

Block H & Reality Jamming: Conflict Reporting via the FPS Game

Faith Denham
info@blockh.net

News broadcasts, particularly those depicting conflict, now share the same spectacular aesthetics as first-person-shooter video games. Where video games once took their visual cues from conventional media, now 24-hour television news employs the same 3D simulations of battles, animations of weapons, and diagrammatic re-enactments using military satellite mapping technologies. One intended result may be a more immersive or entertaining experience, but an unavoidable consequence is the virtualisation of real life terror. James Compton recognises that this ‘experience of war is, for a majority of Western citizens, limited to spectacle,’¹ where we are fed a myopic view of conflict which has been sanitised and simplified. When considering the media’s use of the terms “terrorist” and “freedom fighter” we realise that they are both arbitrary and context-specific. The disparity between the agendas of Fox News and Al Jazeera News suggest that audiences must be allied with one or the other. In response to a since defunct British censorship act, political dissidents were re-voiced by actors in news broadcasts during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, making it obvious who was good and who was bad. With varying degrees of subtlety and visibility, modes of surveillance, propaganda, and control are manifest in every country and sitting room declared “free” or otherwise.

Christopher Douglas notes that games can offer us a sense of the ideology of fairness, where players begin in relative equality — unlike real life where many differentiating and determining aspects of one’s life are established before birth ‘including social and economic standing, political freedom, skin colour, gender, etc.’² Broadcast news infers such parity and balance between opposing sides of real world conflicts, a ‘virtuous war’³ has been created where both technological and ethical superiorities are promoted, leading to a situation of hyperreality that serves to alienate us further from the actuality of events, as our emotional responses are blunted our capitulation is assured. Baudrillard believed that the modern world operates within the void of simulation where it is impossible to tell the difference between the real and hyper-real. Wars take place not on the ground but rather in our domestic arenas via

the safety of detached mediation. Civilian casualties become ‘collateral damage’ as distant destructions are experienced through game-like crosshairs. These bloodless wars run parallel with FPS games such as *America’s Army. AA:Special Forces* has used the experiences of nine soldiers who served in Afghanistan or Iraq in an attempt to bring a greater sense of the “authentic” into the virtual. This purported realism is contradicted by the notable lack of blood and carnage within the game.

In contrast to Baudrillard, Virilio prefers the term ‘substitution’, stating that ‘reality has become symmetrical. The splitting of reality in two parts is a considerable event which goes beyond simulation.’⁴ It is the more captivating qualities of the virtual that substitute rather than obliterate the real. This coercion through the militarisation of public and private technologies has resulted in a crisis of perception, where we rely on the singular inarguable viewpoint maintaining the dominant ideology.

Games like *AA* or indeed *The Night of Bush Capturing* provide ‘a bold and brutal reinforcement of current society and its positive moral perspective on military intervention, be it the war on terrorism or “shock and awe” in Iraq.’⁵ *Block H* provides a parallel experience in a Northern Irish context.⁶ For an Irish or British player in particular, it forces the question of whether fact-based games trivialise the circumstances they depict. The mythic narrative does not have to wait for the past nor the present. Games are reaching a point where they can integrate history in virtually real time. They exist somewhere between Baudrillard’s hyperreal society of simulations and Virilio’s concept of pure war, determined by the increasing speed of communication combined with the continual advancement of technologies; leading to new configurations of our control of space and time. *KUMA\WAR* is based on real world conflict situations set in Iraq and Iran. New missions are made available weekly as ‘game-isodes’. Scripts are based on news reports, real-world audio and video clips are mixed with their own generated content. Video games impersonate television newscasts, which now ape video games.

Choices are integral to the narrative of video games. This decision making process appears to be what mainstream media fears most, but is what we choose in a video game any more dangerous or indicative of our character than our selection of books and films? The games industry has discovered a willing user-producer audience eager to modify and further develop their platforms. When considered alongside the proliferation of the multiplayer phenomenon, this suggests that the intellectual capacity of games is deepening primarily through the expansion of the interface between local and networked elements.

Northern Ireland has had a turbulent past with many violent and bitter ethno-political conflicts ‘predicated on religious affiliation, but centred on split issues of national determination.’⁷ Based around the sectarian divides that still exist within Northern Irish society, *Block H* facilitates participation in a specific conflict situation. By emphasising the cultural elements of the environment the interchangeable characteristics of opposing rhetorics are laid bare.

Bogost’s theory of ‘procedural rhetoric’ within video games can be successfully reinforced with reality jamming, where ‘the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular’.⁸ In *Block H*, reality jamming takes its form in several ways. The game scenario utilises real world photographs of murals and icons which are condensed into a smaller self-contained arena. The sanctioned and unsanctioned murals of Northern Ireland act as communal propaganda that dominates the game world. The *Block H* interior is flanked by game projections of opposing teams on the side walls, evoking an oppressive

atmosphere that channels the visual influences of conflict by echoing the real world visual rhetoric of the murals. The sound reactive television in the centre loops and mixes various combinations of opposing ideologies, obfuscating the deterministic properties of each, resulting in recognition of the similarities between conflicting sides, blending political, private, and public ideologies.

Can we go beyond our ‘willing suspension of disbelief for the moment’⁹ and grasp at the gritty realities that lie hidden beneath? It is possible to address issues in new and constructive ways through games by employing alternative environments and narratives that enable us to question the broader contexts of events in society beyond the current counterfeit dichotomies of good and evil — to enter a world filled with ‘grey morality with nuanced perspectives of suffering, vengeance, horror, and reflection.’¹⁰

As Waffa Bilal states that ‘it is our duty as artists and citizens to improvise strategies of engagement for dialogue.’¹¹ It is crucial that creators ‘make it possible for players to deepen their understanding of the multiple causal forces that affect any given, always unique, set of historical circumstances.’¹² As players become secondary creators, the game’s response to its user becomes more swift and profound. We must concentrate on the human nuances and not just factual minutiae gleaned from Associated Press. As Galloway notes, realism requires ‘a more-or-less direct criticism of current society and morals’.¹³ We must endeavour to disseminate and produce our own versioning of events and histories dynamically in this newly non-linear world.

-
- 1 Nieborg David B. *Changing the Rules of Engagement - Tapping into the Popular Culture of America's Army, the Official U.S. Army Computer Game*. http://www.gamespace.nl/content/MAThesis_DBNieborg.pdf
 - 2 Douglas, Christopher. 2002. “You Have Unleashed a Horde of Barbarians!” In *Fighting Indians, Playing Games. Forming Disciplines* 13 (1), September. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v013/13.1douglas.html
 - 3 Der Derian, James. 2003. “War as Game.” In *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Summer/Fall Volume X, Issue 1. <http://www.bjwa.org/article.php?id=vfh7zH60DJc24E82JB5gy12uW3BiW4uDD83XtJ3v>
 - 4 Virilio, Paul. 1997. *Pure War: Revised Edition*. New York: Semiotext(e), p. 43.
 - 5 Galloway, Alexander R. 2004. “Social Realism in Gaming.” In *Game Studies* 4 (1). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/>
 - 6 www.blockh.net
 - 7 Lauber, Margrethe C. 1997. *Belfast's Peacelines: An Analysis of Urban Borders, Design and Social Space in a Divided City*. <http://www.mspacencyc.com/belfast.study.html>
 - 8 Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*. MIT Press: London, p. 3.
 - 9 Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. 1817 *Biographia literaria*. <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/biographia.html>
 - 10 Ledonne, Danny (Columbin). 2005. Artist's Statement: A Meditation on Super Columbine Massacre RPG! <http://www.columbinegame.com/statement.htm>
 - 11 Bilal, Waffa. 2008. Artist's Statement. <http://www.wafaabilal.com/statement.html>
 - 12 Bogost, Ian 2006. “Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy.” In *First Monday, Command Lines: The Emergence of Governance in Global Cyberspace*, Special Issue 7. <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1617/1532>
 - 13 Galloway, Alexander R. 2004. *Social Realism in Gaming* in *Game Studies* 4 (1). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/>