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Harry Toussaint

Misfire: An Exploration of the Military First-Person-Shooter Video Game Genre as a UK Armed Forces Recruitment Tool

This research paper explores the efficacy of the Military First-Person-Shooter (FPS) video game genre as a UK Armed Forces Recruitment tool. It takes an interpretivist approach, investigating young players' perceptions of the Military through eight in-depth ethnographical interviews. Existing literature has focused on the influence of traditional military advertising on enlistment propensity. However, the literature on the likelihood of military enlistment in military FPS players is sparse. Findings suggest that experiences of military representations in military FPSs may combine with experiences in other media to produce a violent perception of the military. This can be seen to dissuade young players from joining the Armed Forces. However, findings suggest that these experiences also foster an acceptance of the necessity of war.

Key words: Military Entertainment-Complex, Video Games, Ethnography, Military Recruitment

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INTRODUCTION

The United Kingdom (UK) is the largest video game market in Europe (Newzoo 2012). In a 2012 survey carried out by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE), 40% of 16-65 year olds reported playing a video game in the past 12 months, with 24% reporting that they played every week. The First-Person-Shooter (FPS) video game genre is acknowledged as one of the most popular worldwide, with its top-selling Call of Duty franchise accumulating nearly 140 million sales since 2003 (Statistic Brain 2014). With reference to the popular FPS title Doom, Crogan (2011, p. 76) encapsulates the genre, describing how the player adopts a "first-person perspective of the game's virtual world and attempts to survive frequent deadly attacks by a variety of monsters while navigating a labyrinthine environment in levels of increasing complexity and difficulty". Scholars have noted that in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, the narratives of FPS's began to increasingly resemble the "real-world" War on Terror (e.g. Andersen and Kurti 2009; Leonard

2003, 2004; Shaw 2010; Stahl 2006). Scholars argue that this is a result of “the ideological and material links between war and popular culture” (Leonard 2004), as described by Baudrillard (1991); Virilio (2000); Der Derian (2009); and McCalister (2001). Der Derian (2009) encapsulates this relationship as the ‘Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network.’

In addition Hollywood ties (Youn 2014), the ‘Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment-Network’ or ‘Military Entertainment Complex’ involves “the collaboration between the Pentagon (US Military) and the entertainment industries at the site of the popular interactive format, the war-themed video game” (Anderson and Kurti 2009, p.45). Rowbotham (2013) describes how:

“in exchange for playable material the videogames industry gives the military positive presentations of war campaigns. The benefits also extend to training and hardware, with early Sega teams (game designers) regularly switching between Sonic the Hedgehog projects and designing visual display units for attack helicopters. The military also pumps huge amounts of funding into training and simulation programs inspired by videogames”.

This relationship can be observed as far back as the popular and influential 1993 Sci-fi horror FPS title *Doom* which, three years later, was modified and adapted by the United States (US) Military to produce *Marine Doom*. The new version of the game was utilised by the US Marines as part of their training prior to deployment and was later made available for public download. Since then, the military has influenced the production and narratives of war-based video games with the provision of military advisers (Marriot 2002), who’s experience and expertise has shaped the realism and representation of war in many popular Military FPS’s. As Andersen and Kurti (2009, p.46) assert, military FPS’s are one of the most notable sites where entertainment and the military meet, therefore their contribution to shaping public attitudes to war must be considered. This notion has not gone unnoticed by military recruiters. They have understood “the compelling features of games, such as the heightened sense of realism, total immersion and the intense focus on destroying targets” (Andersen and Kurti 2009, p.49). This has led to the production of video games with the explicit purpose of procuring military volunteers.

In 2002, the US Army launched the *America’s Army* FPS franchise as part of a global Public Relations campaign to boost recruitment by giving players a ‘real’ flavour of Army life. To date, the game has attracted 13 million players worldwide (Andersen 2013). Some US Military recruitment stations also contain games consoles loaded with *America’s Army* (Hurdle 2009). The UK Military followed suit in 2009, with its ‘Start Thinking Soldier’ campaign, which included an online game in which potential recruits could test out their shooting skills in the first-person perspective on a shooting range. These games and the popular commercial military FPS titles such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* are products of the Military Entertainment Complex and therefore exhibit similar characteristics. These will be explored in the Literature Review.

The UK Armed Forces are currently failing to meet recruitment targets despite aggressive television, radio and print advertising (Beale 2014; Farmer 2014). Previous research on military recruitment has, for the most part, focused on this traditional medium (e.g. Dertouzos and Garber 2006; Harkley et al. 1988; Reichert et al. 2007). However, the literature on the efficacy of the military FPS shooter genre as a military

recruitment tool is sparse. This research paper will address the deficit in the literature and explore the perceptions of the military held by UK military FPS players.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Reichert et al. (2007, p.399) state, all-volunteer military service systems, such as those found in the US and UK, rely heavily on advertising for lead generation and enlistment influence. In addition, militaries must convince potential recruits of the worthiness of their cause through what Moskalenko (2010, p.249) calls “mechanisms of mobilization”, which aim to “convert civilians into warriors who are ready to sacrifice their own and others’ lives in violent conflict”. In order to underpin the research and inform an appropriate methodology, the following academic areas have been explored and analysed: existing military recruitment research, the characteristics and discourse of the military FPS genre and past literature on the potential influence of video games.

Extant Military Recruitment Research

The body of existing research on military recruitment strategies has largely been carried out in relation to the US Military. Dertouzos and Garber (2006) found US Army advertising in the early 1980’s across television, radio, magazines and newspapers to be very successful, increasing high-quality enlistments by roughly 32% (relative to no advertising at all). Conversely, Harkley et al. (1988) studied enlisted soldiers’ perceived influence of the US Army’s ‘Be All You Can Be Campaign’ compared with other influences. The campaign transmitted messages centered on “pay, skill training, personal challenge, advancement, leadership, personal growth, equipment and spirit/teamwork”. They concluded that Army advertising had some influence on motivations for enlisting, but that its influence was limited, citing conversations with Army recruitment officers as carrying greater weight. It was also noted that mass media (i.e. TV programmes, movies and comics) were perceived as having almost no influence. However, it is important to consider how news reporting of contemporary military issues might contribute to public perceptions. This is because the discourse of Western media in relation to topics such as the War on Terror often aligns with the official discourse of Western governments. This can be observed in studies from Papacharissi and Oliveira (2008) and Griffin (2004), who found that Western media often present war and intervention in the Middle East as righteous and necessary.

Conflicting with Dertouzos and Garber (2006) but in support of Harkley et al.’s (1988) findings, Reichert et al. (2007) applied Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action to the efficacy of US Naval recruitment commercials. Their findings suggest that military recruitment advertising is effective in convincing potential recruits of the promoted benefits of a career in the US Navy (i.e. travel, money for college, challenges, opportunities), but fails to convert this belief into interest in enlisting. Reichert et al. (2007, p.408) posit that “recruitment advertising fails to have more than a negligible impact between beliefs and interest”.

A more recent UK Military survey (cited National Audit Office 2006, p.31) found that the top reasons for joining the Armed Forces were “the opportunities for travel, sport/active life, challenging job, job security, skills and training”. The study was thematically similar to Harkley et al. (1988) and Reichert et al.’s (2007) previous research, with a focus on the non-violent aspects of military life, however, the findings conflict in terms of the effectiveness of promoting these aspects. Supporting the UK

military survey (cited by National Audit Office 2006, p.31), a National Audit Office (2006, p.31) survey on reasons for joining the Armed Forces found that the three most important factors cited were: “interesting work (94 per cent of current personnel and 92 per cent of former personnel rated this as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’), opportunities to travel (86 per cent and 90 per cent respectively), and challenging work (85 per cent and 84 per cent respectively).”

The cited research displays a considerable focus on the motivations of already enlisted soldiers for joining the Army (Dertouzos and Garber 2006; Harkley et al. 1988; National Audit Office 2006, p.31), with some attention paid to potential recruits. Reichert et al.’s (2007) consisted primarily of 18-20 year olds, however there is little research on the success of Army recruitment campaigns in relation to pre-16 year olds. This suggests that there is a need for further research in this area as “the Services also target marketing activity at young people, before they become eligible to join the Armed Forces at 16 years old” (National Audit Office 2006, p.32).

Previous research shows that, traditionally, military recruitment campaigns have focused on the non-violent aspects of a military career. This can be observed more recently in the British Army’s latest campaign, entitled “More than meets the eye.” The campaign features real soldiers from a diverse range of Army roles including electricians, bricklayers and human resources (HR) specialists, “proving that there is more to the Army than just front line combat” (Ministry of Defence 2014). This is reflected in contemporary western cultures’ aversion to violence: as Mackmin (2007 p.66) describes, “Today’s public and media are less lenient and are quick to condemn when evidence of any apparently unnecessary violence comes to light.” This is supported in a study by Mares (2009), which tracked a gradual decline of violence in Western society since the Middle Ages.

The Military FPS Genre

Having explored the existing literature on military recruitment efforts, it is also important to establish what sets the content of military FPS’s apart from the non-violent discourse of traditional recruitment campaigns.

Ouellette (cited by Shaw 2010, p.793) describes how “the post-9/11 appetite for Manichean ‘good versus evil’ narratives is increasingly structuring video games”, with the War on Terror featuring heavily (Gregory 2004). This can be observed in various titles from the Call of Duty and Battlefield franchises, in which the player takes control of a pseudo-real soldier in the UK or US Military in order to take on enemies who, for the most part, hail from the Middle East or Russia. Scholars have speculated as to the potential impact of such video game narratives on players. Shaw (2010, p.795) argues that “war video games are often complicit in reproducing oriental (in the colonial stereotype context) representations and are thus transitional spaces in concert with wider military representations.” In agreement with this, Leonard (2004, p.5) asserts that “war games construct radicalized meaning, thereby providing ideological sanction for America’s War on Terror and its aggression in the Middle East”.

Scholars have also critiqued the genre for its lack of realism, with Leonard (2004, p.5) describing how “within this virtual world, you have the potential to die and kill others without having to face the graphic realities of war.” He posits that this contributes to an increasing acceptance of war. Andersen and Kurti (2009) also

highlight the potential dangers of virtual war without consequences and describe how the fact that military FPS's reward virtual killing might lead to players to developing positive associations with the act. However, there is a lack of research into how the narratives and level of realism within military FPS's are perceived by players.

Establishing the Context in which Players Play

The aforementioned literature demonstrates a significant focus on the success and effectiveness of targeted recruitment campaigns. However, additional research suggests that reasons for joining are multi-faceted and may be rooted in other factors. Asch and Orvis (cited by Legree et al. 2000) found that an individual's propensity to enlist in the Armed Forces is a reflection of societal attitudes towards the military and economic conditions experienced. Legree et al. (2000, p.47) build upon this, concluding that key influencers such as "friends, family, and recruiters," will act upon any pre-existing propensity to enlist, in order to bring about an actual enlistment. However, Harkley et al. (1988, p.723) found "the family" to have little influence on individuals' decisions to join the Army. Supporting these findings, Barrett (2011) interviewed 69 members, leaders, witnesses, and victims of the Toto Conflict in central Nigeria and identified six distinct combatant typologies through narrative analysis. These revealed a plethora of underlying motivations for engaging in the conflict which, in addition to recruitment efforts, revolved primarily around social coercion.

The findings of the aforementioned research are crucial to the validity and reliability of this research paper. This is because they suggest that any perceptions of the military developed through playing military FPS's and the resulting propensity to enlist will also be built upon additional societal and economic factors. Althusser (2009) supports this with his work on what he calls the 'Ideological State Apparatuses.' He posits that, within Capitalist societies, an individual's opinions and desires and the resulting choices and actions are products of established social conventions or ideologies. These are delivered to the individual through the 'Ideological State Apparatuses,' which consist of a number of institutions operating within Western society. These are: religion, education, the family, the Law, the political system, the media (press, radio and television etc.) and culture (literature, the Arts and sport etc.). Althusser's work provides an appropriate framework with which to investigate young, military FPS players' perceptions of the military by highlighting the various factors that may influence and inform an individual's decisions. For instance, there is a large body of literature that suggests that many of the war films produced by Hollywood promote Western hegemony and imperialist US nationalism (e.g. Pollard 2002; Davies 2005; Blackmore 2012). There has also been a considerable research highlighting the susceptibility of adolescents to peer group pressure (e.g. Ellis and Zarbatany 2007; Shi and Xie 2013; Dumas et al. 2014).

Video Game Influence

Over the past 30 years, a large body of research has been conducted on the cognitive and behavioural effects of playing video games. Studies have indicated the potential benefits to learning and information retention (Mifsud et al. 2013; Evans et al. 2013; Manley and Whitaker 2011). However, as Newman (2004, p.6) describes, most of these studies have "centered on the potentially damaging and antisocial effects" such as the "potential harm related to violence, addiction, and depression" (Granic 2014). In particular, focus has been on the extent to which violent video games manifest aggressive and violent behaviour within players (e.g., Anderson et al. 2010; Ferguson 2013; Lemola et al. 2011). It is important to consider this body of work when

researching military FPS players' perceptions of the military and a career within it. This is because soldiering is essentially a violent profession. This can be observed in a study by Klein and Kümmel (2009), who present empirical evidence for military violence and conclude that violence is an inbuilt feature of the military in many modern societies, albeit an ambivalent one.

It is also worth noting that military recruits experience numerous forms of desensitisation training and video games are increasingly becoming part of such training (Andersen and Kurti 2009). For instance, Greitemeyer and McLatchie (2011) found that playing violent video games increased a sense of dehumanisation, which encouraged antagonistic behaviour. Their research concluded that aggressive behaviour induced by video games is triggered when the player considers their victim to be less human. Supporting this idea, scholars have noted the dehumanising characteristics of the military FPS genre: Andersen and Kurti (2009) note, with reference to America's Army, how the enemy is masked and when hit releases red smoke and falls on the ground. Sisler (2008) argues that, within military FPS's, coalition force" are adorned with individual identities and personalities whilst the enemy is anonymised. This dehumanising relationship therefore sees 'us' as complex and 'them' as simple.

Building upon the idea of military FPS content aligning with military and governmental goals, Kontour (2012) applied Michel Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' to the genre. He argues that military FPS's present a form of subtle coercion that promotes social norms which both adhere to and undermine hegemonic models of Western military masculinity; therefore bringing the values of the player into line with those of Western militaries and governments. Foucault's term governmentality conveys the idea that "in contemporary society power works on individuals through the concentration of a range of different discourses on specific aspects of our conduct" (Jones et al. 2011, p. 140). Therefore, in essence, Kontour posits that the discourse within the military FPS genre presents players with what he calls an implicit gold standard of what it means to be a man. This discourse (should it be accepted and adopted by players) then serves the hegemonic aspirations of countries such as the US by providing them with a pool of willing volunteer combatants.

Whilst Kontour's (2012) application of governmentality may be useful in understanding the way in which military FPS's might increase military enlistment, it is important to note that, in contemporary society, numerous discourses are transmitted from various institutions concurrently. Suggesting that the discourse within military FPS's could be contradicted, undermined or even vetoed by other economic, political and technical institutions that manage people's conduct (Jones et al. 2011).

Summary

The explored literature indicates that the non-violent discourse deployed by traditional military recruitment advertising has had varying success rates. Studies have also generally focused on adults or established military personnel. The potential ideological influence of military videos games has been theorised by various scholars but empirical evidence is sparse. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that military FPS video games can influence violent behaviour and aggressive tendencies in players. O'Connor (2012) found that the messages in US Army Recruitment video games clashed with real soldier experiences of military protocol

and suggests that this may cause problems for gaming recruits when assimilating to military life. There is, however, a distinct lack of research into whether the violent nature of military FPS's could develop into a desire to pursue a career in the military, which has been shown to be an inherently violent profession. Therefore, a gap in the existing literature has been identified.

In addition, the majority of 6-15 year olds in the UK are buying or receiving video games (ISFE 2012) and the UK Military actively targets this age group with its promotional activities (National Audit Office 2006). There is therefore scope for a study of young players' perceptions of the military and its actions, as well as their feelings towards a military career. This research paper addressed the following three research questions:

RQ1: How do 13-16 year old military FPS players perceive the military and its actions?

RQ2: What are the sources of these perceptions?

RQ3: What are 13-16 year olds' perceptions of a career in the military?

METHODS

The purpose of this research paper is to explore young players of military FPS' perceptions of the military in order to assess the efficacy of military FPS's as a military recruitment tool. The review of the literature (whilst acknowledging the potential influence of video games) suggests that an individual's perceptions of the military are a product of far more than just their exposure to explicit recruitment efforts. Therefore an interpretivist approach was adopted in order to gain insight into the social context in which individuals play military FPS's. As Walliman (2005, p.204-205) states, the interpretivist approach acknowledges "the unique personal theoretical stances upon which each person basis his/her actions".

In-depth ethnographical interviews were used to gain a deeper and more contextual insight into the source of young gamers' perceptions of the military and their behavioural intentions. The interviews were unstructured, only utilising a list of broad themes and topics to loosely guide the conversations (see Appendix R). This decision was made in order to provide a greater breadth of data (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p.652). The interviews took place in the room or environment in which the participant usually played their game. This was to ensure that participants were relaxed and comfortable, as well as to foster a contextualised conversation rather than a traditional 'researcher-dominated' interview (Clair 2003).

In line with the ethnographical style, the interviewing process commenced with participant observation in the participant-observer format, during which the researcher engaged in playing a military FPS game with the participant. This was carried out to immerse the researcher in the setting and situation in which the participant played, thereby gaining deeper insight into their interactions, relationships and actions with reference to the game (Mason 1997, p.60). In addition, this was carried out to develop rapport with participants (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p.655). This decision also enabled participants to respond to questions in the context of what was on screen in front of them rather than having to recall their experiences. Lofland (1971 cited by Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.652) describes how much of the data gathered from participant observation comes from informal interviewing carried out during the observation. The decision was made to allow each individual participant to select the military FPS title

that they most often played for the purposes of the observation section. This was to avoid any disruption or inhibition of the data collection that could potentially be caused by participants having to familiarise themselves with a new game.

The target population for this research paper was 13-16 year olds who regularly played military FPS's. This was decided in light of the UK Armed Forces actively targeting this demographic (National Audit Office 2006). A snowball sampling method was utilised through which the first interviewee acted as a 'gatekeeper' (Hennink 2011), allowing the researcher access to additional suitable participants through introductions and suggestions. This initial interviewee was selected specifically for their fulfilment of what the researcher considered to be a 'typical' 13-16 year old gamer (Walliman 2005). It was originally intended that four males and four females would be interviewed, in line with ISFE (2012) figures, stating that 56% of UK gamers are male and 44% are female. However, due to time and resource constraints, only one female was successfully recruited.

Table 1- Participant Summary Table

	Age	Gender	Game played in observation
Participant 1	15	Male	Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare
Participant 2	13	Male	Call of Duty: Black Ops
Participant 3	14	Male	Call of Duty: Ghosts
Participant 4	13	Male	Battlefield 3
Participant 5	14	Male	Call of Duty: Ghosts
Participant 6	13	Male	Call of Duty: Ghosts
Participant 7	16	Female	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare
Participant 8	15	Male	Call of Duty: Ghosts

Data from the interviews was collected through a combination of an audio and video recordings and handwritten field notes. Collected data was thematically coded to immerse the researcher in the data and enable thorough identification and interpretation of participants' experiences (Hennink et al. 2011). It was important to consider the graphic nature and sensitive themes present in military FPS's and how they would shape the interviews. This was particularly crucial given the age of the participants. Steps were taken (both written and verbal) to inform the parents or guardians of the participants of the topics that would be covered in the interviews to ensure that they were completely comfortable. They were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix P) detailing the nature of research and the themes that would be explored in the interview. Parents were also given the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview commenced and were informed that they could be present during the interview if they would like.

The researcher recognised that potential bias might arise with the use of snowball sampling to gain access to additional interview participants. Referred participants have the potential to exhibit similar characteristics and backgrounds to earlier participants (McDaniel and Gates 2005). The researcher mitigated this by being purposive in selecting referred candidates, in order to ensure that participants came from a range of situations and exhibited varying characteristics.

Reliability involves the accuracy of research methods and techniques (Mason 2002) and the achievement of consistency and objectivity (Denscombe 2007). A basic interview guide was used to ensure that the themes discussed were consistent in each interview (see Appendix P). In addition, the coding system (see Appendices I-O) utilised the same themes for each interview in order to produce consistent interpretations of participant responses. Mason (2002) describes how the validity of data is concerned with how accurately it measures the themes and ideas explored in the research. The researcher was careful not to be leading or suggestive in the way questions were asked. This was to ensure honest and uninfluenced responses from participants. The main limitation of a purely qualitative approach was that the data could not be seen as representative of the entire population (McDaniel and Gates 2005). However, due to the nature and complexity of the influences and themes surrounding the research questions, it was not viable to interview a cross-section of the population. Instead, a small number of participants were selected who could offer deep and meaningful insight (Iacobucci and Churchill 2010).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of the Military and its Actions within the Game

In the early stages of each interview, participants were asked to describe their favourite things about the game they had chosen to play. All participants described how they liked how realistic their game was. The emergent theme of realism became a useful means through which to explore how closely participants' in-game experience resembled their perception of real warfare. Participants often acknowledged the graphics, the range of weapons and the layout of the maps in which play took place and being realistic. Some participants also noted how they thought specific elements of the gameplay resembled real warfare such as how long it takes to reload a gun or how their character can only sprint for a limited time. P6 described how:

“The graphics are a lot better, it's a lot more realistic [...] I think it's quite realistic [...] like all the weapons and stuff, they're quite realistic. I'd also say the towns and stuff [...] they've got realistic suits and stuff.”

However, all participants were also well aware of the obvious limitations of the games that prevent them from becoming a full realisation of war. The majority of participants described how in real life you do not have unlimited “lives” or “regenerating health”. When asked how closely he thought his experiences within the game resembled what he would imagine real warfare to be like, P5 stated:

“I could see it being like that if you would say they only let you have one life, because you can regenerate, everyone just runs around. But if you were only to have one life I can sort of see it being more realistic.”

The same question was put to all participants producing varied responses. P7 described how she did not think the game was representative of real warfare at all, going as far as to point out that the question was redundant:

“I would like to make more comparisons on like how it's different to actual warfare but I feel like it's too obvious to explain.”

However, it is important to note that P7 had spent time in the Air Cadets and was therefore the only participant to have engaged in anything that even loosely emulated a genuine military experience. Whilst noting that she had not experienced warfare, she described how she had fired a rifle, learned how to march in step and could command a squad of soldiers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, many participants felt that the game they were playing offered them a taste of what real combat would be like. Whilst playing *Battlefield 3*, P4 compared the game to the *Call of Duty* franchise,

“On *Call of Duty*, you know, you’ve got your guns and then you’ve probably got better graphics, but on this you can actually get in a vehicle [...] you can actually like blow up some walls and stuff – so you chuck a grenade at it or you shoot a rocket launcher at it and if you have like a big turret you can completely destroy a barricade [...] It gives you sort of what it would feel like to be like in the Army, like it gives you a bit more of an in depth than *Call of Duty* [...] the sounds of the bullets going past you and stuff as well.”

Although participant responses varied in their view of how representative of real warfare their chosen game was, findings contradict the assertions of Leonard (2004) and Andersen and Kurti (2009). This is because participants’ assumed similarities between their in-game experience and real warfare failed to exhibit a desire to join the Armed Forces in order to commit acts of violence. Participants were in fact averse or at least neutral to the idea of killing someone, supporting Mackmin (2007) and Mares (2009). Supporting this further, the majority of participants reported that they would be scared if they had to carry out their actions within the game in reality. In addition to participant aversion to killing, their fear was often attributed to what participants perceived to be a high chance of death. P3 explained:

“I think it would be quite scary, obviously on this you don’t take it as seriously, but in real life you would have to slowly walk around, you wouldn’t just be rushing around, otherwise you’d be getting killed.”

P4 also described one of his main reservations about joining the Army with reference to a *Call of Duty* game. He stated how he thought that the worst thing about going into combat would be the waiting on the journey into battle,

“I’d really hate, say you were in a helicopter just before it, flying over [...] just thinking about what’s going to happen [...] I imagine it like one of the maps I’ve seen in *Call of Duty*, it’s like, it’s a big city and it’s just completely destroyed and it’s that but just imagine people fighting and just explosions going off and stuff.”

This suggests that P4’s perception of the military and his aversion to the thought of joining it can be directly attributed to his experiences playing military FPS’s. The notion of good versus evil was also explored in the context of the game. Participants were asked whether they felt that there were “good guys” and “bad guys” present in the games’ narrative. All participants stated that they considered the side that they were playing on as good and the people they were shooting as bad, thereby providing explicit player acknowledgement of Ouellette’s (cited Shaw, 2010) observation. Participants played as versions of genuine military outfits such as the British Special Air Service (SAS) and the US Marine Core (USMC) as well as fictional renderings such as the ‘Ghosts.’ These representations of Western militaries were generally up against enemies in the form of militant Middle Eastern fighters, Terrorist groups or Russian ‘Ultrationalists.’

Participants were asked to describe the characteristics or actions of the enemies that made them bad. Some stated that they were not sure what the enemy had done or why they were required to kill them. Other participants described how they were “just terrorists”. P2 reported that throughout the *Call of Duty* franchise, the player is often betrayed by a character considered to be a friend or ally,

“Sometimes you can almost read what happens before it does, some of the people, they don’t look very good, they look dodgy [...] they look very dodgy and they sound very dodgy [...] they have like a bit of an accent, they’re probably dodgy [...] if they’ve got a Russian accent they’re probably not a very good person.”

The way in which P2 reported pre-empting negative behaviour from a character within the game based on the sound of their accent suggests that he has developed a stereotypical view of Russians. Within the context of a military narrative, P2 can be seen to attribute betrayal and untrustworthiness to anyone with a Russian or “dodgy” accent. This supports Shaw (2010) and Leonard (2004) in their assertions that war games produce oriental representations of enemies. In addition, P2 described how he viewed the Russians he was fighting in the game as inferior to the Western forces he was playing as. He commented that he thought their weapons were dated compared to the high-tech equipment available to his character. Whilst playing through a mission set in Russia, he also stated how poor the country seemed, attributing this view to the dilapidated nature of the environment. Referring to real life he also stated, “America are more advanced than other countries”, suggesting that his perception of Western superiority over its rivals in the game is mirrored in his real world view. This supports Kontour (2012) in his assessment that military FPS’s promote the hegemonic norms of Western militaries.

Participants also reported that they enjoyed the storylines in the games they were playing, with particular emphasis on the characters. P1 described how he had developed a particularly strong fondness for a character named Soap, a member of the SAS who features in all three of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* games. He explained that he thought Soap was a “really cool” character and that he could relate to him, as well as stating that he could imagine Soap being a real member of the SAS. P1 even described how his least favourite thing about the whole *Call of Duty* franchise was Soap dying in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. P1’s affinity for Soap supports Sisler (2008) by demonstrating the potential impact of the presentation of a complex ‘us’ and a simple ‘them.’ P1 exhibited genuine sadness over the death of his favourite character Soap whilst remorselessly shooting down waves of Russian ‘Ultrnationalists.’ This could be seen to support the dehumanising and desensitising effects of violent war based video games as highlighted by Greitemeyer and McLatchie (2011) and Andersen and Kurti (2009). However, it is important to note that, later in the interview, P1 described at length how he felt he could not join to Army because his “morals” would prevent him from killing someone (Mackmin 2007; Mares 2009).

Discussions about how participants perceived the job of soldiers and their role within conflict in the context of the game frequently arose. Participants acknowledged the inherently violent nature of a soldier’s job, both in the game and in reality (Klein and Kümmel 2009). The majority of participants also described how they thought that the soldiers were acting so as to protect their own nations or the world from the threat of whoever they were fighting. When referring to British forces, such as the SAS in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, participants frequently used the phrase “for Queen and Country” to describe the motives and values of soldiers. This patriotic sentiment was often echoed when discussing participants’ perceptions of the role and motivations of real soldiers. For example, when asked what he thought about the idea of joining the Army, P2 stated,

“It would be scary but, to be honest with you, I wouldn’t mind being a soldier because [...] you’re doing a good job for your country [...] instead of being like an office worker, I know if you’re an office worker you’re doing something for your family or whatever, but to be in an Army you’re doing something good that will benefit the whole country.”

P2’s perception of the role and motivations of soldiers was the same when referring to reality and the game. It could therefore be argued that his dismissal of the traditional male role of breadwinner in favour of becoming a soldier to “benefit the whole country” supports Kontour’s (2012) application of Foucaultian governmentality to military FPS games.

Experiences of Military Representations in Additional Media Consumption

Participants’ wider media consumption was discussed in order to explore additional sources of military perceptions. P3 stated that he had watched episodes of Ross Kemp in Afghanistan, a series in which British actor and documentary maker Ross Kemp spent time with real British soldiers in Helmand Province. P3 was not aware of who the British soldiers were fighting when watching the programme but described how he thought they were brave for risking their lives for their country and “us”. Based on his positive assessment of what he had seen on the programme, P3 was asked if he would like to fight for his country in Afghanistan,

“Maybe, I think it’s like good, it sounds all good, but then the killing part. Like, you hear [referring to the programme] all the stories of people going, not mental, but like getting all... when they finish it they have all flashbacks of killing people and stuff. I don’t think that would be that good.”

This account is resonant of P3’s response to the idea of carrying out his actions in a military FPS for real supporting Mackmin (2007) and Mares (2009). However, through watching Ross Kemp in Afghanistan, P3 gained an awareness of the potential for psychological trauma when engaging in combat. P3 appeared to be more disturbed by this prospect than the violence itself. Since the topic of post-traumatic stress in soldiers is generally omitted from the narratives of military FPS, it can be inferred that this programme played a more significant role in shaping P3’s perception of a career in the military.

P2 described how he enjoyed action films and had recently seen *Olympus Has Fallen*, a film about a group of North Korean Terrorists forcibly taking control of the White House and holding the US President hostage. P2 was asked why he thought that the terrorist attacked the White House and not Number 10 Downing Street in the UK. His response was resonant of his comments about American superiority when talking about *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, discussed earlier in this section. He described how the White House was the home of “the leader of the Free World”, Barack Obama and that he has the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) at his disposal. Whereas he associated Number 10 Downing Street with menial political decision making stating “they (the US Government) stopped bin Laden, we stopped a double-dip recession”. P2 explicitly attributed these views to his media consumption, stating,

“All these films, they show all these big like rooms with all this technology [...] I pretty much get this off of news and films [...] you never see a film where people all gather in 10 Downing Street to like kill off this most wanted man in the world.”

P2 perceives the films that he has viewed about the US Government as legitimate representations of its nature and motivations. This suggests that film narratives similar to the one found in *Olympus Has Fallen* can promote Western (in this case American) hegemony over the rest of the world (Pollard 2002; Davies 2005; Blackmore 2012); much in the way that *Kontour* (2012) suggests that military FPS's do.

Most participants also described how they had often seen stories in the news of dead British soldiers being returned from Afghanistan. They stated that it was sad that they had been killed but felt that it was a good thing that they were protecting the UK. P5 described a news story about a British soldier that he had heard on the radio,

“I remember there was this one person [...] he got an award for killing four people when he was all alone or something like that [...] he saved loads of people [...] that was pretty cool”.

Although participants were averse to the idea of being exposed to violence personally, P5's statement suggests an acceptance of the necessity of violence in the preservation of life. The way in which the soldier was 'heroised' within the news report supports Papacharissi and Oliveira (2008) and Griffin (2004). P5's assessment of “that was pretty cool” suggests that his perception of the role and values of a soldier may have been influenced by the discourse of the news stories he had viewed.

Whilst discussing their wider media consumption, participants were asked if they had encountered any advertising for the Army, Royal Air Force or Royal Navy. All participants stated that they had seen military adverts either on television or the internet. Participant perceptions of the adverts they had seen tended to support Harkley et al. (1988) and Reichert et al. (2007) and conflict with Dertouzos and Garber (2006). This is because participants reported either not paying attention to adverts in general or that the adverts had no impact on their desire pursue a career in the military. Some participants also stated how some of the non-violent aspects of a military career touted in the adverts were quite appealing, such as “making friends” and “improving skills”. However, this was quickly dismissed by their perception of soldiering as being an inherently violent job (Klein and Kümmel 2009). P2 went as far as to state that he did not believe the adverts,

“You're out there to fight a war, not to fix a car [...] if your job is a soldier, you don't become a mechanic, you're a soldier.”

Similarly, P4 compared the content of the military advertising that he had seen with the *Battlefield 3* video game,

“I think it's different because *Battlefield 3* is like made up, it's not based on a real thing but it can give you an inside look on what's happening. But in the Army adverts and stuff, it doesn't really show you the actual fighting you will do. It will tell you but it won't show you what will actually do really.”

This suggests that P4 views the nature of a soldier's job in *Battlefield 3* as a more accurate representation of reality than the official military advertising he had seen.

School, Family and Friends

Most participants stated that neither the military nor anything related to the War on Terror was ever mentioned at school. However, P6 stated that when he was at primary school there was a visit from two Army recruitment officers. In line with the non-violent discourse of military advertising, the officers described how a career in the Army would “improve your skills, make you stronger, braver and socially better.” When asked how he felt about the visit, P6 described how it definitely made him

interested in joining the Army knowing that it would improve his skills. When asked whether he had considered a career in the Army, he stated that he had to a certain extent but he had not given any career much thought yet. This suggests that the delivery of the non-violent aspects of the Army by a recruiter was more effective in fostering a consideration of a career in the Army than advertising, supporting Harkley et al. (1988).

The opinions and views of participants' parents were also explored with regard to the military. Accounts support the findings of Legree et al. (2000) therefore conflicting with Harkley et al. (1988) because all participants reported that their parents either never mentioned the military or stated that they would probably be opposed to them enlisting. This is reflected by the way in which all participants had no immediate desire to join the Armed Forces. P3 described his Mother's feelings towards him enlisting,

"She said that she would never let me go into it [...] I can see where she's coming from sort of thing. Because she's read about all like people getting shot and killed and things."

This account further supports Mackmin (2007) and suggests that participants' aversion to violence could have been fostered by parental influence. Additionally, participants often stated that they only watched the news if their parents were watching it, indicating parental influence over the news consumption of participants.

The opinions of participants' peer groups were also explored. The majority reported that most of their friends played military FPS's but never had discussions about a military career. However, P6 described how he had two friends who wanted to join the RAF. He reported having conversations with them about the RAF and stated:

"I think it's definitely good, from what they've said it sounds like quite a lot of fun to drive around in a plane."

These findings support Ellis and Zarbatany (2007), Shi and Xie (2013), Dumas et al. (2014) and Legree et al. (2000) and suggest that the opinions of peer groups may influence an individual's perceptions of a military career.

CONCLUSION

This research paper aimed to identify and explore young military FPS players' perceptions of the military in order to assess the efficacy of the genre as a UK Armed Forces recruitment tool. Findings indicate that participants largely viewed the military as a violent institution, suggesting that they have an accurate perception of the nature of a career in the Armed Forces (Klein and Kümmel 2009). In addition, all participants described how the military exists to protect "us," stating how the current military operations in Afghanistan serve to "prevent" terrorists from attacking us or to "stop" their operations abroad. However, this idea of a preventative and intervening force for good came hand-in-hand with the perception that a soldier's main purpose was to follow orders and kill the enemy. This presents a paradox in which the participants seem to have accepted the government and military rhetoric of prevention of and protection against violent acts of Terrorism but feel that it is perfectly acceptable to achieve this through aggressive military action. Despite this, participant accounts largely contradicted Leonard (2004) and Andersen and Kurti (2009) in their assertions that exposure to virtual, non-consequential war might desensitise players to violence. Participants were in fact averse to the idea of killing and often stated that they would not like to join the Army due to fear of death.

Whilst acknowledging P7, who had spent time in the Air Cadets and P6, whose primary school was visited by Army recruiters, the findings of this study suggest that the primary contexts through which participants could form their perceptions of the military were found in the media they consumed. In addition to military FPS's, some participants reported watching war documentaries, war films and war related stories on the news. Considering that the majority of participants were averse to the idea a career in the military through fear of violence, it can be postulated that the graphic nature of participants' experiences of the Armed Forces in their media consumption have amalgamated to produce their violent perception of the military. P8 optimised this point when he stated,

“in like World War 2 when they sort of advertised the war they showed it as something fun, whereas now we know it's not actually fun [...] it's different and you could get killed quite easily.”

This suggests that the explicit use of military FPS's for recruitment and military support for commercial games is counter-intuitive to the non-violent discourse of military advertising. This can be observed in the findings as often participants commented that the non-violent aspects presented in recruitment adverts would be appealing were it not for the violent nature of a military career.

However, findings suggest that participant perceptions of Western superiority and the righteousness of military operations in the Middle East were contributed to by military FPS's. This supports Shaw (2010); Leonard (2004); Sisler (2008) and Kontour (2012), however similar notions were recorded when discussing additional media consumption. There is also evidence to suggest that parental and peer group views may have influenced participants' perceptions of the military. However, participant accounts generally indicated that their friends and family were neutral in their feelings toward the military.

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