

Gaming, Terrorism and the Right to Communicate

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Abstract

This paper maps the conceptual terrain needed for the study of the right to communicate in the context of one of the fastest growing segments of digital media—the gaming industry—and a key subject in global communication: media and terrorism. It identifies three key areas in gaming research: gaming as *drama*; as a *grammar*, and as a *narrative* and their relevance to right to communicate research. Further, it examines in thumbnail fashion, a sample of games in the American and Middle East context.

Key Words: Terrorism, Gaming, Right to Communicate; Media Technology; ICTs; Middle East.

Gaming and the Right to Communicate

For the right to communicate to evolve, activities are needed that test old and *generate new* knowledge. (www.righttocommunicate.org, *emphasis added*)

What is a video game? “A video game is a cultural object, bound by history and materiality, consisting of an electronic computational device and a game simulated in software. The electronic computational—the machine, for short, may come in a variety of forms. It may be a personal computer, an arcade machine, a home console, a portable device, or any number of other electronic machines” (Galloway, 2006, p. 1). McAllister expands this understanding and suggests that computer games can be conceived as a confluence of different kinds of “work,” particularly, “they require work to create; they require players to work to engage with them; they themselves are works of art and industrial works; and finally they *do* work, particularly rhetorical and cultural work” (McAllister, 2004, p. vii, *emphasis in original*).

What also differentiates video games from other media is the fact that these different kinds of “work” are undertaken across multiple actors—creators, developers, gamers (in

the case of on-line games often with thousands of gamers). Such interaction creates some unique problems for analysis. As McAllister puts it, “computer games are extraordinarily difficult to study because they are so socially complex; recollections of how they were inspired and of the myriad collective and negotiated decisions that gave them their final form, as well as explanations of how and in what contexts they are eventually to be experienced, are difficult to identify and reconstruct” (2004, p. viii).

Thus, gaming poses a whole new set of questions for examining issues of the right to communicate. It signals a mode of media use that calls into question the very semantic organization of the three elements of the right to communicate—association, information and global rights—and the four goals of developing the concept of the right to communicate: (1) describing and *defining* the human right to communicate; (2) collecting, organizing and *expanding* on the right to communicate; (3) facilitating activities on the right to communicate in *research* and education; and (4) advancing the right to communicate—*personal and universal*—for everyone (as cited in the Right to Communicate website (www.righttocommunicate.org, *emphasis added*). I will not do a piecemeal examination of each of these issues but deal with them *relationally*, as they are emergent in the discussion of gaming.

It is not the aim of this essay to focus on the traditional areas of right to communicate scholarship (namely, issues of policy, ICT’s, intellectual/legal history, democratic participation and politics) but rather to provide a thumbnail sketch of the emerging field of game studies and outline some of the issues that impinge on the study of the right to communicate. As such, this is primarily a *mapping exercise*. It seriously takes the idea of moving right to communicate scholarship in a new direction—by focusing on *gaming texts as agents of communication*. Such a direction becomes important given the centrality of digital media in contemporary society.

Gaming, Storytelling and Right to Communicate: Main Approaches and Issues

While the field of game studies is relatively new, there are a number of theoretical positions that scholars have brought to the understanding of the texts of games/gaming. I briefly review three: gaming as *drama*, gaming as *grammar*, and gaming as *narrative*.

1. Gaming as Drama:

This approach centers the player—or performer—at the heart of understanding gaming. Whitlock (2005) explains that “to play the game is to *perform* it due to its interactive nature. The video game player of today is a *performer*. He/she is actively engaged in an interactive state that is both physical and mental, playing a character. Narrative, however simplistic, houses this performance in a virtual world, a performance space made up of pixels that can allow an unlimited creative freedom” (p.189, *emphasis added*). When the player becomes a performer, the stage is the game, and the props are the actual equipment used to perform such as the Sony Play station and its dual-shock controller.

Viewed in this manner, the analyst can evaluate the dramaturgical ability of the player as a key element in assessing how the game works. The player usually takes on a digitally constructed “avatar.”⁽¹⁾ Besides focusing on the role of the player, the “gaming as drama” approach treats the game as a “play” asking questions of a theatrical (and intertextual) nature. Overall, this approach attempts to find parallels between theatrical performance and video games. The key idea here is that both realms create virtual worlds through the creation of illusory spaces governed by verisimilitude (Hand, 2005).

Relating this approach to the right to communicate, one can pose questions related to the symbolic, cultural and ideological implications of the use of avatars in computer-mediated communication; the ranges of avatars that people use; the possible impact of avatars on other cultures (for example Asian or Middle Eastern), and the ways the technology of gaming (controller, game console) might affect the range of communication that players enter into. Equally important is whether “drama” as a form of communication helps or hinders communication patterns between nations in all its constitutive elements (race, class, gender, ethnicity etc).

2. Gaming as Grammar

Drawing from Kenneth Burke's concept of "grammar," and a Marxist understanding of dialectic, McAllister (2004) suggests that "one way to make meaning out of an artifact like a computer game is to see how it 'works' in five integral areas of power—those of agents, functions, influences, manifestations and locales (pp. 1-2). This grammar affords game scholars a "flexible framework by which they may arrange their examination of particular struggles they see playing out in computer games" (Ibid). He suggests that "visual metonymy"—the simplification of complex information—is a common element in the grammar of gaming leading to specific political effects: "To observe, that computer games operate with the force of mass media, is also to observe that computer games operate with the force of propaganda" (Ibid, 14).

Relating this approach to the question of the right to communicate, a key concern is examining the discursive range of messages about terrorism. Specifically, it is useful to think through what "propaganda" is in gaming environments. Multiplayer involvement in a gaming environment radically alters the relationship between a message and its producer. Unlike mainstream media, where accusations about "propaganda" can be easily located with single news outlets or internet websites, the same cannot be applied to a game, with the multiple ways in which it refracts issues of power.

3. Gaming as Narrative

The "gaming as narrative" approach articulates the idea of "spatial storytelling" through which games can be "read" as narratives (created by both designers and players). Games create four types of narrative experiences: 1) evoking associations with external narratives, 2) enabling (or prescribing) players' enactment of a game's scripted narrative, 3) revealing a game's "embedded" narrative through players' activation of certain spaces or artifacts, and finally 4) allowing players to craft "emergent" narratives (Castell, Taylor & Jensen, 2005, pp. 133-134).

Galloway suggests that a key element in discussing gaming narratives is to see the relationship between the gaming world and the real world. He explains that historically the theories of visual culture refer to such relationship as “the problematics of representation. But in gaming the concept of representation does not account for the full spectrum of issues at play” (2006, pp. 70-71). He suggests that a better term to describe this participatory relationship (of player to text) is that of “correspondence”.

In this context, McMahan (2003) examines the kinds of “participation” that games create using concepts like “Immersion,” “Engagement” and “Presence.” *Immersion* suggests that the experience of playing a game has specific cognitive effects, akin to being submerged in water. Whilst *engagement* is based on the idea that “many users appreciate games at a non-diegetic level—at the level of gaining points, devising a winning strategy, and showing off their prowess to other players during the game and afterward, during replay. To be so engaged with a game is sometimes referred to as deep play (McMahan, 2003, p. 69). Finally, *presence* refers to “the artificial sense that a user has in a virtual environment that the environment is unmediated” (McMahan, 2003, p. 3).

Relating this approach to the right to communicate one can interrogate the different ways in which “spatial storytelling” constructs a mode of communication for both players and designers asking whether this creates a more “democratic” form of communication or just corporate sponsored “collaboration.” Of special interest is whether external narratives affect a player’s enactment of a game. (For example, do news events in the real war on terrorism affect choice of roles in a virtual game?) Another key concern here includes the kinds of “modifications” to a game (player developed software that changes a game—behavior referred to as “modding”). As an element of right to communicate, these modifications may create opportunities for reconstituting the narrative of the game itself.

Since media stereotypes (the issue of “representation”) often limit communication across cultures, do things change with “correspondences”? It may be that since games are participatory, they create new frameworks for relationships between cultural

communities. This is especially the case with on-line games, where people from different nations of the world—often opposed to each other in the world of politics—participate in virtual teams accomplishing game based goals.

Finally, the experience of the player (immersion, engagement, presence) has central relevance to issues of the right to communicate. It may be that as players take on these modes of engagement, they create ways of communication that are radically different from those that were created by television and film—where the subject is positioned by the text. In gaming, each player sees him/herself as having the right to communicate, to fully participate in the virtual environment and in creating new communities. The key issue of course remains whether these new modes of “experience” recreate the restrictive nature of existing social formations and identities or create new hybrid cultural formations—and by implication a more nuanced language to articulate the right to communicate.

Gaming, Terrorism, Right to Communicate: Assessing a sample of games

Popular accounts of gaming often see it as a “vehicle for sexism and mindless violence, as antisocial and anti-educational, or alternatively as just a pointless waste of time” (Carr, Buckingham, Burn & Schott, 2006, pp. 2-3). I want to suggest that gaming needs to be examined in its socio-cultural and political context. Following McAllister (2004), it is important to describe how an artifact (for e.g., a computer game) affects discursive systems that exist beyond the artifact (for example, U.S.—Middle East relations). Scholars need to address the “so what” question and establish a connection between a rhetorical analysis and the dialectic—in other words, to explain how in-game struggles are representations of real-world struggles.

Gaming needs to be understood both as a media technology and as a *political vocabulary* that has a significant impact on modern societies, which relies on the central role of those media technologies in organizing its socio-political life. While the “fact” of computer games having particular psycho-physiological effects (usually seen as creating more

violent youth) is clearly a matter of some dispute, the fact that they exert *some* influence on people in *some* way is beyond question. In short, a good deal of the work of computer games is that “they are always making and managing meanings, sometimes by demonstration and sometimes through interpretation. Such work is always simultaneously, then, the *work of power negotiation*” (McAllister, 2004, p. ix, *emphasis added*).

Since violence is arguably a key element in most video games and that violence against institutional interests (states, armies, civilizations, cultures) is a recurring leitmotif, one can ask whether it is possible to limit issues of “terrorism” in gaming. Sidestepping that larger question, I chose games that directly referenced terrorism, focusing on a small sample of games originating in United States (*Deus-Ex*; Tom Clancy Games) and the Middle East (*Special Forces* and *Under Ash*). A central assumption was that the Middle East and the United States are central players in the ways that terrorism is being played out in the world (and the media) today. ⁽²⁾

The American Games: Overview and a Right to Communicate evaluation

Deus Ex is an award winning first person shooter/role-playing game. Set in a dystopian world during the 2050's, the plot focuses on *JC Denton*, a rookie agent for the United Nations Anti-Terrorist Coalition as he sets out to combat terrorism in a world that is slipping into chaos. Game play is focused on *role-playing*, which includes stealth, sniping, front assault, dialogue or engineering/computer hacking. The main character is a *nano-tech* augmented (i.e. his human basis can be modified with technology so that he can perform superhuman feats). Cybernetic devices can be used by players to augment different body parts with different skills—these choices affect game play and plot. Non-player interaction is an important element of the game, since meetings and interaction with persons in the game help construct JC's performance in the game.

A combination of choices made by the player—relating to skills, role playing, augmentations, and interactions affect how objectives within the game are achieved. This leads to levels of freedom and performance of the player as JC goes about focusing on the central narrative function of the game—saving the world from the chaos of terrorism. The back-story revolves around the effects of a lethal pandemic known as “grey death” the effects of which can be nullified through a vaccine called Ambrosia, which is in short supply. The terrorists, especially the NSF (National Secessionist Force) of the U.S. and Silhouette, a French group try to steal, fight for the vaccine against the UNATCO which is headquartered in New York City in a bunker under Liberty Island, placed there after a terrorist strike on the Statue of Liberty (<http://deusex3.com>; <http://deusexgaming.com>). There are numerous subplots focusing on JC’s family, the insider politics of the NSF, the UNATCO, and a meditation on class relations between those who *have* ambrosia and the underprivileged who *have-not*. It is an environment in short that speaks to the conditions of contemporary globalization.

Reading *Deus-Ex* as a text around the right to communicate appears unproblematic—it is a text anchored in relatively unproblematized ideas about national identity, using the construct of “liberty” as a centering rubric for structuring the world. The echo of such discourses with the ongoing war on terrorism and the ethnocentric nationalism of the Bush presidency lend a reading of *Deus Ex* as unproblematically hegemonic. Similarly, the name “JC” appears to center a Judeo-Christian identity. While acknowledging the over determined nature of these construct, I would suggest caution—*Deus Ex* is fundamentally a post-modern text, with multiple intertextual connections to both the world of fiction and film. The game features a text-reading system, which allows the player to read terminals and notes, which includes excerpts from newspapers, books, and novels. Comments from works like *The Man Who was Thursday* by G.K.Chesterton, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, Shakespeare’s *Richard III* – along with the influences of other writers like William Gibson, Asimov, Neal Stephenson work as a kind of reflexive bookend to the consequences of action. As a commentary on real-life terrorism, *Deus-Ex* incorporates the missing twin towers by including it in the story line of the game. The game also lends itself to modding which includes not just the usual features of changing

the graphics and levels of difficulty but completely altering the storyline of the game—in sum, providing a process of alterity to the discourse of terrorism—and opening out new possibilities for the right to communicate.

The American author Tom Clancy's video game company *Red Storm Entertainment* has established a market for games that draw narrative sustenance from his novels and include three popular series—*Ghost Recon*, *Splinter Cell* and *Rainbow Six*. *Ghost Recon* is a series of military tactical shooter games where the player is in charge of fictive squad of the U.S. Army's Special Forces, referred to as “the ghosts.” One of the creators of the game calls it “a tribute to military professionals everywhere” (www.ghostrecon.com/introduction) suggesting limited import for democratic communication—and by implication, the right to communicate. Yet, there is complex work going on with the game—an active list of forums, chat rooms and an international community of users. There is a *differentiated* use of force (and its legitimation) around a *range* of sites (Russia, Korea, Ethiopia) thereby allowing for a discursive range outside the limits of television news's coverage of terrorism (traditionally focused on the Middle East and the traditional ambit of “coups and assassinations”). The games reveal a process of understanding globalization that is outside the range traditional journalistic accounts—drug use, money laundering, arms supply, investments in the official infrastructure of politics by those in the criminal/terrorist underground and so on. Such a narrative focus is found in the occasional documentary but appears to be a central element in Tom Clancy games. It is also interesting to note the use of a “double agent” in the games, provides players to take on the role/narrative of the terrorist—a perspective taboo in mainstream media coverage.

While there is ample evidence that all of these games (*Deus Ex*, Tom Clancy games) are complex media “correspondences” and perhaps even plurivocal in their semantic constructs, *there is an inherent limitation in all these games*—they are in the end, first person shooter (FPS) games. As FPS games they must in the end fulfill the objectives of the game—to shoot, to kill—in a word, *terrorize*. They are also fundamentally masculinist, eschewing any ambiguity about identity. They provide a narrative grounded

in an account of the state—where the nation-*state* (with an emphasis on the work of the state rather than the nation) emerges, continually as the center of the stated objective (no pun intended)—the preservation of certain national order—one overwhelmingly White, masculine and majoritarian. It is also easy to read too much into the various global locations in which these games are being played or in local versions of these games. (The Korean versions are especially popular.) One can argue that what is being mobilized is a set of narratives where the action is re-enacted (by a different set of majoritarian national subjects) rather than *a re-stocking of the narrative question around terrorism* in each location.

Additionally, games like *Deus Ex* and the Tom Clancy games share much (thematically, narratively) with games that are centered on the U.S. Army such as *Kuma/War* and *America's Army* (which is a recruitment tool for the U.S. Army). Turse examines the collaboration between the gaming industry and the U.S. Army arguing that “with no public outcry over the militarization of popular culture, the future of such collaboration seems assured. Can the day be far off when the Department of Defense gets a producer credit for a Paramount film and Reality games is granted office space in the Pentagon? Before that happens, we need to start analyzing the effects of blurring the lines between war and entertainment” (2003, p. 2).

The Middle East Games: Overview and a Right to Communicate evaluation

While there is a history of the study of Arab representation in traditional media, little work has been done in the context of gaming. A project on “Digital Islam” by Vit Sisler maps some of the ground that is needed to be covered. Sisler suggests that game representations of Arabs and Muslims do not circulate in a vacuum, but are tied into a wider matrix of media constructions. He suggests that there are four key themes—most followers of Islam are seen as a *threat*; Islam is most likely linked with terrorism; The representation of ordinary Muslims is marginalized and a conflictual framework dominates”(2006, p. 2). Such constructions exist in games like *Delta Force*, *War in the*

Gulf, Splinter Cell, America's Army, Desert Storm, Full Spectrum, Back to Baghdad, Conflict: Global Terror, Battle in Sadr City and Kuma/War.

Sisler argues that while gaming is different from other media in allowing the role-playing of different groups, there are still discursive limits: "Generally speaking, the player controls American or coalition forces against terrorists, while insurgents or enemy regime's units are controlled by the computer. The enemy is depicted by a set of schematized attributes, which often refer to Arabs or Muslims, head cover, loose clothes, dark skin color. In many cases the in-game narrative thereafter links these signifiers to international terrorism and/or Islamist extremism" (Sisler, 2006, p. 5).

The response in the Middle East has been to produce games that construct an American and Israeli "Other." Two examples of this trend are the games, *Under Ash/Under Siege* (produced by a Syrian company) and *Special Forces* (produced by the central internet bureau of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement). The game *Under Ash* (and its sequel *Under Siege*) both focus on the Palestinian territories. It allows the player to play the role of a young Palestinian facing Israeli occupation during the first *Intifada*. The story line is focused on Ahmad caught up in a demonstration, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers who shoot, maiming the protestors. The task of the player is to get out of the demonstration alive. The player has to help wounded friends and fight off attacking soldiers. The story lines progresses with him joining the *Intifada* against the Israelis. The game shows real events, demolitions of Palestinian houses, and conditions of Israeli jails. The website outlines the rationale for the game: "The Palestinian nation is dispossessed: their homes are being torn down, the land is taken, trees fallen, property confiscated, cities besieged. They are put into jail, tortured, killed. The world ignores them; no one hears their cries. No one cares for their rights" (Sisler, 2006, p. 26).

The game does not include suicide missions and if you kill a civilian the game ends. In *Under Siege*, the player is (again) Ahmed, who takes part in the real-life events of 1994, when an Israeli shot 29 praying Muslims in the Mosque of Abraham in Hebron. The player has to survive the first minutes of the shooting hidden between pillars and then try

and disarm him. Later missions involve sabotaging the Israeli army and kidnapping of an Israeli General. Crucial (to both games) is the construction of the main hero, Ahmad who is seen as a fearful person, who refuses violence but is exposed to an attack and forced to defend himself. The game attempts to be real—if Ahmad gets shot, he dies. There is no ultimate victory against Israel. According to one of the producers of the game “it is about history. So in our modern history there is no solution for the conflicts and the game is some kind of a mirror” (Sisler, 2006, pp. 25-27). The game is explicitly located within a larger discursive strategy—to oppose the restrictive coding that American games provide. The website suggests that its purpose is to be part of the “struggling decision to fight the usurping Zionists” (Ibid, p. 5). It outlines the goals of the game as follows: “Lebanon was invaded by Israel in 1978 and 1982 and was forced to withdraw in 2000. We decided to produce a game that will be educational for our future generations and for all freedom lovers of this world of ours. In the game you will find pictures of all the martyrs that died during their struggle to liberate their land so that our children may live in freedom” (Sisler, 2006, p. 5).

Concluding Remarks

What are the implications for issues of the right to communicate as games in America and the Middle East work through the specificities of their national and cultural prisms? One of the few studies that have tried to examine this question (American versus Middle Eastern) is Machin and Sulemain’s research on Arab and American computer games. They conducted a comparative analysis of the discursive constructs of the American game *Delta Force* and Arab Game *Special Forces* and found that in the American game, the “forces are linguistically functionalized, understood in terms of what they do, but visually categorized, biologically, through their body type and culturally, as a mixture of collective identity (uniforms). In the Arab game, on the other hand, they are classified in terms of what they believe, through Islamic references, and visually through connotations that express their reliance on the will to fight, rather than on technology” (2006, p. 13).

Stahl's (2006) essay, *Have you played the war on terror?* offers a theorization (while focused on American games) that can be applied to how games in both cultures approach communicating about terrorism. He sees a gradual erosion of the categories of "citizen" and "soldier" morphing into what he calls "virtual citizen-soldier." He also introduces the idea of "game time," referring to a discourse of action over reflection and historical understanding. Specifically, he suggests that the

Virtual citizen-soldier is produced by the changing configurations of electronic media, social institutions and world events. The new figure is distinct from the citizen in important ways. The very efficacy of the citizen in participatory democracy resides in a critical space that allows for public deliberation about important political matters....the figure of the virtual-citizen-soldier forecloses this critical space (and) represents a depoliticization of the public sphere.

(2006, p. 125)

Similarly, Graaf and Nieborg (2003) draw on the concept of "the military entertainment complex" to suggest that "realism" is reworked to fit into the narrative expectations of war—with the use of real-time and place visual effects, training on weapons, learning maps, understanding strategies and a complete immersion in the vocabulary of war so that what results is something akin to submersing the individual (and individual judgment) into what they call "community branding" and "aesthetic totalitarianism" (p. 327). This may result in understanding the war on terrorism in terms of gaming (rather than the other way) with the war seen as a ludological construct, where action needs to be taken within a rule-based system, with its clearly articulated set of practices, expectations and motives" (Nieborg, 2004, p. 2).

Graf and Nieborg's work suggests the "reality" of terrorism is lost in the maze of entertainment functions that games about terrorism provide—they are simultaneously propaganda, education, training and recruitment as gamers come to understand terrorism from a specific vantage point—that of the military. Paradoxically, while such games prepare gamers for a specific political reading of the war on terrorism, it may

simultaneously distances him (since most gamers are male) from the reality of the war itself. Zhan Li (2004) spent hours on *America's Army* missions online, talking to players, as the second Gulf War began and found that “there was little discussion of the outbreak of the war. It was more common for the players to express a reluctance or even annoyance about the idea of discussing the unfolding events in the Gulf. The players who were active in the missions were there for escapism and entertainment. For most, the idea of discussing real war seemed to threaten their sense of carefree pleasure and represented the encroachment of the serious into the liminal space of game play” (p. 5).

Finally, Kumar (2004) addresses the role of videogames in making possible the war on terrorism in direct, referential terms. He suggests that “war is made possible within a field of representation and videogames, as products as well as producers of representation, are implicated in the construction of that possibility” (pp. 1-2). He argues that videogames “contribute to making war imaginable by elevating it to commonsense. This is not to say that videogames are the only generators of a discourse of war or even that there is a temporal dimension, which can be traced in terms of cause and effect (the discourse being treated as an event prior to the effect). Rather war and security are intertextual. They are materialized through the interplay of signifiers, which populate the political imaginary. Videogames along with other forms of popular culture can be implicated in the production of war and security precisely because these concepts cannot be understood outside of discourse” (Ibid, p. 2).

Notes

⁽¹⁾ *Avatar* is a word derived from Hindu mythology. The etymology of the word means “incarnation” but is usually used as synonymous with online “identity”.

⁽²⁾ There are other equally important national/cultural sites through which one can examine issues of gaming and right to communicate (such as the conflict in Ireland; Spain, South East and South Asia).

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