when repeated consumption of such immersive experiences occurs, they serve to normalise violent and biased representations of war (Foster, 2016). Numerous games are available. Western and Eastern enterprises are involved in hybrid warfare in the modern world. Examples of these include *Crisis in the Kremlin* (2017) and *This Is the President* (2021), which presented Russia as a danger to the West and established global hegemony. Other video games, such as *Blood Rage*, *Game of Liberation*, and *Glorious Mission* (a Chinese version of *Call of Duty*), also generated propaganda and framing against the military and political establishment as well as technological advancements (Allen, 2019). The story of *Six Days in Fallujah* shows how video games, memory and propaganda can collide. Based on the Second Battle of Fallujah, the developers wanted to make an authentic documentary-style simulation with interviews from soldiers and civilians. The game is highly realistic in battlefield tactics and decision-making. Still, it has also raised a discussion on the question of whether the dramatisation of a current war as an interactive entertainment devalues the suffering. The basic model of the game, along with some images showing figures III to V, shows the structure of the game plan theme: New technology, new tactics and targeted audience.

Figure 3

Web of Victura and Highwire Games



Figure 4
Basic Information Model of Video Game

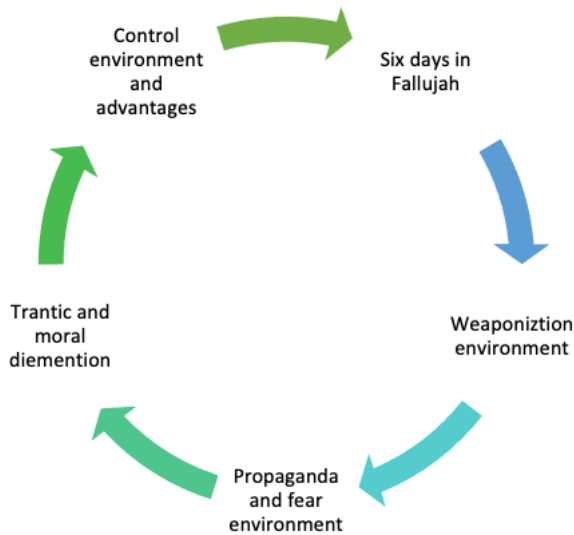
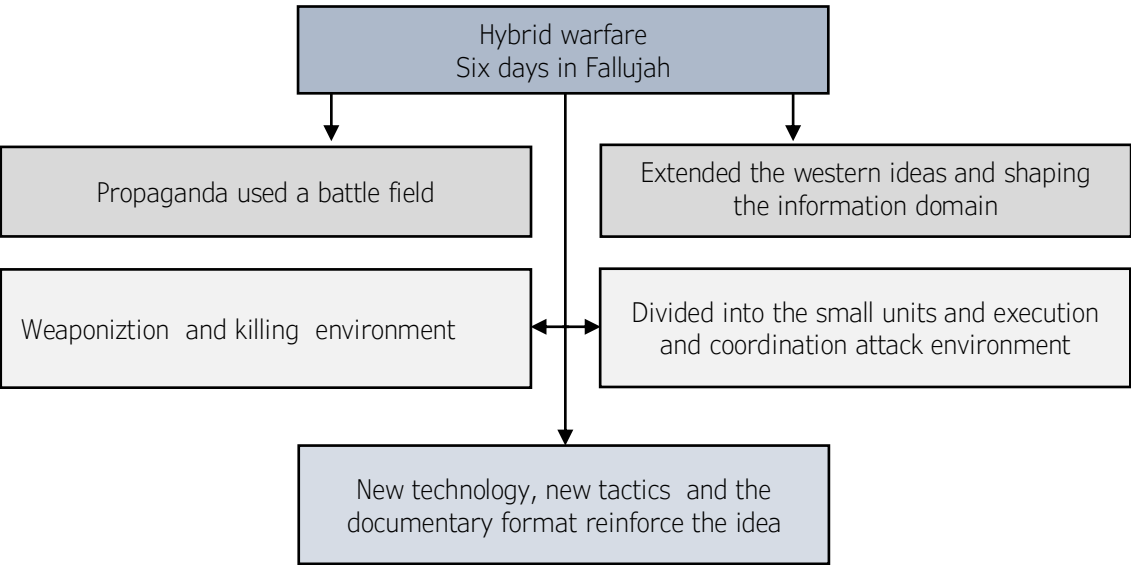


Figure 5
Chart Designed as Per the Model of a Video Game



Critics raise issues with the selective amnesty given to U.S. Marines at the expense of Iraqi civilians, arguing that the disparity in trauma might help perpetuate Islamophobic narratives. A study of war games finds that the Muslim has become a stereotyped opponent, thus perpetuating post-9/11 militaristic and racist discourses in popular culture (Treuting, 2023). Overall, the controversy surrounding Six Days in Fallujah raises broader questions about the role of video games in shaping historical memory and political discourse. The developers portray such projects as a technological novelty, while critics regard them as insensitive and propagandistic. For instance, veterans and Iraqi civilians have criticised the game for not paying attention to the massive civilian loss and to the long-term health effects of the Iraq War. These concerns underpin the manner in which video games can serve to inform and distort understandings of conflict based on how narratives are designed (Treuting, 2023). Beyond representation, scholars stress the importance of player engagement in games' cultural contributions (Rehak, 2003). Discussed avatars as having a dual nature, as both representatives of player agency while also existing as outlines of game rules. This relationship allows the player to immerse themselves in fictional worlds and to feel frustration when the game resists complete control.

Other theorists e.g Vella (2015) and Owen (2017) emphasise the blurring of boundaries between mind, body, and technology with immersion, and the creation of "flow" moments, in which the player experiences a complete sense of absorption. As evidenced by such encounters, the psychological bonding between the players and the digital environments allows games to be most effective in terms of persuasion and indoctrination. This potential is not invisible to militaries and political actors. Another example of how entertainment and ideological messaging can be combined into a single game is America's Army, a game designed specifically for recruitment by the U.S. Army. Researchers contend that games based on the military, such as Call of Duty, not only entertain but also influence public opinion by inserting cultural and political discourses. Narrative and myth are the major rhetorical structures by which ideologies are transmitted, often masked as entertainment but with broader political interests in mind (Pattison, 2024). Violent video games have also been a source of concern as to their impact on behaviour. Empirical studies have indicated that long-term exposure to violent games leads to a greater probability of aggression, especially by children and adolescents. While extreme cases such as an eight-year-old murdering playing Grand Theft Auto IV raise our alarm bells, it is even the less extreme cases which show how violent games prepare people for a world of violence (Donovan, 2013).

Significantly, these games often depend on racial and gender stereotypes, which maintain discriminatory attitudes. For example, the first-person shooter Grand Theft Auto: Vice City encouraged players to attack Haitians and Cubans, a feature which was later stripped after a public outcry (Younge, 2004). From the hybrid warfare viewpoint, video games are a means for psychological manipulation and for recruitment. Hybrid war tactics capitalise on societal cleavages and use non-traditional methods to destabilise the state (Gregory, 2025). In this context, games are also tools for propaganda, training, and even cyber operations. Examples include the Mercenaries 2 game, in which the United States invaded Venezuela, and Kuma War, in which the United States attacked Iranian nuclear installations. These cases illustrate how digital simulations can convince both state and non-state actors of the narrative power of a simulation to influence perceptions of conflict (Ottosen, 2010). The blend of realism and fiction further enhances this convincing impact. As Anton points out, the fact that combat games display realistic graphics and weapons and draw on real-world events is part of their appeal. This combination makes the narratives seem more credible, which has a greater ideological effect. There is also a risk, however, that violent games reinforce negative stereotypes and encourage hostility towards certain groups. As a result, video games not only emerge as products of entertainment but as potent tools in hybrid warfare, able to mould opinions, influence behaviours, and train individuals for conflict (Bogost, 2007).

Cultivation Theory and Video Games

Cultivation theory describes the way that long-term exposure to the media affects social reality. The theory, developed by Gerbner (1969), assumes that television is a powerful cultural storyteller that delivers a stable system of messages that shape beliefs about the world. Rather than focusing on short-term effects, cultivation research concentrates on how repeated exposure over time, across years, accumulates and strengthens shared assumptions about social life. According to the cultivation hypothesis, heavy viewers are more apt to accept television's distorted portrayal of reality than light viewers. This process is premised on the assumption that television presents a relatively unified system of messages to audiences that are consumed regularly and often in a relatively nonselective manner (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Michael Morgan J. S., 2014). With the advent of video games as a significant medium, some scholars have been interested in whether cultivation theory works outside of television. Although video games are often characterised by their interactive and open narratives, Michael Morgan J. S. (2015) argues that they can be depicted as narrative tools that have the potential for developing long-term perceptions. This logic is similar to that of genre-specific cultivation, in which exposure to specific genres over a period of time creates specific worldviews

(Busselle, 2012). However, it introduces theoretical and methodological issues when applying cultivation theory to video games.

In contrast to television, games are interactive and co-authored by players, assuming the consistency of messages across the medium challenging (Schmierbach, 2009). Further complicating cultivation research is the lack of a large-scale "message system analysis" of games similar to Gerbner's Cultural Indicators project for television. Whilst content analysis of television can be based upon fixed texts and standardised coding systems such as PAT (Perpetrator-Act-Target) for violence, video games do not represent a single definitive text. He notes that even relatively simple games such as this make it hard to do a standardised comparison, because so many aspects of the game change, such as the number and nature of acts of violent behaviour a player decides to engage in (Lachlan, 2008). In the same vein, Bogost (2007) stresses the fact that meaning in games is often generated through interaction with systems, rather than imagery, thus challenging canonical modes of analysis. Despite these challenges, video games can still build patterns of meaning systematically. MMO research has found that players may form narrow yet extreme worldviews that develop as a result of repeated exposure to the same game (Williams, 2010). This suggests that game-based cultivation might operate at a more genre-specific, if not title-specific, level rather than at the level of the medium as a whole. And while the interactive aspects complicate generalisation, the potential for long-term perceptual effects, especially in the wake of games' growing centrality in popular culture, remains essential.

Against this background, the present study takes cultivation theory as a theoretical frame of reference. By testing the extent to which long-term media exposure develops perceptions in line with systematically patterned messages, this study brings the logic of cultivation to interactive settings. In doing so, it welcomes the possibility that video games, like television, can influence sustained social assumptions, while at the same time acknowledging the methodological and theoretical challenges of working with a medium.

Systematic Review

This systematic review protocol adopts a systematic review methodology to identify, appraise and synthesise evidence from relevant studies. In contrast, systematic reviews have transparent and rigorous procedures to assure reliability and validity (Oakley, 2005). Includes scope and protocol definition, searching and selection of evidence, quality appraisal, data extraction and synthesis (Coren, 2006). This approach is beneficial for summarising complex research bodies for both academic and policy audiences.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was employed, selecting studies directly related to the research aims. To include only the highest-quality, peer-reviewed papers, the researcher used expert judgment to eliminate potentially irrelevant or low-quality evidence.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from four large academic publishers, Taylor & Francis, Sage and Springer. The keywords "video games" and "hybrid warfare" were used to narrow the search to peer-reviewed studies that relate to the role of video games in hybrid warfare.

Sample Size and Review Plan

A total of 23 high-quality research papers are in the final sample. The systematic review had three phases:

1. **Scope:** matching selected studies with research goals.
2. **Evidence Extraction:** finding evidence on hybrid warfare and on video games.
3. **Quality Assurance:** including only peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals.
4. The source of selected papers is shown in the following table

Table 1*Sample Size Details*

Sr. No	Article Title	Published in	Year	Relevancy
1.	"Definitive playthrough": Behind-the-scenes narratives in let's plays and streaming content by video game voice actors	Tylor & Francis	2022	Video games as Hybrid warfare
2.	Social Media Policy against Russian Propaganda in Ukraine	Sage	2022	Real war scenes in Games
3.	A game-theoretic analysis of hybrid threats	Tylor & Francis	2022	Video games as Hybrid warfare
4.	Understanding hybrid influence: emerging analysis frameworks	Springer	2021	Video games as Hybrid warfare
5.	Open world empire: Race, erotics, and the global rise of video games	Sage	2021	Video games' potential for warfare
6.	The impact of video games on the players' behaviours: A survey	Sage	2021	Video games' potential for warfare
7.	The Video Game as a Medium	Tylor & Francis	2021	Video games as Hybrid warfare
8.	The Player as a Hybrid: Agency in Digital Game Cultures	Tylor & Francis	2021	Video games as Hybrid warfare
9.	A comprehensive model of counteracting the hybrid aggression process	J Store	2021	Games as a critical source
10.	A new look at the cognitive neuroscience of video game play	J store	2020	Video games as warfare
11.	The rise of hybrid warfare	Tylor & Francis	2020	Video games as Hybrid warfare
12.	War, time, and military videogames: heterogeneities and critical potential	Tylor & Francis	2020	Video games' potential for warfare
13.	Transmedia Storytelling: The Many Faces of Video Games, Fluid Narratives and Winding Seriality	J Store	2020	Video games' potential for warfare
14.	Hybrid warfare and hybrid threats today and tomorrow: towards an analytical framework	Tylor & Francis	2019	The game is a hybrid warfare
15.	Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR	Sage	2019	War games and propaganda
16.	Meet the New Villain, Same as the Old Villain: The New Cold War in American TV, Film, and Video Games	Tylor & Francis	2019	Video games are a non-military war
17.	The Changing Face of Video Games and Video Gamers: Future Directions in the Scientific Study of Video Game Play and Cognitive Performance	Springer	2019	Video games as a tool for psychological warfare
18.	Military videogames	Tylor & Francis	2019	Historical links of the military in the video game industry
19.	Playing war	Tylor & Francis	2018	War games and propaganda
20.	Military Shooter Video Games and the Ontopolitics of Derivative Wars and Arms Culture	Wiley	2017	Future flight on the ground in the real vs virtual world
21.	Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games	J Store	2016	Future of the game in warfare
22.	Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games	J Store	2016	Video War Games as politics
23.	War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict	Sage	2015	Future of Game as Warfare

Data Analysis

In this paper, I explore the position of video games as critical political media, particularly in the field of armed conflict and hybrid war. Despite their popularity worldwide, video games have been given little attention in political science, even in studies of popular culture and new media. This gap is surprising given how games about war play a role in international politics. To answer this question, I examine the specific nature of games as distinct from other media and investigate their political potential along four dimensions: as communicative resources of strategy, as simulations of real wars, as generators of fictional wars and as arenas for critical engagement with military policies and norms.

The Video Game Medium

Although video games have been an under-researched topic in political research, their cultural and commercial impact is clear. War game franchise titles like Call of Duty, Battlefield and Medal of Honour have sold millions of units all over the globe (VGChartz). Unlike most media, video games demand a long-term commitment from players, sometimes tens of hours, and even longer with multiplayer options, which offer everlasting play. They also create engaging fan bases that create mods, videos, and stories, further expanding their reach. Unlike books or films, video games compel audiences to participate in simulated events, thereby transforming players into active members of virtual armed forces. This interactivity favours particular perspectives, as in the case of games that simulate real conflicts and put a player on one side of a war (Schulzke, 2014). Some researchers suggest that this embodied experience may help them to be more persuasive (Bogost, 2007) but assertions about actual player agency are still debated (Schulzke, 2014).

Video Games as an Instrument of Strategic Communication

Video games are strategic communication tools, a concept related to soft power (Joseph S. Nye, 2005). States and organisations use them to influence the perceptions of audiences while measuring responses at relatively low cost (Schulzke, 2014). An excellent example of this is the U.S. Army's America's Army, published in 2002, which has been downloaded by millions of people and portrays a very positive Army culture, values and missions. Other examples of such techniques have been employed by non-state actors like Hizbullah in Special Force and Special Force 2, where the simulation of real battles against the Israel Defence Forces is employed to further Hizbullah's narrative. These examples show how games convey ideology as well as represent history (Allen, 2011; Salter, 2011; Schulzke, 2014).

Simulating Real Wars

War games are commonly based on recent or ongoing wars and profess to be realistic games using realistic graphics, artificial intelligence, and weapon models (Payne, 2016). Yet these simulations tend to misrepresent events, place them in selective narratives and view them from one side's perspective. Kuma\War, for example, has published episodic missions that mimic the raid on Osama bin Laden, or the capture of Muammar Gaddafi, but in ways that are imprecise and that potentially get the historical facts wrong. Other games, such as Delta Force: Blackhawk Down and Medal of Honour, are explicitly based on military operations but alter events in such a way as to make them politically reinterpreted. Whilst video games serve to challenge the boundaries between fact and fiction, such examples illustrate how games shape the narrative around war.

Creating Fictional Wars

Many games simulate wars that are fictitious but relate to actual geopolitical concerns at the time. Games like Battlefield 3, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, and Ghosts all imagine large-scale conflicts between NATO and Russia, or the U.S. and China, or the U.S. decline against rising Latin American powers. The scenarios dramatise threats and risks often being framed in terms of extreme military measures, such as torture,

nuclear explosions or breaches of sovereignty, as being justified as a response to existential crises (Schulzke, 2014). In doing so, they mark otherwise controversial practices as normative.

Critical War Games

Not all war games lionise the military. Spec Ops: The Line - a subversion of the genre in that it shows a disaster in a U.S. incursion into Dubai, and the suffering of the civilians and the psychological damage to the soldiers (Payne, 2016; Schulzke, 2014). Even mainstream franchises carry some dangers within, such as Call of Duty: Black Ops II making a statement on autonomous drones, or America's Army being used by activists to protest the Iraq War (Robinson, 2015). These examples show that games are politically important as both legitimising and contesting hegemonic discourses.

Six Days in Fallujah: The Story of the Battle of Fallujah and PUBG as Warfare

Two games represent very different approaches toward war representation. Six Days in Fallujah attempts to do an honest job of recreating the Second Battle of Fallujah in 2004 by consulting with U.S. Marines and using a wealth of military data. With a high level of realism, players engage in urban combat, executing evacuation missions and strategic battlefield tactics. The game's documentary sim hybrid aesthetic embodies Peter Tamte's conviction that video games can and should still solve real problems while they're still relevant. By comparison, Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) is the battle royale genre that pits as many as 100 players against each other, all seeking to remain alive. It was launched in 2017 and became a global phenomenon, with over 400 million players by 2018. PUBG is a dynamic combination of exploration, looting, and combat in ever-evolving maps, where wit and survival are rewarded. Like Six Days in Fallujah, PUBG places the player in a military-like situation, but the game uses entertainment rather than realism. Together, these cases highlight how military-themed games function as persuasive objects, cultural artefacts and war simulators. By creating narratives of conflict, patriotism, and survival, they become part of the larger context of hybrid warfare.

Conclusion

While video games can be a source of fun and skill building, too much use can also create psychological and behavioural impacts akin to those of too much television. With cutting-edge graphics and immersive design, they create compelling virtual worlds that shape players' perceptions and actions. In this context, video games are weapons of psychological warfare. Psychological warfare is the use of propaganda and non-combat techniques to manipulate behaviour, opinion and morale in the course of conflict or crisis. As Ismael Garcia pointed out, video games are not distractions but tools of psychological terror. The United States and other powers have acknowledged this potential and have used games to narrate stories and normalise political agendas. Because they incorporate both reality and fiction, video games are a compelling interactive media. They can be used to spread propaganda, misinformation, and to target vulnerable groups, especially young people. Their capacity to generate attitudes and amplify behaviour makes them practical tools of hybrid warfare, where the traditional and the non-conventional meet.

This phenomenon is therefore necessary to understand the changing nature of modern conflict strategies. Understanding the use of video games in hybrid warfare can help in the creation of countermeasures, safeguarding vulnerable communities, and identifying actors engaged in this new type of influence.

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