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Facing the Horrors of Distant Battlefields With a TV and Console

By SETH SCHIESEL



During the Vietnam War major television networks regularly broadcast real-life images of fighting in jungles, cities and swamps. Just as television was becoming this country's dominant mass medium, Americans came to perceive through their screens at least a bit of the confusion and pain of the battlefield.

That's over now. By the Gulf war, television had mostly been reduced to retransmitting officially sanctioned images of precision munition strikes. These days, it is almost impossible to find scenes of actual ground combat on television.

Traditional fictionalized entertainment has hardly filled the gap, which may owe less to Hollywood's depictions of modern war than to the reluctance of modern viewers to see them. After all, television and film audiences continue to flock to re-creations of World War II while reflections of today's wars have fared poorly. (See "Redacted" and "Over There" on FX.)

So it may be simultaneously illuminating and terrifying to realize that an entire postdraft generation of young men has had its perception of war shaped in some measure by video games. Games are perhaps the final mass-entertainment medium that regularly includes portrayals of modern war; gamers may be the last audience ready to consume them.

The military figured this out a long time ago. Since 2002 the Army has developed and distributed a game called America's Army that is explicitly meant as a recruiting tool and which now has more than eight million registered players. [Three years ago I joined members of that game's development team on simulated winter maneuvers at Camp Guernsey, Wyo.](#)

Now comes Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, the hit combat game developed by Infinity Ward and published by Activision. Since its introduction in November for PCs, the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3, the game has sold more than eight million copies (at \$50 to \$60 each). It won the Game of the Year prize at the annual Interactive Achievement Awards in Las Vegas last month.

In the game, Infinity Ward spins a sufficiently plausible tale about rebels taking over a traditionally secular Middle Eastern country that is near the Persian Gulf, but never named. The radicals find common cause with ultranationalist Russians, and together

the two groups end up threatening the United States with nuclear holocaust. Players take on the role of American and British soldiers who must, essentially, save the world.

The single-player version of the game is relatively short; I played through the PC version (on an excellent machine from Nvidia) in one nine-hour sitting. And while the sun-bleached Middle Eastern bazaars and misty wooden hillsides seem realistic enough, it is clear they are meant as part of an entertainment experience, not a documentary. If you are shot a few times, take cover for 15 seconds and you're back in the fray. Be killed by a grenade, and you just reappear at the last checkpoint. As gorgeously rendered as the game is, through all the running, jumping and crawling it seems clear that this is not in any meaningful sense an approximation of real war.

But there is one mission in the game that deserves to be in the pantheon of wartime storytelling, a level that chillingly, almost horrifically, reflects how modern technology has allowed both soldiers and civilians to detach from the reality of taking another human life. It is at once the most realistic scene and the mission that feels most like a video game, but only because for some modern soldiers, war really has come to resemble a video game.

It is called "Death From Above," and in it the player is aboard an AC-130 gunship high above a nighttime battlefield. The screen presents only the black-and-white infrared screen displaying the ghostly images of combatants below. The player's job is to shoot the enemy from on high, to watch the little silhouette images of their bodies fly apart while hearing only the whine of the plane's engines, the whir of machine guns and the exhortations of the fire commander: "We got a runner here! Nail those guys by the building! There's a guy by that car. Light 'em up!"

The most penetrating element of the mission is that it looks and sounds almost exactly like real-life videos that have been posted on YouTube of AC-130 missions in Afghanistan and elsewhere. One of those videos now carries an addendum in its description: "Note: This is not Call of Duty 4!"

As Vince Zampella, Infinity Ward's chief executive, put it: "We certainly based that mission on the real-life YouTube videos people put up because the Internet is really the only place you're going to see those images. You kind of get that feeling like you're playing God, but you realize, 'Hey those are human beings down there.' For these guys a mile over the battlefield looking at a screen, it's just like you're playing a game."

Of course, it's not like that for most soldiers. Sgt. David Lee of the New York Army National Guard knows the difference. A couple of weeks ago Sergeant Lee, 28, sat in uniform at a computer at the gaming parlor Neutral Ground in Midtown Manhattan, playing the multiplayer version of Call of Duty 4 on the Internet. He said he had spent a year on the ground in Iraq, had lost friends in action and had returned home to Manhattan in 2005.

“It’s really not like real life at all,” he said of the game. “If people are getting their impressions about war from a game, it’s just wrong. In real life you realize that once you squeeze that trigger, you are responsible for that bullet until it lands. Here you’re just clicking a mouse and running around like Rambo.”

But Sergeant Lee added that in the real war zone, war games provided an invaluable outlet.

“That said, sometimes it feels really good to just be able to click the mouse or hit the buttons as a way to relieve stress and not worry about the consequences,” he said. “They would sell Xboxes at the PX in Iraq, and we would play [Halo](#) 2 or whatever just as a way to escape the horrible reality of being in war. Sometimes we would ignore the simple things like going to sleep, and being able to just get into a game was a great release.”

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