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Serious games

Harun Farocki

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In the summer of 2008 my collaborator Matthias Rajmann sent me a newspaper clipping. Traumatized U.S. troops returning from combat are treated with video games. In therapy they watch virtual scenarios that simulate some of the situations they experienced in Iraq. The idea is that the virtual images will help the soldiers to remember the events that caused their trauma. From previous research we knew that similar virtual environments were being used to *train* troops for combat. Images that prepare the war resemble those that help process it. The idea for a project was born.

To say that a newspaper clipping gave us the idea for a film is so very unoriginal it seems almost self-effacing. That is why I should rather be telling you that, one day, on a cruise on a galley, I met a herder who used to kiss his chameleon and whose name sounded like Immersion. I had previously encountered the word ‘immersion’ in ads for language classes where students immerse themselves in the language they are learning. Researching our film, I found out that ‘immersion’ describes the way we ‘dip into’ virtual images and that there is a form of psychotherapy called immersive therapy.

We learned that there are virtual scenarios designed for people traumatized by the collapse of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. I began to imagine a film that would reconstruct the entire recent history of the United States as a computer-animated adventure. The films of Frank Tashlin, who made animated films before he became a ‘reality filmmaker’, came to mind. In his films all objects appear crisp, three-dimensional, and shiny – as though advertising every single prop, location, and character.

We also learned that *Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy* had been the subject of several programs on American television. Apparently the military has an interest in letting the general public know about this therapeutic

tic innovation. Nonetheless, it took several months before we obtained permission to film at Fort Lewis in Washington.

Synopsis

To this day, the British military employs painters who paint battle scenes in oil on canvas. Perhaps an attempt to respond to the elusiveness of newsreel images with something more permanent. An event – most recently the war in Iraq – is honored with an image and a technique that demands intellectual engagement as well as rare craftsmanship. These are the same skills that are necessary to create the computer-generated images in video games. Vietnam has long been part of the imagery of video games, whose iconography has been shaped by hundreds of movies about the Vietnam War. For the games simulating the war in Iraq the U.S. military has provided the necessary data.

Video games are the single most important medium to shape collective imagination. Where only two generations ago children would grow up playing with toy trains running through plastic mountain villages, today's children play in imaginary environments populated with deserts and palm trees, concrete runways and power poles, and – yes! – statues of Saddam Hussein. The confusion of Iraqi cities with their small alleys of concrete bungalows, where snipers fire gunshots from roofs, will, I predict, outlive the news coverage of that war. In 50 or 60 years when today's players are about to die, unlike Citizen Kane, they will not be thinking of a sleigh but of a veiled woman passing through Game City.

Once you have an idea for a film you have to write synopses. Synopses that describe research interests. Synopses that address potential sponsors: museums and art institutions, and, in our case, film boards. Synopses asking for permission to film. Someone at the Institute for Creative Technology needs to be approached differently than someone at the press office of a military unit.

A painter who paints a girl reading on a swing will not tell his model that his picture is meant to depict the fragile relationship between beauty and knowledge. In my experience it leads nowhere to tell the people one films what kinds of questions the finished film will raise. This is what we usually tell the people we film: we want to show that one can read on a swing, or: how one can use Virtual Iraq (VI) to evoke a traumatic memory? We want to show what is going on in the places we have chosen for our film. That is not a lie.

Whatever it is we say, we will be misunderstood. Because every single person we want to film is also a television viewer unfamiliar with the kind of films we make and used to the documentaries we do not want to make.

When we approached editorial departments of television stations for funding our synopsis focused on the idea of the film: an episode in which video games are used to prepare troops for war; another episode in which video games are used to help veterans cope with the consequences of war. At best we were told to cast a wider historical net, starting with the discovery of 'war neuroses' at the end of the First World War. For that kind of film one does not need to have an idea.

We arrived in Washington on a Saturday at the end of January 2009. We explored the surroundings of Seattle. Bridges, crossings, the sounds, tunnels, railroads, harbors with cranes and silos, factories and office buildings built of brick. In Tacoma we came across a building with a curious plaque: here, in 1893, a general originated the custom of rising and standing during the playing of the national anthem. Never before had I seen a sign honoring the originator of a custom. The neighborhood in which our hotel was located was called DuPont. Shops and office buildings the size of apartment buildings surrounded by curvy roads. There was a Starbucks and a liquor store – and a remarkable number of therapists' offices. Nothing here was older than ten years. In his book on Hitchcock, Truffaut speaks of 'American stylisation'. Buildings in the U.S. possess a strong emblematic quality. We were looking for signs of the current crisis, but in residential neighborhoods not a single house was for sale. Nothing here indicated that America was waging two wars, with the war in Afghanistan in its eighth year.

The seminar began at 7 the next morning. It was held in several rooms adjoining the cafeteria of the rather dilapidated casino at Fort Lewis. Large mirrors in wooden frames indicated that the rooms had once been used for festivities. Not anymore. Dirty carpets, ceiling lights that barely worked, and radiators that did not do their job. Our three-man crew was supervised by three press officers flown in from Washington D.C. for the occasion. Soon they retired to the cafeteria.

The seminar was called a workshop. Plain-clothed civilian therapists were teaching army therapists who, except for one student, showed up in camouflaged military uniforms. The civilian instructors were quite eloquent while the students said nothing for the duration of the class. Later, during role play, it became clear that their language was clumsy and awkward. They had large coffee mugs and water bottles and many were overweight – a marked contrast to the military therapists.

Two of the civilian therapists gave an introduction. It is important, they explained, to find out what it was that traumatised the patient. The next step, they said, is to find a corresponding scenario in the Virtual Iraq

Program that the patient will see on his Head Mounted Display (HMD) – a pair of monitor glasses, if you will. The patient can navigate through the images, for example a turn of his head equals a pan. The therapist can present stimuli such as the explosion of a land mine or car bomb, or snipers opening fire. He can also introduce smells like burnt rubber or hair, but that was not part of the workshop.

After familiarising themselves with the technology the more than 30 military therapists began to practice at six workstations. Stylistically, I liked these scenes a lot. The patient-players were wearing headsets and they spoke in a loud voice, their sentences sounding like declarations. They used the past tense: 'I was really mad. I just ... like I thought I didn't want to shoot at just anything, but at the same time I just ... I was so mad that I just wanted to shoot somebody.' The HMDs concealed their faces like masks. On a computer screen which we were recording we could see what the patients saw under their HMDs.

Hitchcock made more than one film in which the scenario that caused a character's trauma is eventually shown on screen. Here, at Fort Lewis, we were able to see what the patient seemed to imagine. *Then* Hollywood referred to Freud, *here and now* therapy refers to Pavlov. One of the civilian therapists asked one of the military therapists why the images in the Virtual Iraq Program were not as high quality as those in regular video games. The answer he received was that game manufacturers operate with a budget at least ten times the budget of the military. One civilian therapist told us that many veterans feel shame telling their comrades they are seeing a therapist. When they say that they are going to play a video game everyone else wants to go as well. There are dentists for kids who wear Mickey Mouse masks and crawl on the floor. It may well be that the video games are meant to lure soldiers into therapy.

On the second day we witnessed a virtuoso performance. One of the civilian therapists was playing a patient who spoke about his experience in Baghdad. This was his first mission. He was accompanying someone named Jones. Their task was to clean the streets, which meant tearing down propaganda posters. Jones suggested that they separate, each taking to one side of the street. They knew they were disobeying orders but did it anyway. The therapist who played the patient was entering a courtyard when he heard an explosion. He looked – he zoned out, starting to digress. The therapist who played the therapist interrupted him: what did he see? The therapist who played the patient said:

[s]o I got to where he's at and ... and it's like just ... from his knee up, and that's all that's there ... and there's flesh and there's blood and there's bits of uniform and it's ... it was ... and I'm like: shit! So at that point I'm just freaking out. I'm thinking I'm going to die. That this was not a good idea. Why the hell are we out here doing this?

At this point he broke down. Hunched over, he implored the therapist to end the session. He could not take it any longer. The therapist insisted that they continue. The patient hesitated, stammering, unable to describe his thoughts and reproaches in clear language. He played his role so convincingly that friends and colleagues whom I had told we were filming role play assumed that he was recounting an actual, genuine memory. The press officer who had given us permission to shoot the workshop believed that the 'patient' was describing a personal experience. Even if it was true that the therapist performed so well because he wanted to sell the software, that does not mean he was playing false.

We had to wait nine months before we were able to continue filming. This time we filmed in Twentynine Palms, California. I had heard of this place in Bruno Dumont's eponymous film. The film tells of a couple who travel through the desert, and at the end of the film the husband murders his wife in the most horrific manner. Fritz Lang says death is not a solution. In their case, I do not know what the problem to be solved was.

In the town there was an overabundance of tattoo shops and hair salons offering buzz cuts, but not a single bar or nightclub. The military base is roughly the size of Berlin – too big to be fenced-in completely. Occasionally tourists wander on the premises, not knowing where they are. It took us half an hour to get to our destination. Once it took us almost an hour. Unlike at Fort Lewis where we could hear the clamor of a nearby kindergarten, there are no family members staying at the Twentynine Palms military base.

At an outpost we saw a settlement of shacks where troops were put up. Marines were getting ready for the conditions they would have to deal with in the field. This image of shacks, neatly sitting side-by-side in a deserted landscape devoid of bushes and trees, evoked the worst idea of war misery for me. We watched the Marines. They seemed shy, polite, and no less eloquent than the military therapists in Fort Lewis. They seemed more like clerical workers or computer specialists than the Marines we are used to seeing in the movies.

It only took us three days to film what we had come here for. In some kind of makeshift classroom 12 soldiers were sitting at three tables placed

next to each other. Every soldier had a laptop in front of him. Four soldiers made a tank crew. Three tanks altogether. The three vehicles traversed a virtual Afghanistan, its landscape derived from real geographical data. The soldiers could see the route the vehicle was taking on their laptops, filmed mostly from behind and above as though the camera was mounted on a crane following the tank. Using our own camera we filmed one crew as they interacted with each other, we also recorded what the soldiers saw on their laptops.

The battalion started out moving across a plain. The tanks were made to stop on the tarmac several times because of an irregularity on the road that could have been an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). One time the driver reported seeing a number of birds in front of him, and one bird flew by in very close proximity to the virtual camera. It seemed to me that this did not have anything to do with warfare but was rather meant to create a so-called reality effect – just like fiction films use sub-plots, and sub-plots create the impression that not everything happens on purpose and serves a narrative function.

A hostile vehicle appeared on the horizon just once. It was immediately brought down by another U.S. battalion. An hour had passed when our battalion encountered a group of enemies on foot, so-called *dismounts* or *insurgents*. We finished them off quickly. The gunner in one of the tanks we were pursuing was shot by a sniper twice. The second bullet brought him down and the figure of the gunner fell from his lookout post. Watson, who had been playing the gunner, was now no longer part of the game; he leaned back in his chair, somewhat grumpy.

There is a virtual sun shining in the computer-generated world of our video game. The sun's position is computed using real astronomical data from Afghanistan. When a tank passes over sand the sand flies up – always in the same way, regardless whether there are lichens growing on the ground or not. A surface simulating metal has almost the same texture as one simulating plaster. Unlike cartoons, which create their own distinct stylisation, video games strive to imitate analog film images. In that sense they are imperfect, because one can navigate in them; they are derived from data rather than reproducing a given (external) reality. Computer-generated images ascribe a higher value to themselves than photographic images using film stock. They are something that is generated, not something that is reproduced. At the very most they are edited for reproduction. The fact that they lag behind, limping yet feeling superior, gives them an air of magniloquence.

How many times have I watched children pointing at a figure in an

image and saying ‘that’s me’? I know that at the movies people identify with the characters on the screen, but I cannot see how that happens. In the exercises we were filming we saw veterans, grown-ups, literally inserting themselves into the digital environment. Each soldier looks at a character meant to represent him, even bearing his name on a name tag. There is an instructor placing IEDs and enemies, on foot or motorised. The instructor has a huge arsenal at his disposal: explosives, vehicles, traffic signs, barriers of all kinds, as well as people. We recorded him clicking through the arsenal. It looked like dressing characters for a genre film, or like inspecting stage props in a studio specialising in these kinds of films. Man wearing a caftan with burnoose; man wearing a caftan with hard hat; man with explosive device strapped on his chest; woman in blue burqa; woman in black burqa. Explosives in a cement block, in a Coca-Cola can, in a Pepsi can, in the cadaver of a dog.

On our way to a Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) facility, a rather remote Marine Corps base, a press officer told us that not long ago a hiker got lost on the premises and died of hunger and thirst. When we arrived at the MOUT site we heard about a bank robbery on the radio. The robbery was part of the exercise, as was the radio station. A mock-up city with different kinds of neighborhoods: embassy quarter, prison quarter, stadium, slum, historic center, etc. We went to the historic center which was situated on a slope. The buildings were containers with cut-out windows; they were made of beige foamed plastic, some of them several stories tall. There were car wrecks, a roadster with its roof pulled back. Two guards were sitting on the car, looking like a 1960s pop art painting by Edward Kienholz. There was a pick-up truck loaded with garbage bags, a license plate in Arabic script was covering one from California. Ambiguous identity: a mock-up garbage truck that will get rid of real garbage.

For three days and three nights the container city was inhabited by 300 extras: men and women in native dress – no kids though. The extras were immigrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. The script (unknownst to the extras) called for a bank robbery at 4 in the morning. At 5 in the morning the script required the extras to approach and pressure the U.S. guards. The guards, who did not understand Pashto or Arabic, made an effort to communicate and remain friendly. Arbitrators wearing orange-colored vests were observing the scene.

A man revealed to us the location where, at 6 in the morning, there would be a fire attack. We put a new tape in our camera, focused it on a table where a group of men were eating a meal, and let it roll. Just a few minutes after 6 two men came running from behind a container, firing

gunshots in the air. The extras in the foreground jumped up in fear and ran away, screaming – one came back to fetch his meal. Clearly he did not want to miss out on his meal just because he was participating in this training exercise. His behavior is not necessarily unrealistic. It may well be that in a country where gunfights are part of everyday routine people will not abandon their meals every time something happens.

Marines followed by interpreters began chasing the assassins, who sought refuge in a mosque where they died in a gunfight. Apparently the purpose of this exercise was to remind troops never to enter a mosque, not even when involved in a gunfight. The marines had clearly learned their lesson. They stopped in front of the door, sending the Afghan back-staff into the mosque. The commanding officer inquired whether the insurgents had been searched for booby traps.

The training exercises in the mock-up city with its extras are not that much different from the video games. On the contrary, it seems as though the real world is imitating the world of video games. MOUT sites are set pieces, like a city in a Hollywood Western. Both are designed to let scripted incidents happen; both cannot hide the fact that every single building was designed and built at the same time. MOUT buildings are containers, which means they must be placed on level ground or on a terrace. In the U.S. most actual buildings are level with the ground, lacking groundwork and foundation. This is why they look as if just put there – that too is part of the ‘American stylisation’.

On our first trip to Fort Lewis we filmed a lot, but most of the material was useless – mainly because the therapists were acting half-heartedly, incapable of using their own personal experiences. Some were chewing gum. I have not seen a single film in which people are chewing gum during a therapy session. Someday, perhaps, there will be a plaque in the casino at Fort Lewis reminding us that it was here that the custom of keeping your gum in your mouth during a therapy session originated. Not to forget that the therapy session was part of a role play which was part of a training exercise – which means that chewing gum will have been introduced into three different social activities, all of which require a symbolic separation from daily routine.

When I edited the material we shot at Fort Lewis into a 20-minute film the fact that I used all of the material that could possibly be used made me feel uncomfortable. In Twentynine Palms we shot more than we had proposed in our synopsis. We filmed soldiers getting into a Hummer suspended in the air so that it could be turned around, allowing soldiers to practice how to get out of a vehicle that has fallen on its back or its side.

We also filmed at language classes where soldiers practiced a few words of Arabic in front of a computer screen showing Iraqis who approached and pressured U.S. guards just like in the training exercise in the MOUT mock-up city. In the end I did not use the bulk of the material. I decided to choose a simple form of narration: each film telling of one exercise only. That way the uniformity of the background highlighted the polymorphy of the computer-generated images.

Not until I was working in the editing room did I notice that the images generated to prepare soldiers for the war display shadows, while nothing cast a shadow in the images designed to process the war. Perhaps the budget for the therapy software was too small to create shadows. Do we need shadows to bring back a memory? Do dreams cast shadows?

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