A Genealogy of Power

The Portrayal of the US in Cold War–Themed Videogames

Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade

Abstract

This article analyzes the relationship between power, knowledge, and an idea of American Exceptionalism in Cold War–themed videogames. The article focuses on three perspectives. The first section engages with how knowledge is positioned in videogames and what role it plays for shifting power dynamics. Next, it looks at the relationship between notable historio-political events—such as Ronald Reagan's 1983 "Evil Empire" speech and the United States' proposed Strategic Defense Initiative—and videogames to determine how historical knowledge is impacted when it is remediated in games. The third part of this article discusses how Cold War–themed videogames focusing on the US-American perspective embellish a hero who epitomizes and performs American Exceptionalism by establishing a notion of (moral) power that lies with the West. By connecting these three dimensions of knowledge and power in Cold War–themed videogames released between the 1980s and the present, this article suggests that videogames alter players' perception of Cold War ideologies by associating the US with victory while vilifying the USSR and depicting Soviets as the losers in this conflict.

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Regina Seiwald and Alex Wade

The twentieth century was characterized by wars on a global scale. The first half was defined by two hot conflicts in 1914–1918 and 1939–1945, with both of them following a late-stage imperial logic.[1] The time in the aftermath of WWII is universally accepted as the Cold War. Marked by an age of extremes,[2] the period between the 1950s and 1993 was one of utmost precarity in the face of nuclear proliferation in the northern hemisphere between NATO and the Warsaw Pact: the West was committed to a utopia achieved through individual liberalism, while the East embraced the socialist idealism of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin that imagined a collective march toward a better tomorrow. The ideological struggle between democratic capitalism and communist command economy was primarily fought between the US and the USSR, but many conflicts were decided in Europe. Both sides were committed—in dramatically different ways—to improving the economic, social, and political polity of their citizens. Francis Fukuyama polemically argued that the triumph of the free(-market) individual signaled the end of history, as the last man and the political system they signify came to be the only game in town.[3]

For the purposes of this article, what we have termed "Cold War-themed" goes beyond the temporally discrete era between the end of WWII and the dissolution of the USSR between 1991 and 1993. Instead, this notion also expands to the future, with games and other media drawing on binary discourses in their geopolitical depictions long past the early 1990s. Cold War-themed videogames center on the cultural and technological battle between the "free" West, embodied by American individual exceptionalism, and the "tyrannical" East, epitomized by the socialist USSR. To be sure, games that depict war may be traced back to early examples such as Go and chess. However, what makes Cold War-themed games specific, as we will demonstrate in this article, is using computers to simulate scenarios leading to war and its potential outcomes as well as the processes involved in waging it. These dimensions are related to the advent and application of computing technology, which started to emerge during the Cold War.

In this article, we will argue that Cold War-themed videogames both produce and are a product of the discourse of technology and culture manifest in the conflict between East and West. Cold War-themed videogames imagine a technological and cultural battle between the West, often but not always represented by the US, against the East, often but not always the Soviet Union. This does not mean that these narratives were temporally limited to the second half of the twentieth century, for a range of narratives suggest that the Cold War continues far into the twenty-first century (e.g., the videogame *S.D.I.* [Cinemaware, 1986] and the movie *Crimson Tide* [1995]). These media texts are counterfactual because they represent a war that has not been waged; or if it was waged, then this was not a hot conflict between the two belligerents, but rather a strategic battle fought on big boards and in proxy and/or simulated wars. However, Cold War-themed narratives do not necessarily resort to the idea of an all-out war between the US and the USSR. In films such as *WarGames* (1983) and many of the videogames discussed below, individuals surmount impossible odds and situations to prevent a cold war from turning hot. No matter how videogames and other media may imagine World War III, they, as Matthew Thomas Payne argues in *Playing War* (2016), do not "have to explicitly reproduce our world to comment on it."[4] In this way, the computers that deployed game theory to analyze the zero-sums of nuclear war were engaged in counterfactual narratives themselves, lending an entirely new—and possibly unintended—dimension to Niall Ferguson's term of "virtual history."[5] Subverting the real to the virtual, computers calculated the gains and losses of an eventuality that by luck or design never came to pass. That videogames are the art form that originated from this technology is a double irony: individuals, despite their heroic portrayals in the media, had little or no control over the power, processes, pitfalls, and practicalities of war. The last man becomes post-human and ultimately, inhuman. Videogames, with their simulation of agency, provide some means to redress power imbalances, which is a key point we will explore in greater depth in this article.

The games we will discuss share two key features: *a)* their thematic focus on the Cold War and *b)* their privileging of the United States' ideological position as a morally righteous and "good" superpower who defends the world against the threat of tyrannical, Soviet communism.[6] Indeed, videogames are children of the Cold War, and in the West, "early videogames were programmed on machines designed for calculating the outcomes of nuclear assault on the population of the world."[7] Many early videogames were (strategic) war games, such as *Star Trek* (Mike Mayfield and Bob Leedom, 1971) and *Spacewar!* (Steve Russell, 1962), whose "genesis," according to John Wills, "came at a time of peak hostilities between two superpowers vying for global dominance through the space race."[8] Allowing us to interactively engage with their narratives and worlds, videogames offer thought-provoking scenarios of alterna-

tive histories and presents as well as dystopian pasts and futures. That way, the player explores dystopias with a keen cognition of what nuclear annihilation of our planet ultimately entails. On the one hand, this can be achieved with a look toward the future, playing with "what if"-scenarios and often with a reversed man-machine relationship. On the other hand, dystopian games also often look backwards, giving us a retrospective view of alternate, counterfactual and, in the extended sense of the term, virtual historical timelines.

To further elaborate on both points, we also need to consider the Cold War itself and the kind(s) of worldview(s) it created in the West. Cold War-themed games frequently depict dystopian worlds destroyed in a nuclear holocaust. According to Jean Baudrillard, the Cold War was a war that simply could not be fought because it would result not in a conflict "between peoples, states, systems and ideologies, but rather of the human species against itself."[9] If the Cold War had turned hot, our binary conception of the world—namely "good" capitalist West versus "evil" communist East—would have disintegrated.[10] Mike Gane's conclusion that a nuclear holocaust will not become our reality is hardly an assuagement given that the only reason for this is that it would divest us from the pleasure of confrontation.[11] Instead, as we have stated elsewhere, "it is evident by this point that hyperreality, realised in the technologies that simultaneously integrate humans more closely with the machines that kill them either physically or symbolically, has re-hewn the weave of everyday life."[12]

As the ideological children of this conflict, being born en masse in the 1980s and heralding the computer's shift from functionality to entertainment in the geopolitical West and the East,[13] videogames give us an opportunity to imagine and "experience" what it would have meant if the Cold War had turned into a hot, military, and likely nuclear confrontation. The realism of these games, as argued by Jonna Eagle, results from a mixture of their "proximity to everyday experience and distance from it."[14] Their futuristic and counterfactual representations raise questions about power and knowledge, specifically bias, distorted depiction, and the subjectivism of the dominant socio-historical discourse and its portrayal in games. Some games appeal to the player's emotions and morality by presenting bi-polar worldviews, dividing the geopolitical landscape into "good"—embodied by the US—and "evil"—epitomized by often nondescript socialist and communist forces.[15] This opposition indicates that the imaginary worlds of Cold War-themed videogames are undergirded by a hefty dose of American Exceptionalism. Seymour Martin Lipset has defined American Exceptionalism as the US being "qualitatively different from other countries," with "liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire" being its key characteristics.[16] At its core, American Exceptionalism is not a system that aims at establishing superiority over anything that differs from the American perception of excellence; instead, it emphasizes the country's "myth of uniqueness" grounded in

its exceptional history of being founded as a republic.[17] However, the idea of American Exceptionalism lends itself to narratives of dominance, and this is what Cold War-themed videogames often adopt.

In the following, we will analyze the relationship between power, knowledge, and an idea of American Exceptionalism in Cold War-themed videogames. We will focus on three perspectives. In the first section, we will engage with how knowledge is positioned in games and what role it plays for shifting power dynamics. Next, we will look at the relationship between notable historio-political events, such as Ronald Reagan's 1983 "Evil Empire" speech and the US's proposed (and utopian/dystopian) Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and videogames to determine how historical knowledge is impacted when it is remediated in games. The third part of this article will address how Cold War-themed videogames focusing on the US-American perspective embellish a hero who epitomizes and performs American Exceptionalism by establishing a notion of (moral) power that lies with the West. By stringing together these three dimensions of knowledge and power in Cold War-themed videogames released between the 1980s and the present, we will suggest that videogames alter players' perception of Cold War ideologies by associating the US with a sense of victory while vilifying the USSR and depicting Soviets as the losers in this conflict.

Power and Knowledge: Changing Cold War Discourses

The Cold War was a war of power that was—apart from proxy wars—fought not by physically attacking the enemy but by demonstrating moral, cultural, historical, and political superiority over the enemy. The US and the USSR established intricate networks of knowledge and power. On the one hand, these networks were built on the accumulation of information by intelligence services. On the other hand, they also relied on how the media communicated certain ideas and concepts to the people, which would influence the formation of subjective perceptions of the conflict.[18] To uncover the mechanisms at work in the creation of this knowledge, we can draw on Michel Foucault's study of power structures in society. Historically, power organized the functioning of society and became particularly pronounced in class divisions and axiomatic hierarchies that did not allow for upward mobility. However, Foucault argues that from the eighteenth century onwards, power has transformed from an authority-led phenomenon to one that underpins social structures in every possible way. Power enters the everyday in forms we accept as normal, such as the hierarchical structures that undergird the education system.[19] Power is a foundation of most societal organization mechanisms that regulate our day-to-day lives, but its form has changed over time.

If we re-contextualize Foucault's notion of power in the present age, and particu-

larly when considering digital media such as videogames, we can witness this change in its ontology from power as force to power as societal habitus. As Paul Strathern has argued, "Power now becomes a 'technology': it is the technique by which a society regulates its members. The modern individual was created amidst this plethora of rules and regulations. In many ways he created himself in reaction to these restraints."[20] Power has become a structuring device that has lost many of its negative connotations, while it can still subtly influence past and present discourses in ways that influence constructions of historical truth. Media disseminate knowledge to the masses. They may be informative, but they may also be manipulative. The third-person shooter *Freedom Fighters* (IO Interactive, 2003) builds its alternative history around the Soviet Union as the sole victor of WWII.[21] The game overtly presents the fact that the USSR won this war as an alternative history, while failing to emphasize that the Soviet Union was, indeed, one of the four powers winning it—although, arguably, they suffered by far the most losses, from civilian deaths to economic effects. In this sense, the imbalance between historical inaccuracy and the power to control knowledge becomes apparent very early on. The game, however, presents the narrative that in the aftermath of WWII, Western forces slowly weakened, resulting in the global spread of communism. The game's protagonist, resistance soldier Chris Stone, fights his war as a war of knowledge by infiltrating and pirating the Soviet-controlled media network SAFN (Illustration 1).

At the same time, the occupation forces use media outlets associated with this network to shape public opinion, notably when Chris's brother Troy is forced to urge the resistance to abandon their plans. The player witnesses this episode in the form of a non-playable newscast, which live-streams Troy's speech. However, Troy departs from the scripted text and commandeers the live cast to urge the resistance to continue their fight. The camera tilts down to the red star communist emblem before switching back to the studio. This episode underlines that the media channel is a weapon, equating information dissemination with power that may even be superior to weapons causing physical harm. This time, however, the resistance controls it, realizing its potential for mobilizing the masses.[22] In his role as the "Freedom Phantom," Chris proceeds in his quest to take over the media network, which he sees as the only way to regain New York City, thereby symbolically freeing the West. In a last push, he raids the SAFN studios and urges his fellow citizens to rise up against the occupiers, which culminates in the mass mobilization of resistance fighters and the subsequent takeover of key Soviet infrastructure.

This videogame draws on different conceptions of the interplay between power and knowledge that are (or seem to be) historically specific. On the one hand, there are dated power structures that resemble those that Foucault described for the period up to the seventeenth century: domination, uniformity, and absolutism. These

Illustration 1: The SAFN network declares the death of Commander-in-Chief General Tatarin, using a media outlet to communicate their plans for revenge.
Screenshot from *Freedom Fighters* © Electronic Arts, 2003.

characteristics find expression in the "bodily rhetoric of honour" associated with the soldier, who epitomizes state-led totalitarianism in his looks, posture, and gestures.[23] This dated idea of overt power clashes with a new form of power as knowledge that, on the other hand, demonstrates that media can be used to educate and mobilize the masses against practices of governance that undermine the American core values of egalitarianism, individualism, and liberty.[24] Despite their obvious differences, both forms of power coexist today, and *Freedom Fighters* displays both of them. The game approaches the concept of power from an unconventional angle because, according to Lisa Downing, normally "no attention is paid . . . to the power of resistance or subversion on the part of those submitted to the regimes of disciplines. Only official discourses of knowledge are considered, not the reverse discourse of, for example, prison sub-cultures."[25] However, in videogames, and, by extension, many other forms of popular media, the figure of the underdog or any deviation from the status quo feature prominently and frequently in narratives; indeed, these characters are often even placed at their center.[26] By demonstrating how hierarchical power dynamics can be shifted if masses of people are mobilized, *Freedom Fighters*

displays power structures that are normally not shown because they divert too far from mainstream practices.

Homefront (Kaos Studios, 2011) also articulates this concept of dominance.[27] The game establishes its notion of power by combining generating information with disseminating it, contrasting this idea with military strength and economic superiority. The game opens with a look into the past, displaying a statement by then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, in which she condemns the killing of South Korean sailors by a North Korean torpedo attack in March 2010. From this historic event, the game envisions a dystopian future defined by political unrest, pandemics, and warfare. The game is set in 2027, over twenty years after the Greater Korean Republic emerged as the world's sole superpower as a consequence of being the only nation that profited from a global oil shortage following numerous wars. After Korea has detonated a nuclear device over the US, the nation's electrical supply fails, resulting in chaos and hysteria. Communication breaks down and message control is implemented from the top. Former American soldiers are shipped to re-education camps in Alaska, which resemble Russian gulags, both in their setup and in the kind of discipline they apply for breaking the prisoners' wills. On the side of the resistance, illegal information collation plays a central role. The resistance fighters infiltrate the enemies by attaching tracking devices to vehicles and goods sent to Korean territories. That way, information can be gathered, and power can be generated without being visible to the occupation forces. In addition, the control over information shifts because as soon as progress is being made by the US resistance forces, the European broadcasting network spreads these successes on various channels. Narratively, *Homefront* depicts a very modern kind of war that is fought by means of information control rather than physical confrontation.

While videogames *represent* power structures in their narratives, they also *embody* power structures ludically. Power is essential to all games because playing games requires their players to be aware of rules that they follow (or break, e.g., by cheating) *because* these rules are a key characteristic of the medium. While playing, players need to be aware of the rules governing progression and win conditions before applying this knowledge to excel in meeting the win conditions set out by these rules better than others, be they in-game enemies or real-life players. In this sense, the kind of link between power and technology in videogames is binate: the game functions as the technology that establishes and enforces power structures. At the same time, power is the technology that guides players' engagement with the game. Without this power, the purpose of playing would be debatable (if a player outright rejects all the rules a game dictates, what is the point of playing it?). Most often, these rules are not explicitly spelled out, but the player learns them by engaging with the game. In this sense, "power operates according to and by means of secrecy as

well as—or instead of—by voicing its presence in loud and oppressive interdictions and orders."[28] Nonetheless, videogames are still capable of (vociferously) perpetuating certain ideologies, but these tend to be communicated more overtly on a narrative level than on a ludic level. An example of a game that plainly communicates ideologies is *America's Army* (2002), which was jointly published by Ubisoft and the US Army with the intention of attracting young recruits. More covertly, all war games—even those far removed from any historical or present reality—communicate certain ideologies because in the act of producing a game, game makers need to make choices on how to represent the gameworld. Whether these power structures inform players' knowledge of the world, however, depends on the game's content, its aims, and objectives.

The idea of resisting power structures becomes apparent on a narrative level by focusing on a protagonist who rejects dominant ideologies, which will be addressed in the next section. The emphasis on resistance against (socialist) collectivism and a campaign for individualism shapes our perception of the Cold War as an American success story, which it was not because neither side won it, and the current shift in geopolitical power structure is testament to this argument.

Technological Ordering of Space and Time

The current plea by global actors to follow a "rules-based order," thrown into relief by the war in Ukraine, positions the social and political manifestation of what is "right" and "wrong" into disagreement and even disrepute. Where laws are inviolable, as with the moral imperative of not taking another person's life against their will, in war, the taking of life during a conflict or a "special military operation" can be secondary to larger strategic aims. These ideas are enshrined in widely agreed (albeit not always followed) protocols such as the Geneva Convention, rules of engagement, Just War, and nuclear non-proliferation treaties. In the case of thermonuclear war, the targeting of civilian centers is a central concern to the wider aim of paralyzing key infrastructure. The subsequent breakdown of society follows logically from this, placing the actors in a double bind that forms the basis of the "rules" of mutually assured destruction, or in Baudrillard's terminology, "impossible exchange"[29]: it is intolerable to imagine a world where the aim is to annihilate the opponent, while opening your own society to the same outcome. However, this does not prevent actors from engaging in theoretical or hypothetical musings about the scenarios leading to nuclear war or its ultimate outcome. In fact, the opposite is the case: without these ruminations, planning processes, and simulations of any potential "what-if"-scenario, widely credited to game theory, the impossible exchange of nuclear weapons would have already occurred in the post-WWII world. These contemplations are, in effect, always-already present counterfactuals, while they also illustrate the fundamental

mechanisms of historical development.[30] Therefore, the social habitus of power that is vital to its perpetuation, giving increasing weight to concepts such as deterrence and even weapons where defense is prioritized over attack.

As one of the architects of deterrence in game theory, Thomas Schelling found that using pencil and paper for complex thought experiments and mathematical equations was "hard to do."[31] Indeed, the invention of digital computers proved to be the most ubiquitous and perhaps most important legacy of the Cold War, allowing mathematicians and strategists to ponder the "infinite game."[32] In this abstract arena, rules are malleable by those who make them. These rules were integrated into the calculations attributed to the economic, binate, exceptional, and ultimately ludic discourse of "Communist governments and armies [that] were depicted as demoniac machines" where the "entire transaction was understood as an accounting procedure in which capitalists scored 'credits' and communists 'debits.'"[33] "Big boards," large panoptic screens that reduced megacities to icons and megadeaths to power numbers, became the widely accepted visual representation of the infinite game, further abstracting the consequences of mass murder. The contradictions of impossible exchange were used to great effect in movies such as *WarGames*, where a computer, having run through a multitude of scenarios, decides that there can be no winner. Despite such representations in other media, the Cold War computing legacy of videogames best sketches the labyrinthine infinity of game theory.

Missile Command (Atari, 1980) is a key example of the digital legacy of the Cold War.[34] As with many arcade games, it asks players to "insert coin[s]," which are then transformed, in the alchemy typical of democratic capitalism, into "credits." These credits provide what are effectively six lives in the form of cities that must be protected from nuclear attack. The player does not play fast and loose with power fantasies: the player is in purely defensive mode, managing scarce resources. Three anti-missile batteries protect the cities, and they can be used to destroy incoming missiles before they eliminate the cities or the player's batteries (Illustration 2). The user interface is atypical for the time, utilizing a proto-mouse trackball instead of a joystick, reminiscent of the electromechanical pinball machines of 1970s arcades. While *Missile Command* coerces the player into the ideas of game theory, its ideals fall apart: playtime and the lifespan of the cities under protection can be extended, while the "evil empire" needs to be decimated. *Missile Command* follows the custom of the infinite game: in the game, like in nuclear conflict, there are no winners or losers, and the game continues until one of the players drops out. Notably, the endgame splash screen does not announce "game over," but "The End," shrouded in the spectrum of colors heralded by nuclear airburst.

The rudimentary big-board graphics of *Missile Command* and similar games were

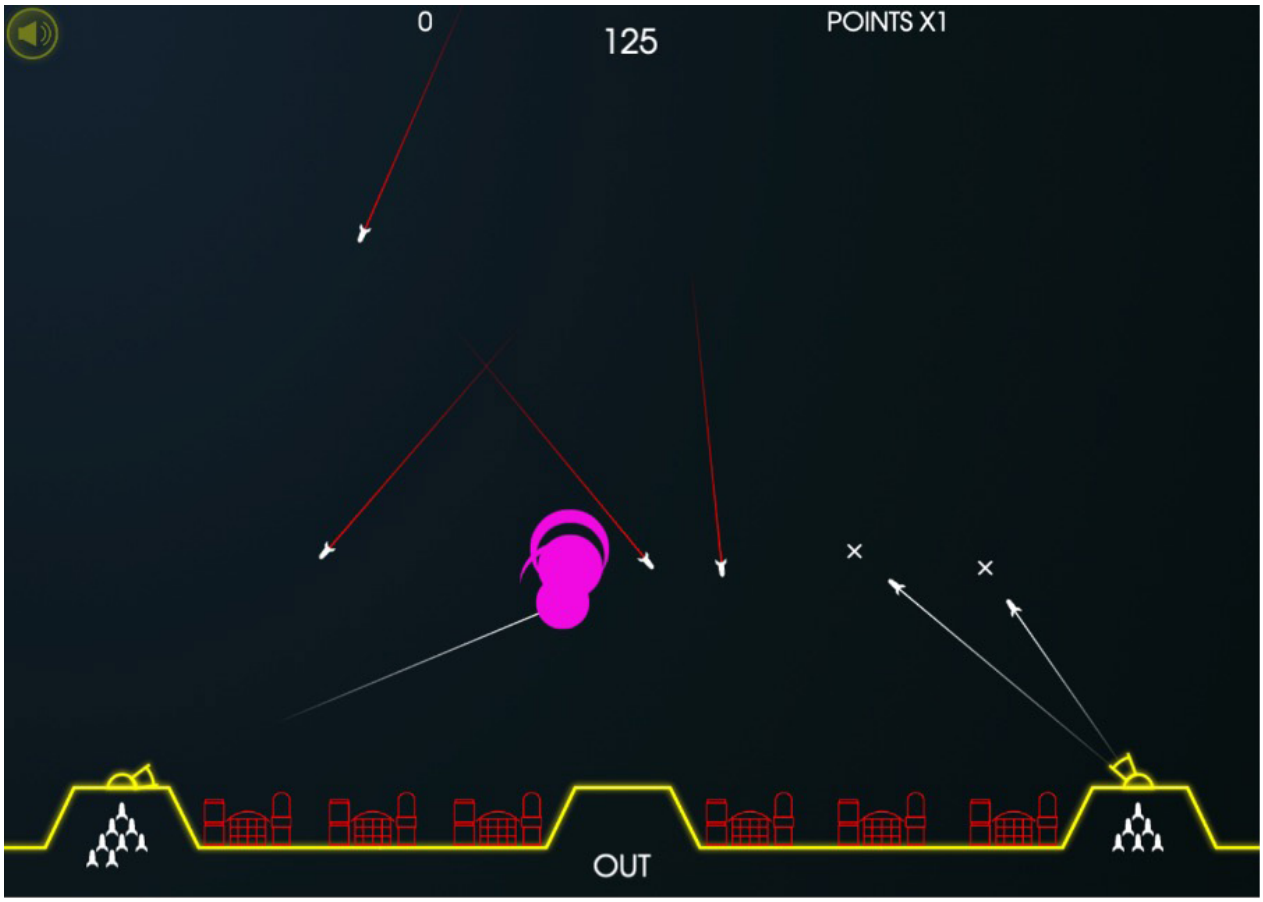

Illustration 2: Anti-missile batteries protecting the cities.
Screenshot from *Missile Command* © Atari, 1980.

products of their time, but they remain a pervasive index of the panopticism of nuclear war. Later games also use this setup to communicate a sense of the colossal drawing boards of Cold War strategic planning. Introversion's *DEFCON* (2006) uses big-board graphics to display the effective inability of the human race to avoid extinction, zero-summed as "Everybody dies."[35] Yet, playing in a defined space makes the nuances of warfare visible: six cities are more easily relatable to the player than the geostrategies demanded by global warfare. At the same time, *DEFCON*'s real horror lies in the effective inability to prevent human extinction. How the player shuffles the competing demands of an isolated, threatened settlement over their own missile batteries is key to the dichotomy at play here.

In March 1983, President Ronald Reagan gave two speeches that would redefine the US Cold War discourse. The "Evil Empire" speech addressed the imbalance between the US and the USSR, explicitly positioning the latter as the "focus of evil in the modern world," with the US as its "good" counterbalance.[36] Echoes of these ideas would be heard in later speeches justifying gargantuan military intervention and spending, such as President George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" address in the wake of 9/11.[37] Just over two weeks after the "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan re-affirmed the US's position

as the victim in the escalation of nuclear weapons while, simultaneously, introducing plans for a new active defensive weapons system.[38] The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) would offer an identification, tracking, and destruction system that covered the United States in a protective shield, deploying a network of twelve military satellites using (theoretical) energy beam technology to eliminate nuclear missiles before they would strike the United States. The gambit was that if nuclear weapons cannot be used, then they should be rendered effectively useless, or even more impotent than they already were. Supplementing gung-ho affirmations that attack is the best form of defense, the latter stages of the Cold War brought *Missile Command*'s emphasis on prophylaxis full circle.

If attack is no longer the best form of defense, then all that is left is the technocratic sphere of prevention. This idea is enshrined in Reagan's bizarre proclamation that SDI technology could be shared with the Soviet Union, thereby rendering *all* nuclear weapons impotent, bringing another order of complexity to an already complex, indeed paradoxical state. The program relocated the battlefield from Earth to the heavens, bringing a new dimension to warfare: where satellites were used primarily for "passive" purposes of surveillance and intelligence, space-based machines would be deployed actively to destroy the opposition's weapons. The seemingly fantastical, indeed science-fictional proposal, which had not even been discussed with Pentagon officials, only added to the contradictions at the core of Cold War thinking: SDI technology effectively delegated wartime decision-making to machines. The fact that the scenarios the artificial intelligence would encounter could not be tested prior to use—given that a nuclear attack had never occurred—meant that SDI was expected to work perfectly first time, every time.[39]

The fantastic nature of the SDI program immediately led the news media to label it "Star Wars," offering an explicit configuration of the Military-Industrial Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) with overt, expected, and accepted links in the power nexus between media, entertainment, and war: entertainment and the threat of warfare overlap, blurring the line between reality and fiction.[40] Almost inevitably then, where the press coined terms, entertainment media turned to the alchemy of coins and credits with two commercial videogames carrying the SDI-moniker. Sega's *S.D.I.* (1987; also known as *Global Defense*) is a game first released to the arcades in 1987.[41] Following an intro in which an ICBM strikes New York City (Illustration 3), destroying the symbolic center of global capitalism—the Twin Towers—the player takes control of a satellite across multiple levels. In a nod to *Missile Command*, the player uses a trackball to control energy beams from the satellite. The player's satellite repels waves of missiles before docking with NASA's space shuttle, after which bar charts provide the player with a resumé of their performance. The battle starts above Earth before progressing to increasingly more machinic environments such as

Illustration 3: *S.D.I.*'s loading screen asks players to "insert coins."
Screenshot from *S.D.I.* © Sega, 1987.

space stations and mechanical globes. These changes in setting suggest that artificial intelligence conceived of in the SDI program becomes independent and develops its form and that humans are no longer the primary lifeform requiring strategic defense. Unlike *Missile Command*, this is an arena entirely purged of humanity, where only posthuman machines can thrive in zero-g, zero oxygen, zero-sum environments and exceptionalism is measured in technological, technical, and technocratic accomplishments.

Sega's *S.D.I.* reflects on the power of technological developments through its own technology by taking a step back. In their System 16 boards, used to produce visually accomplished games such as *OutRun* (1986) and *After Burner* (1987), Sega had already shifted the state-of-the-art in arcade hardware. *S.D.I.* is a technically simpler game drawing on influences in the horizontal and vertical shooter genre such as *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) and *Scramble* (Konami, 1981). Amidst the growing moral panic that arcades and their games were deleterious to the nation's youth,[42] *S.D.I.* showed how rhetorical power "proved considerable," allowing its proponents to "claim that they were supporting defensive rather than offensive weapons."[43] This worked as much for the conservative position of reclaiming the ethical compass from critics of untrammeled nuclear proliferation as redeeming the arcade as a means to which

to digest the nuclear and digital discourse seen in *Missile Command*. In this way, both the military program and the game program of SDI demonstrate the symbolic political power of infinite games that determine "American high technology in full control, a shield rather than a nuclear sword."[44] To this end, they extend exceptionalism, first to protecting American civilian centers above all else, and then to the exceptional technology that makes this political symbolism possible.

The second game carrying the SDI moniker was published by Cinemaware in 1986,[45] a company specializing in slick interactive narratives inspired by motion pictures. Set in an alternative 2017, the plot is eerily prescient of the failed coup that occurred in the USSR in 1991.[46] The KGB have seized control of nuclear missile launch sites in the Soviet Union and blackmail the US and USSR to succumb to their demands. In this future, Reagan's utopian vision is seemingly actualized as SDI is shared between the West and the East, becoming a mutually protective technology. Following the intro, the player-character, Sloan McCormick, needs to defend the twelve SDI satellites from an attack by the splinter KGB faction, suggesting that even the world's most advanced weapons system is not impervious to attack. The player has access to surveillance technologies including radar and long-range scanners (graphically represented by "big boards") to defend the SDI network. If the satellites are not defended adequately, the resultant gaps in the defensive shield allow nuclear weapons to enter American air space and territory. Irrespective of the player's success on this level, the KGB faction launch nuclear weapons and the player has to use pulse or beam energy weapons to intercept incoming ICBMs. Reflecting the projected success rate of the SDI program, some missiles inevitably penetrate the shield, levelling major civilian centers such as Chicago and New York City. This is not a fail-condition and McCormick is praised by the President through the metonymy of a picture of Congress: "America thanks you, Captain."[47]

While players may fail at this stage of *S.D.I.*, with reports saying that the "situation in orbit has deteriorated, nuclear war is inevitable," before a splash of 'The End' is displayed on screen, the key to the game, like in *Missile Command*, is found in the microcosm of human relationships. McCormick must rescue his lover, Natalia Kazarian, from the VI Lenin space station, which is under attack from the "diving attack ships of the fanatical KGB."[48] A static first-person section follows, laden with historical Soviet iconography including a portrait of Karl Marx and CCCP hammer and sickle flags, where the player must rescue Kazarian within four minutes. If the player manages to beat the clock, McCormick and Kazarian kiss against the backdrop of a brightly lit Earth in an ending typical of space operas. Another sequence of defense follows, and Congress once again praises the player's performance, with the "best" ending pronouncing, "Congratulations! You have defeated the KGB. The revolution is over and the entire human race is in your debt."[49] In a twist that accentuates Cin-

emaware's filmic inspirations, at the game's conclusion, the camera rolls back to reveal an audience watching the credits in a movie theater. "The End" is displayed on a cinema screen, on the one hand spotlighting the contrasts between "The End" as in the cessation of human life in *Missile Command* and the "bad" ending of *S.D.I.*, and on the other hand suggesting the close of a film, a device that neatly places the videogame in the cinema projector's black box, rendering it as a movie. In doing so, it defers to film—and especially action hero narratives, a staple of 1980s American cinema—being the most influential American medium. It positions the form and the content of film as the locus where the individual can achieve immortality. At the same time, it bridges the intractable gap between the Evil Empire and the benevolent United States through the vehicle of romantic love and one man's—as it is invariably a man in older games—commitment to duty and heroism against impossible odds.

The Cold War as an American Hero Story: The (Historio-Political) Relationship Between American Exceptionalism and Videogames

The SDI-related games analyzed above indicate a development toward characterization and individualization in videogames that was not present in games made in the 1970s, largely because the technology would not allow for it. The idea of power represented in Cold War-themed games of the 1980s is still mainly located on an abstract level (e.g., the nation state and state institutions). Later games spotlight the individual subject, forming a stylistic device that constitutes a contrast to the authoritarian Soviet system. Foucault has translated the idea of power onto the subject by introducing the concept of the "docile body" in reference to humans who "may be subjected, used, transformed and improved."[50] A docile body is ultimately the result of strict and regimented training implemented by (and in) institutions such as prisons but also in the military or, less obviously so, in educational settings and the hospital.[51] These and similar institutional frameworks demonstrate that the relationship between knowledge and power must be placed in social relations because both elements need a subject, be it docile or not.[52] The producer of knowledge unavoidably has power over those that do not (yet) possess the same knowledge, and hence a form of hierarchical dependence is established between them. This relationship, however, is never static but constantly negotiated and questioned by other instances of power. In this sense, knowledge perpetually changes and grows, having "its own genealogy,"[53] which also has an impact on the truth associated with this particular knowledge. In other words, if knowledge changes, the truth we associate with certain discourses or ideas changes as well. As a consequence, power relations between bearers of knowledge and those lacking it shift (e.g., the transition from a geocentric

to a heliocentric worldview).

All political systems produce docile bodies. However, their existence is more apparent in totalitarian states such as the USSR because docility forms an integral part of this system's functioning. The Korean soldiers in *Homefront*, for example, are stripped of their individuality, as they have been molded by the state authorities to fulfil the functions they have been trained for; the troops are portrayed as (stereo)typical, faceless stormtrooper types. Apart from the agents of state-sanctioned violence (e.g., the police and armed forces), docile bodies also populate democratic/capitalist societies, albeit on a more subtle level: "the docile bodies of modernity are recognisable as the workforce of high capitalism, as well as prisoners, schoolchildren and soldiers, citizens trained and moulded in the operational factories of the schools and barracks."[54] Capitalism is built on the idea of assigning roles to individuals who need to fulfil them for the system to work. Of course, a docile body is not synonymous with uniformity, but many Cold War-themed videogames focusing on an American perspective tend to emphasize the docility and lack of individuality associated with Americans' antagonists. In the East, the mass of Sovietism stands above all. In the West, if the individual loses, everything and everyone is lost. Videogames that invite the player to assume the role of a character have a particular relationship with the triumph of the individual. When the player-character dies, all is lost. The player's enemies, however, are easily replaced: death is not the end for them, in their stead are more, bigger, and deadlier enemies, until victory is eventually attained.

Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis (Bohemia Interactive Studios, 2001), for example, thematizes the relationship between docility and authority by distinguishing between two Soviet political attitudes—those that lean toward the American system and those that radically divert from it.[55] Aleksei Guba, a renegade Soviet general, wants to bring down Gorbachev to lead the USSR into a new totalitarian era of anti-Americanism, but his break from docility is met with American antagonism, wanting to defend American Exceptionalism by all means. Ironically, however, the idea of a docile body opposes the focus on individualism and freedom of the subject the US seeks to promote as foundational values. *Operation Flashpoint* puts this idea on its head as the individual American does everything in their power to defend America's foundational myths. Simultaneously, the dissident Soviet general undermines the docility demanded by the authoritative state, thus building his moral stance on American values. The game is nonetheless symbolic of an anti-communism underpinning the US mentality that "grew out of and became the institutionalized version of the anti-radicalism, nativism, and Americanization movements,"[56] which are still predominant in the US today. The game does not abandon this American value system to serve docility; on the contrary, individualism becomes a key characteristic of the American docile body that serves (democratic) authority. In a nod to Ronald

Reagan's labelling of the Soviet Union as the "evil empire," the depersonalization of the enemy in *Operation Flashpoint* stipulates them as a collective, which opposes the fundamentally American value of individualism.

To a certain degree, Foucault's idea of the docile body clashes with individuality. For the American value system, this proves particularly problematic because of its focus on the individual rather than a collective.[57] In its legal history, the United States placed the individual at the center of the creation and protection of rights against external powers and the state. This focus on the individual's (alleged) freedom rather than the state's (actual) power over it explains why Cold War-themed videogames focusing on an American perspective emphasize socialism's uniformity in exaggerated ways. In addition, this focus on the individual is also the reason why socialism would never work in the US. Yet, instead of recognizing it as a legitimate alternative system, America's antagonism demonizes it in these games. This is particularly pronounced in the role of the "lone wolf,"[58] who is the American hero fighting against totalitarianism in a dystopian world overrun by socialism. A character who epitomizes this individualized heroism is Marines Captain Nathaniel Renko, the protagonist of the first-person shooter *Singularity* (Raven Software, 2010).[59] Renko needs to decide how to alter the past by travelling back in time, preventing the world from falling into chaos. The player is tasked to make a series of decisions that center on individual survival versus the greater good. Essentially, any decision made by the player that does not involve Renko's suicide as well as the murder of two other characters who were corrupted by power brings an end to the established world order, raising questions regarding the value of individual actions in the course of history. While the American moral value system is built on a focus on the subject's singularity, history (and the game) shows that power structures eventually decide the direction a society takes. The conclusions drawn from this insight thereby rely on the individual player, who must be docile to the game's pre-programmed narrative in order to arrive at this point. The only way to resist docility would be by not playing the game (or, by changing its source code).

Another game that places emphasis on the protagonist-player as a heroic individual and the only one who can save the world from (communist) absolutism is *America's Army*.[60] In 2002, the game was launched by the US Army with the aim of appealing to young Americans as potential recruits. The game has received numerous updates, and the US Army even has its own Esports team.[61] As a convention for first-person shooters, the game puts the player in control of moving the plot and determining an action's outcome, hence placing them in a position of singularity and heroism in comparison to their adversaries, who are often depicted as a collective that opposes core American values. While the game certainly presents insights into Army life, it has not remained without criticism. For example, media critic David B.

Nieborg argues that "the *America's Army* development team cleverly mixed various educational, marketing and propaganda mechanisms at their disposal to offer a free game which on the one hand fits perfectly into the FPS genre while at the same time reinforcing a highly politicized recruiting agenda."[62] This game is therefore part of the "virtual military/entertainment complex" mentioned above,[63] which was developed by the US Department of Defense in collaboration with various entertainment outlets to positively influence the public perception of the US military. When looking at *America's Army* more closely, however, a discrepancy between core American values and those propagated in the game becomes noticeable: for the soldier to be successful, a person needs to be docile and follow the seven basic values of the US Army: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.[64] These values promoted by the US Army are in clear opposition to the ones embellished by *America's Army*. Rather, the seven core values resemble closely what Foucault wrote about the seventeenth-century soldier, who can be molded and formed as needed for the purposes of the authoritative state power.[65] In other words, the values of the US Army are incompatible with ideas of American Exceptionalism as individualism, which does not stop the military-entertainment complex from selling both sets of values as utterly American. The image of the lone wolf therefore sits uncomfortably with the US (or any) military system, while it seems to epitomize the concept of American Exceptionalism with its focus on the hyper-individualized subject.

Conclusion

Our article has shown that Cold War-themed videogames draw on many ideas associated with the relationship between knowledge and power. Unlike the more linear historical development of power discourses from docility to individuality, however, these videogames mix elements from various eras. As a result, docility and individuality can be and are present simultaneously without resulting in discrepancies. Videogames' capacity to do so is partly owed to the relationship between values of American Exceptionalism and the celebratory status of the Armed Forces in the United States. The focus on positive associations with American values also has the effect that these videogames can potentially influence our awareness of Cold War epistemes because the subjective world they create is biased, particularly due to their focus on the US as the supposedly triumphant victor of conflicts from which the US did not emerge victorious. While videogames do not primarily distribute information, they nonetheless possess the potential for impacting our historical knowledge.

Political processes and programs have been popular topics in videogames. One reason for this prominence is the simplistic worldview reality *and* fiction try to paint, articulated in simple "good versus evil" topoi. While many (Cold War) games, notably pre-1990s titles, articulate this unmitigated contrast between good and bad in ref-

erence to institutions of authority, such as the governmental system, later games move it to an individualized level. However, while the "good" and righteous US-associated character is portrayed as an individualized subject, the communist-led enemy is still painted as a faceless collective. Throughout their history, Cold War-themed videogames have thus utilized many of the concepts Foucault analyzed in the context of the relationship between power and knowledge. Games therefore possess the capacity to present power structures in their storyworlds, while they themselves can also potentially function as generators of historical discourses due to their portrayal of power and the subsequent knowledge they form.

Notes

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