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# Call of Duty: Playing Video Games with IR

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## Abstract

This article attempts to further develop the IR research agenda on video games. The argument starts with a critique of the narrow focus on war-themed blockbuster games of current IR work on video games. I argue that this narrow view of IR and of video games is unsustainable and counterproductive, and has led to the positioning of IR as a regime of value with an unwarranted focus on the ideological effects of video games, and also to a paradoxical closing off of its research agenda. In the second half of the article I attempt to sketch two directions of research that could help overcome these initial limitations. The first outlines the potential for the IR study of the global aesthetic economy of video games, and the differentiated distribution of its regimes of value. The second encourages the study of game-worlds as practical-theoretical spaces where a particular relationship between academic subjectivity and its objects is constituted. The significance of this argument transcends IR video games research: it has relevance for cross-disciplinary issues regarding the status of academic moral-aesthetic judgements about cultural artifacts and practices; the relationship between academic and ‘popular’ knowledge; and the potential for political mobilisation at the interface of entertainment and social critique.

## Keywords

IR theory, duty, playfulness, video games, popular culture, regimes of value

‘Seriously?’ – was a friend’s witty retort to the news that I was writing about video games. Her deliberate double entendre captured perfectly the twin questions that flank the argument of this article – and, in the era of ‘impact’ and ‘relevance’, accompany all IR research: what constitutes serious *IR* work, and can IR work be other than *serious*? In both senses, video games bring to the IR research agenda an opening as well as a closure of sorts, each accompanied by its own analytical and deontological challenges.

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On the first count, video games have become so ubiquitous that IR simply could not afford to ignore this enormous domain, whose significance and reach is only likely to grow. IR scholars have already heeded this call of duty: video games are now at home in IR,<sup>1</sup> and have even made brief appearances in mainstream publications aimed at the foreign policy establishment.<sup>2</sup> However, answering this call is not without difficulties, which stem from the extraordinary diversity and complexity of video games, but also from the peril of analytical duplication. Simply put, IR research on video games must be distinct from what other academic perspectives have to say,<sup>3</sup> distinct from the prodigious and often sophisticated output of video games journalism, as well as different from what game designers and gamers say. Interdisciplinarity – the usual antidote to disciplinary perspectivism – would be a tempting solution, were it not for the difficulties entailed by interdisciplinarity itself,<sup>4</sup> and for the concerted attempts to establish Games Studies as a stand alone discipline which now has its own gurus, bibles, schisms, journals, and a first generation of academics trained as games scholars.<sup>5</sup>

1. Lucian Ashworth, “‘You Will Change the World and Create History!’ Computer Gaming’s Use of Classical Geopolitics” (paper presented at ISA, Montreal, 16 March 2011); Frédéric Gagnon, ‘Invading Our Hearts and Minds’: Call of Duty® and the (Re)Writing of Militarism in U.S. Digital Games and Popular Culture, *European Journal of American Studies* 5, no. 3 (2010): 1–17, available at: <http://ejas.revues.org/8831>; David Grondin and Frédéric Gagnon, ‘Studying Militarized Visualities through the Video/Digital Game: Rethinking the Aesthetic Turn in IR through Digital Militainment’ (paper presented at ISA, Montreal, 16 March 2011); Marcus Power, ‘Digitized Virtuosity: Video War Games and Post-9/11 Cyber-Deterrence’, *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 271–88; Nick Robinson, ‘Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or Embedding the Military–Entertainment Complex?’, *Political Studies* 60, no. 3 (2012): 504–22; Nick Robinson, ‘Have You Won the War on Terror? Military Videogames and the State of American Exceptionalism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 2 (2015): 450–70; Mark B. Salter, ‘The Geographical Imaginations of Video Games: Diplomacy, Civilization, America’s Army and Grand Theft Auto IV’, *Geopolitics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 359–88; Mark B. Salter, ‘Gaming World Politics: Meaning of Play and World Structure’, *International Political Sociology* 5, no. 4 (2011): 453–56.
2. Peter W. Singer, ‘Meet the Sims ... and Shoot Them: The Rise of Militainment’, *Foreign Policy* 178 (2010): 91–95 Available at: <http://atfp.co/1BebhTg>.
3. See Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce, eds., *Understanding Digital Games* (London: SAGE, 2006); Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003).
4. See for e.g. Andrew Barry et al., ‘Logics of Interdisciplinarity’, *Economy and Society* 37, no. 1 (2008): 20–49.
5. Espen Aarseth, ‘Computer Game Studies, Year One’, *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001). Available at: <http://bit.ly/1u5Avsi>; Christopher Douglas, “‘You Have Unleashed a Horde of Barbarians!’: Fighting Indians, Playing Games, Forming Disciplines”, *Postmodern Culture* 13, no. 1 (2002). Available at: <http://bit.ly/1ED7NqL>; Markku Eskelinen, ‘Towards Computer Game Studies’, *Digital Creativity* 12, no. 3 (2001): 175–83; Thomas M. Malaby and Timothy Burke, ‘The Short and Happy Life of Interdisciplinarity in Game Studies’, *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009): 323–30; Adrienne Shaw, ‘What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies’ *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010): 403–24; Jonathan Corliss, ‘Introduction: The Social Science Study of Video Games’, *Games and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2011): 3–16.

However, it is precisely this need for differentiation that has simultaneously narrowed the opening of the IR research agenda on video games, with all such work concentrating on their military aspects (see footnote 1). IR research seems to thus respond to a different call of duty: the duty of talking *seriously* about video games in order to at the same time counter the perception of video games as frivolous entertainment, and maintain the status of IR as the discipline of the sombre, the urgent, and the deadly. From this perspective, the challenge facing IR is to find a way of engaging with all the aspects of video games in a way that embraces both their diversity, and their playfulness. This is no easy task, because it entails a potential reconstruction of the deontological mission of IR that may decouple it from its dead-serious vocation, and allow the expression of more playful academic subjectivities that literally play games with IR.

This article attempts to take on these challenges and further develop the IR research agenda on video games, building on the existing contributions to the IR literature on video games, cinema, literature, art and aesthetics, popular culture and the everyday – which for simplicity I will shorthand here ‘aesthetic IR’<sup>6</sup> – as well as on some excellent critiques of aesthetic IR.<sup>7</sup> My argument proceeds in five steps. In the first section, I develop the claim that IR work on video games must overcome its current narrow focus

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6. This makes impossible a comprehensive referencing of this literature; in addition to the works specifically cited, agenda-setting contributions can be found in Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London: Palgrave, 2009); Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton, eds., *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015); Alex Danchev and Debbie Lisle, ‘Introduction: Art, Politics, Purpose’, *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009): 775–79; Kyle Grayson et al., ‘Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum’, *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155–63; Xavier Guillaume, ed., ‘The International as Everyday Practice: IPS Forum Contribution’, *International Political Sociology* 4, no. 5 (2011): 446–62; Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *Battlestar Galactica and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2013); Cerwyn Moore and Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Aesthetics and International Relations: Towards a Global Politics’, *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 299–309; Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006); Jutta Weldes, ed., *To Seek Out New Worlds: Science Fiction and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003). I include here the literature on video games and ‘popular geopolitics’; e.g. Jason Dittmer, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics and Identity* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Ian G.R. Shaw and Barney Warf, ‘Worlds of Affect: Virtual Geographies of Video Games’, *Environment and Planning A* 41, no. 6 (2009): 1332–43; Ian G.R. Shaw, ‘Playing War’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 11, no. 8 (2010): 789–803; Ian G.R. Shaw and Jo Sharp, ‘Playing with the Future: Social Irrealism and the Politics of Aesthetics’, *Social & Cultural Geography* 14, no. 3 (2013): 341–59.
  7. See for e.g. Gerard Holden, ‘World Literature and World Politics: In Search of a Research Agenda’, *Global Society* 17, no. 4 (2003): 229–52; Gerard Holden, ‘Cinematic IR, the Sublime, and the Indistinctness of Art’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34, no. 3 (2006): 793–818; Gerard Holden, ‘World Politics, World Literature, World Cinema’, *Global Society* 24, no. 3 (2010): 381–400; Peter S. Henne and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Interpret this Volume! What We’ve Learned about *Battlestar Galactica*’s International Relations Scholar-Fans’, in Kiersey and Neumann, *Battlestar Galactica*, 206–18.

on war-themed blockbuster games. The next two sections discuss two further limitations of this work, derived primarily from the temptation to formulate normative-aesthetic verdicts about particular games and gaming in general. I will focus my critique on the implicit positioning of ‘gaming IR’ as a *regime of value* and its focus on the ideological *effects* of video games as the justification for their study.

The second half of the article attempts to sketch two potential research avenues that could help overcome these initial limitations. Section four argues for IR’s engagement with the ‘video games ecology’, understood as ‘the totality of elements from code to rhetoric to social practices and aesthetics [which] cohabit and populate the game world’.<sup>8</sup> The key argument here is that by taking into account the ways in which the commercial and entertainment dimensions of video games modulate their ideological and/or mobilising potential, IR can shift focus away from singular blockbuster games towards the study of the global aesthetic economy of games, and the differentiated distribution of its regimes of value. The fifth and concluding section lays out a further dimension of IR’s encounter with video games, which concerns the relationship between video games and IR, relationship that is related to, but significantly distinct from the circuits that bind video games and IR to the ‘reality’ of international relations (ir). If we take video games to be a mirror in which IR can see *itself*, then the study of game-worlds is a duty because it makes ‘us’, IR scholars, think harder about the relationship between academic and ‘popular’ knowledge.

## Beyond the Discipline of Death: Video Games and IR

At the very least, the titles of so many video games – ‘civilisation’, ‘total war’, ‘diplomacy’ – indicate that they are not on the list of places where, paraphrasing Sylvester, we least expect to find international relations.<sup>9</sup> We can think about the place of video games in IR in four inter-related ways.<sup>10</sup> Most commonly, the link with IR is based on the fact that many games, including some hugely successful ones, are *about international politics*. Many ‘shooter’ games (where the player assumes the role of an armed operative) and real time or turn-based ‘strategy’ games (where the player assumes the role of a state-person of some kind) fit in this category, although in most of them international politics is usually reduced to war or traditional inter-state relations.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, video games constitute a ‘mirror of contemporary spatial strategies (of warfare, empire,

8. Katie Salen, ‘Toward an Ecology of Gaming’, in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008), 2.

9. Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

10. Different taxonomies are offered in Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, ‘Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics’, in Neumann and Nexon, eds. *Harry Potter and International Relations*, 1–23; and Grayson et al., ‘Pop Goes IR’.

11. See for e.g. *America’s Army; Battlefield; Call of Duty; Crusader Kings; Diplomacy; Europa Universalis; Full Spectrum Warrior; Homefront; Making History; Medal of Honor; Total War*.

or colonialism)'.<sup>12</sup> Diplomatic bickering caused by games content<sup>13</sup> indicates that video games can also be the *object of international politics* in the traditional sense of relations between states. Such instances do not require attention to the specificity of games as cultural and commercial artefacts, but are useful for highlighting the now ubiquitous interweaving of politics and popular culture in general.

A different kind of significance is suggested by the use of video game imagery and vocabulary in the propaganda surrounding the conflict involving Islamic State (IS).<sup>14</sup> In this case, video games *are international politics*: the conflict is fought and played at the same time, with the playing an intrinsic part of the fighting. Quoting Salter once again, video games are here 'instances of the everyday practice of world politics':<sup>15</sup> to play these games is to be and act in the world, and thus play breaks out of the magic circle of the game world into the world of which it is revealed to have always been a part of.

It is also in this understanding of IR as the domain of the everyday, that the fourth way of thinking about the relevance of video games emerges: video games *are IR theory*.<sup>16</sup> To make this argument, different views of IR and of games are required. On the one hand, IR not only studies, but also includes a kind of 'everyday theorizing' carried out by non-academics 'in and through every-day practices'.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, games are seen as 'conceptual model[s] for understanding the world and our place in it';<sup>18</sup> their representational work, narrative capacity, and engagement with wider cultural contexts is in this sense a product of their rule systems.<sup>19</sup> This makes a much greater variety of games interesting from an IR perspective: strategy and shooter games provide obvious material, but so do games where combat is absent, or is an optional but not necessary dimension of play.<sup>20</sup> Whether they claim to simulate real events, or to create imaginary worlds

12. Salter, 'Geographical Imaginations', 363.

13. Adam Gabbatt, 'Call of Duty: Black Ops Upsets Cuba with Castro Mission', *The Guardian*, 11 November 2010. Available online at <http://bit.ly/1p9mw3X>.

14. Dominic Casciani, 'How the Battle Against IS is Being Fought Online', *BBC News Magazine*, October 9, 2014. Available at: <http://bbc.in/1yzFLvO>. Last accessed August 7, 2015.

15. Salter, 'Gaming', 454.

16. I developed this argument in Felix Ciută, 'Video Games, IR Theory and Popular Knowledge' (paper presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Vienna Games Conference 'Future and Reality of Gaming' (FROG13), Vienna, 27 September 2013).

17. Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, 'The Evolution of International Security Studies and the Everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse', *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 6 (2012): 526.

18. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Games Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 'Foreword', 2. See also Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).

19. As Patrick Thaddeus Jackson argues, this also applies to popular culture artefacts in general and science fiction in particular; see his 'Critical Humanism: Theory, Methodology, and *Battlestar Galactica*', in Kiersey and Neumann, *Battlestar Galactica*, 18–36.

20. See for e.g. *Age of Empires; Alpha Centauri; Beyond Earth; Civilization; Crysis; Democracy; Destiny; Elite: Dangerous; Eve Online; Metro: Last Night; Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising; Papers, Please; République; Rise of Nations; Starcraft; State of Emergency; The Castle Doctrine; The Elder Scrolls; XCOM*.

(which often turn out to be not so imaginary),<sup>21</sup> games guide players to play *by* the rules of ir built in the game, which constitute the game's own 'IR'; at the same time, the games themselves play *with* the rules of ir as IR scholars know it, and crucially, as gamers also know it.

As can be seen, the interface between video games and IR *seems* to require a broad view of IR. Yet aesthetic IR has until now focused very narrowly on blockbuster war-themed games, a double filter based on the best-selling popularity of these games, and a foreboding of their role as vectors of pernicious ideologies of violence and militarisation.<sup>22</sup> Both justifications are problematic in their representation of IR as well as video games. On the one hand, *blockbuster* games represent but a narrow slice of the output of the video games industry. The numbers argument – we study them because they sell hundreds of millions of copies (which they do) – is always susceptible to the charge that it mirrors the familiar concern of IR with great powers alone, or that even such wide audiences are unevenly reached and therefore aesthetic IR ends up studying once again first world cultural artefacts with no actual global significance.<sup>23</sup> But the political, global, and everyday significance of video games lies in their huge number and diversity, rather than the market performance of even exceptional products. Beyond the episodic presence of some game in the media, or in the middle of an international crisis, video games are of interest to IR as a global phenomenon which has spawned a multi-billion dollar industry reaching hundreds of millions of households throughout the world,<sup>24</sup> with a global political economy, a parallel virtual economy, complex emerging subjectivities, and deeply textured interactions between new and traditional types of communities.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the tendency to mark out *war* video games as IR's specialist focus seems to be spurred by anticipated accusations of frivolity: war at the same time makes video games easier to sell to the yet-to-be convinced IR crowd as a legitimate research topic, and consolidates the 'serious' credentials of IR in general. Paradoxically, this apologetic gambit involuntarily undermines the agenda of aesthetic IR, which is built on the understanding of ir as a complexly multilayered domain of which IR is actually a constitutive part. In contrast, the focus on war games reinforces a very narrow view of the ir represented in games, and the ir in which games are involved.

A further explanation for the focus on the military/war dimension is that it facilitates the participation of IR scholarship in the interdisciplinary study of video games, which has long recognised their political significance and 'function as political actors in a wide

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21. As IR students of science fiction have also noted; see the contributions to Weldes, *To Seek Out New Worlds*, and Kiersey and Neumann, *Battlestar Galactica*.

22. See for e.g. Power, 'Digitized Virtuosity'; Robinson, 'Military Videogames'.

23. See Henne and Nexon, 'Interpret this Volume!'.

24. Data available from the Entertainment Software Association, <http://bit.ly/1k8LWBs>, and the Interactive Software Federation of Europe, <http://bit.ly/1xLxk1e>

25. Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, eds., *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity. A World of Warcraft® Reader* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2008).

range of settings that extend beyond mere moments of game play'.<sup>26</sup> Aesthetic IR's intervention in this analytical field is prompted by the under-specification of concepts like 'political' and 'actor' in some of the video games literature, which circumvents the multiple divides they create in politics/IR.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, video games analysis is seen to potentially 'benefit from the incorporation of concepts and approaches found within the field of IR'.<sup>28</sup> However, this argument necessarily privileges the perspective of aesthetic IR, and thus at the same time returns to a much broader understanding of the remit of IR, and masks the deep divisions that exist in our discipline.

As can be seen, these contradictions are generated by the double positioning of IR video games scholarship in the 'fractal distinctions'<sup>29</sup> that shape the fields of IR and Games Studies (via aesthetics, sociology, or cultural studies). If the blockbuster/war criterion reflects the distinctive duties (and insecurities) of international political scholarship, the Game Studies fractals adopted in aesthetic IR are equally powerful and equally implicit. The next section illustrates that manner in which this dual positionality requirement has not only carved out the narrow video games domain that is eligible for IR work, but has also limited considerably what can actually be said about video games.

## I Played a Game and I liked it: IR as a Regime of Value

Video games, notoriously wrote Roger Ebert, 'can never be art'.<sup>30</sup> More interesting than his verdict was the fact that Ebert was a *film* critic who confessed that he never played any video game, and that he did not intend to ever play one.<sup>31</sup> Are games art? It depends, of course: on what we think about art, about games, and about whether such a question makes sense at all. Arguments that video games have an increasingly 'sophisticated aesthetic logic'<sup>32</sup> have gained momentum recently, drawing attention to the evolving combination of technological advances, narrative-driven game design, and focus on the affective aspects of play. Ebert could not have been aware of any of this, and although he didn't quite go as far as calling games a 'more sophisticated delivery of stupidity',<sup>33</sup> such

26. Mizuko Ito, 'Response to Frasca', in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 87.

27. But see Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2007).

28. Grayson et al., 'Pop Goes IR', 159; Grondin and Gagnon, ' Militarized Visualities ', 7.

29. Andrew Abbott, *Chaos of Disciplines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001); Abbott's concept of fractal distinction designates the epistemological, conceptual, theoretical or ideological dichotomies that perpetually organise all the disciplines in social science and the humanities, e.g. subjectivity/objectivity, agency/structure, individualism/holism, explanation/understanding, quantitative/qualitative, and so on.

30. Roger Ebert, 'Video Games Can Never Be Art', 16 April 2010. Available at: <http://bit.ly/NSChjk>. Last accessed August 6, 2015.

31. But see Jane Graham, 'Are Video Games Now More Sophisticated Than Cinema?', *The Guardian*, 2 June 2011. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1MepIcx>.

32. Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 85.

33. George F. Will, 'Is Russian Roulette Next on TV?', *The Baltimore Sun*, 22 June 2001. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1qS3CPP>.

statements illustrate that, when it comes to delivering sweeping judgements about video games, business is booming.

Even the quickest glance will grasp that the stand-out characteristic of most video games commentary is its jumbling of aesthetic, ethical, and ideological pronouncements. From media panics<sup>34</sup> to academic concern about the ‘dubious assumptions’ they embed,<sup>35</sup> reactions to video games rarely do *not* formulate peremptory verdicts about their general worthiness or the moral status of players.<sup>36</sup> Unsurprisingly then, IR’s engagements with games also follow this path, usually examining specific games in order to show that they are full of very bad things. For example, Salter’s analysis of *America’s Army* leads to the conclusion that ‘war games represent a militaristic, masculinist, Western geopolitical frame of violence’.<sup>37</sup> And it is not only the thematic content of games that comes under such scrutiny, but also their rule systems. In his examination of (again) *America’s Army*, Power subscribes to the view that video games ‘do not teach the wrong ethics, they teach that ethics are superfluous’,<sup>38</sup> while in similar vein Salter deplores the absence of ‘inherent moral constraints on behaviour’ in games like *Diplomacy* or *Civilization*.<sup>39</sup> Fractal distinctions aside, such statements are problematic for three interrelated reasons.

The first reason does not concern the verdicts as such, but the narrow view of the game industry and even of war/violent games they rely on. War games produced outside the ‘West’, for non-Western audiences, are completely left out.<sup>40</sup> So are violent games created with the specific purpose of challenging everyday representations or legitimations of war, and games with explicitly moral story lines and play choices.<sup>41</sup> We can include here the emerging category of ‘newsgames’,<sup>42</sup> the broad category of ‘realist’

34. The stand-out example is the debate regarding the relationship between gun violence and video games, which has reached the highest echelons of American politics. See Frank Cifaldi, ‘Vice President Biden’s Warning to the Video Game Industry’, *Gamasutra*, 15 January 2013. Available at: <http://ubm.io/1IXUt3i>; Brian Sinclair, ‘Obama Calls for Violent Game Research’, *Games Industry International*, 16 January, 2013. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1wdv40q>.

35. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 202.

36. See Stephen Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005).

37. Salter, ‘Geographical Imaginations’, 360. But see Marcus Schulzke, ‘Rethinking Military Gaming: America’s Army and its Critics’, *Games and Culture* 8, no. 2 (2013): 59–76.

38. Power, ‘Digitized Virtuosity’, 285.

39. Salter, ‘Geographical Imaginations’, 366.

40. See for e.g. *Glorious Mission* (China); *Special Force* (Lebanon), *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Japan), *Blitzkrieg* (Russia), *CrossFire* (South Korea), *World of Tanks* (Belarus), *Under Ash* (Syria).

41. See for e.g. *6 Degrees of Sabotage*; *Bioshock*; *Blacksite: Area 51*; *Deus Ex*; *Mass Effect*; *Metal Gear Solid*; *September 12<sup>th</sup>*; *Spec Ops: The Line*; *The Last of Us*; *This War of Mine*; *Unmanned*.

42. The BBC online game *Syrian Journey* is only a recent example, <http://bbc.in/1xxCFd0>; see Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari and Bobby Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010).



games that ‘reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice’;<sup>43</sup> or those which Frasca has called ‘games of the oppressed’.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, even some of the ‘Western’ blockbuster war games have come under attack from the political establishment for being *insufficiently* regimented to the nationalist/ideological mainstream.<sup>45</sup>

A second limitation lies in the simplistic treatment of video games ethics, which draws on a view of the game audiences that ignores ‘how players constantly make choices about their in-game behavior’.<sup>46</sup> The result is ‘an infantilization of the game space’ which presumes that players are incapable of both diagnosing the moral code of a game, and operating with different moral spaces.<sup>47</sup> But as Sicart argues, *whatever* their rules, video games – including violent ones<sup>48</sup> – are ‘designed ethical systems’, and therefore the ‘experience of a computer game is the experience of a moral object by an ethical subject’.<sup>49</sup> Players are ethical agents who ‘reflect, relate, and create with an ethical mind’, navigating each game as ‘a complex network of responsibilities and moral duties’.<sup>50</sup> To play is therefore to engage in multiple forms of interpretation, focused on the meaning of the game’s narrative content, the diegetic moral affordances established by its rules, or the ethics of the activity of playing.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, Salter and Power’s indignation factors out the ludic aspects of video games, i.e. precisely what makes them games: that in play ‘we agree to suspend the rules of the every day in favour of creating a space that allows us to experience the taboo, the challenging and the passionately desired’;<sup>52</sup> that players may actually *want* to play a game that (or in a way that) breaks the moral codes they observe strictly in their personal

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43. Galloway, *Gaming*, 75.

44. Gonzalo Frasca, ‘Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues’, in Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *First Person*, 85–94.

45. Then UK Defence Secretary Liam Fox called upon UK retailers to ban *Medal of Honor* because it allowed gamers to play as Taliban; ‘Liam Fox Defends Call for Ban of Medal of Honor Game’, *BBC News*, 23 August 2010, <http://bbc.in/1Dz2Yy5>. *Counter-Strike* was temporarily banned by a Brazilian federal court ruling that the game was an ‘attack against the democratic state and the law and against public security’; David Jenkins, ‘Brazil Bans Counter-Strike and EverQuest’, *Gamasutra*, 21 January 2008. Available at: <http://ubm.io/1wKKsQA>.

46. Mia Consalvo, ‘Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics’, *International Review of Information Ethics* 4, no. 12 (2005): 8.

47. *Ibid.*, 10.

48. Marcus Schulzke, ‘Defending the Morality of Violent Video Games’, *Ethics and Information Technology* 12, no. 2 (2010): 127–38.

49. Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009), 5; see also Shaw and Sharp, ‘Playing’.

50. *Ibid.*, 4.

51. *Ibid.*, 117; see also Carrie Andersen, ‘Games of Drones: The Uneasy Future of the Soldier-Hero in Call of Duty: Black Ops II’, *Surveillance and Society* 12, no. 3 (2014): 360–76.

52. Jon Dovey and Helen W. Kennedy, *Game Cultures – Computer Games as New Media* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), 41.

lives;<sup>53</sup> and that the constraints of (re)playability require that alternative moral paths in a game must be equivalent.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, given the necessity of product differentiation as well as the calculated positioning of some games as political artefacts, it is neither surprising that different games have different moral affordances, nor is it uncommon to find games that deliberately subvert and invert the moral affordances of other games.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, perhaps the most significant limitation of current IR study of video games is the creation and reproduction of an analytical-moral hierarchy with two distinctive characteristics: the privileging of academic understanding over (in this case) player perspective,<sup>56</sup> and an ‘endemic moral dualism [...] in which singular definitions are constructed of “good” and “bad” instances of popular culture’.<sup>57</sup> In other words, aesthetic IR constitutes an academic *regime of value*, understood as the ‘normative organisations of the proper which specify what counts as a good object of desire or pleasure; a proper mode of access or entry to it; and an appropriate range of valuations’.<sup>58</sup>

Calling this hierarchy into question does not mean denying the political content and normative significance of either video games, or academic analysis; it is also not to say that all games are born equal, or that moral-aesthetic judgements about art/popular culture cannot be formulated. It is to ask whether it is ‘the academic’s privilege and prerogative to decide upon the political worthiness of fan cultures and practices’,<sup>59</sup> and to investigate the constitution and consequences of such a prerogative. The implications of this question are significant, both specifically for the study of video games, and more generally regarding the formulation of moral-aesthetic judgements by IR academics as *academics* (rather than as *IR academics*). On the first count, this particular regime of value constitutes the distinction between the academic-player and the ‘mere’ player, a dual set of imagined subjectivities that govern the academic attitude towards games, and define the relationship between ‘mere’ players and games in general, where the choice between ideological complicity and fertile agency usually ends up pathologizing<sup>60</sup> players as deficient subjects<sup>61</sup> who must be protected from themselves.

53. Amanda Lange, “‘You’re Just Gonna Be Nice’: How Players Engage with Moral Choice Systems’, *Journal of Game Criticism* 1, no. 1 (2014): 1–16.

54. Michael James Heron and Pauline Helen Belford, ‘Do You Feel Like a Hero Yet? Externalized Morality in Video Games’, *Journal of Game Criticism* 1, no. 2 (2014): 9.

55. See for e.g. *Quest for Saddam/Quest for Bush*, or *Under Ash/Israeli Air Force*. See Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2010), 136–7.

56. See also Rowley and Weldes, ‘The Evolution of International Security Studies and the Everyday’, 526.

57. Matthew Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002), xi; see also Holden, ‘World Politics’.

58. Tony Bennett et al., *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 260; also Arjun Appadurai, ‘Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value’, in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63.

59. Hills, *Fan Cultures*, xi.

60. Andreas Huyssen, ‘Introduction to Adorno’, *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 5.

61. Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 22.

More generally, the formulation of *any* IR regime of value must be scrutinised, since it concerns the eminently political practice in which ‘academics insist on reserving, for themselves, the ability to determine political significance’.<sup>62</sup> In aesthetic terms, this points to the direct-but-not-overt participation of IR academics in what Rancière called the ‘distribution of the sensible’ in the aesthetic regime of art.<sup>63</sup> To a significant extent, this participation reflects the emergence of aesthetic IR under the broad banner of critical IR, where both the practice of academic research, and academic subjectivity are defined by a *duty* of emancipatory critique circumscribed by the relationship between academia and state power.<sup>64</sup> While too complex to be fully covered here,<sup>65</sup> the extension of the duty of critique into the *right* to formulate moral-aesthetic prescriptions has broad implications which not only have been systematically ignored, but, as will be demonstrated in the next section, at times turn aesthetic IR against itself in epistemological and substantive terms.

### Causality Where We Least Expect It: Game Effects in ir/IR

One of the few things that can be said with certainty about aesthetic IR is that it is at the polar opposite of the positivist research agenda. And yet, despite the fact that aesthetic IR scholars would be extremely reluctant to designate causes-effects in other aspects of ir, their engagement with video games often *starts* from the dark premonition of the potential effects of video games.<sup>66</sup> Following the general thesis that popular culture ‘shapes how constituencies understand the world’<sup>67</sup> and ‘helps to produce consent to foreign policy and state action’,<sup>68</sup> Power argued for example that video games ‘legitimize and justify US military interventions’<sup>69</sup> and manufacture ‘consent and complicity among consumers for military programmes, missions and weapons’.<sup>70</sup> No evidence is provided for this statement – the limited existing evidence seems to point in the opposite direction<sup>71</sup> – and no reference is made to the lack of consensus on the effects of video games,

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62. Ibid., xxviii.

63. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004).

64. See for e.g. Steve Smith, ‘Power and Truth: A Reply to William Wallace’, *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 4 (1997): 507–16.

65. See Felix Ciută, ‘The Playful Subject: Video Games, Popular Culture, and the Imagined Subjectivities of IR’ (paper presented at the 8<sup>th</sup> Popular Culture and World Politics Conference, London, 20 November 2015).

66. Robinson, ‘Videogames, Persuasion’.

67. Nicholas J. Kiersey and Iver B. Neumann, ‘Introduction: Circulating on Board the Battlestar’, in Kiersey and Neumann, *Battlestar Galactica*, 9.

68. Jutta Weldes, ‘Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations’, in Weldes, *To Seek Out New Worlds*, 7.

69. Power, ‘Digitized Virtuosity’, 274.

70. Ibid., 278.

71. Ruth Festl et al., ‘Militaristic Attitudes and the Use of Digital Games’, *Games and Culture* 8, no. 6 (2013): 392–407.

despite a long-standing concern with this subject in Games Studies and beyond.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, effects-based positions on video games have proved difficult to sustain, as illustrated by the debate regarding the link between video games and gun violence, where even analysts who are fiercely critical of the ideological effects of FPS games may be inclined to lay the blame on the absence of gun control legislation or weapons manufacturers, rather than video games. What stands out even more in these statements is the remarkable immunity of the academic-player to such pernicious persuasion effects, which takes us back to the fractal distinctions inherent in any reference to the effects of video games, which in this case concern the work of ideology in political contexts of various scales.

The injunction formulated by Power falls into the incorporation/resistance paradigm of audience research, which starts with an understanding of the games industry as 'essentially reactionary, ideological, and irrational', designed to control and discipline 'pleasure and amusement'.<sup>73</sup> In this paradigm, players are 'passive media consumers sitting at the end of a one way tunnel of content',<sup>74</sup> and research focuses 'on how gamers are influenced by, or at best react to, media texts'.<sup>75</sup> Unsurprisingly then, the effect of games is to encode 'prejudices and discipline their players into reproducing them'<sup>76</sup> as the result of their 'instructional force at the quotidian and implicative levels [which defines] the logic by which players interpret the real world'.<sup>77</sup> Play is therefore a form of 'coercive mimeticism',<sup>78</sup> a disciplinary relationship in which 'players not only play the game but are also played by the game, disciplined by the game's logic'.<sup>79</sup> Rather than the non-ideological realm it claims/appears to be, game space 'intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well'.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the overall effect of games is to 'configure our expectations of the real, our sense of history, national identity, race and gender, or economic justice, not just in terms of representation, but in the way that rules teach universal laws and routine behavior'.<sup>81</sup>

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72. Kurt Squire, 'Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games', *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1–12.

73. James Hellings, 'Precautions against Fan(atic)s: A Reevaluation of Adorno's Uncompromising Philosophy of Popular Culture', *New German Critique* 118, 40, no. 1 (2013): 170. See also Julian Stalabrass, 'Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games', *New Left Review* I/198 (1993): 83–106.

74. Consalvo, 'Games and Ethics', 8.

75. Victoria K. Gosling and Gary Crawford, 'Game Scenes: Theorizing Digital Game Audiences', *Games and Culture* 6, no. 2 (2011): 140.

76. Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp, 'Style: Strategy and Mimesis in Ergodic Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 3 (2004): 419.

77. Ken S. McAllister, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 55.

78. *Ibid.*, 410.

79. N. Katherine Hayles, 'Refiguring the Posthuman', *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 3 (2004): 315.

80. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, 192.

81. Douglas, 'Playing Games', 21.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination – nor knowledge of the games literature, nor actually playing a video game – to realise that this is not the only way in which the nexus between games, play and players can be theorised. Alternatives can easily be found in the video games literature, as well as in IR. First, with an active audience in mind,<sup>82</sup> games no longer appear as unidirectional and univocal artefacts. Play is also no longer a prison, but a form of emergent authorship where players are '[recruited] to a hermeneutic process'<sup>83</sup> which actively involves them in the 'coproduction of game narratives and meanings'.<sup>84</sup> As eloquently put by Squire, games are 'possibility spaces [...] in which we can live, experiment, and play for different reasons and with different outcomes'.<sup>85</sup> Ultimately, 'there is no *one* game out there that anyone plays. [...] The specific meanings of any play experience are negotiated within interpretive communities, which overlap and extend into broader cultural discourses'.<sup>86</sup>

It is thus possible to argue that a focus on the productive power of audiences would actually be more productive for IR than a preoccupation with the effects of video games as hermetic agents of ideology. To argue that 'players and communities of players can take the same [game] and turn it into vastly different experiences'<sup>87</sup> is not to remove games or their players from their ideological context in the name of a blanket commitment to hermeneutical freedom. On the contrary, it is to argue in favour of *more* attention to the work of ideology in, and between, different contexts. Whether inside or outside the 'West',<sup>88</sup> gaming cultures are replete with 'signs and significations that effectively disrupt the ideological inclinations of the original game code, which is not to say that they would be "innocent" or free from ideological propositions themselves'.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the contribution of IR to the study of video games can lie precisely in its ability to trace the ways in which 'game virtualities arise from and cycle back into the social actualities of markets, battlefields, sweatshops, and law courts',<sup>90</sup> and to capture the interplay between 'indigenous cultural elements, players' preferences and globalization'.<sup>91</sup>

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82. See for e.g. Mirko Tobias Schäfer, *Bastard Culture! How User Participation Transforms Cultural Production* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

83. Dovey and Kennedy, *Game Cultures*, 41.

84. Corliss, 'Introduction', 8.

85. Kurt Squire, 'Open-Ended Video Games: A Model for Developing Learning for the Interactive Age', in Salen, *The Ecology of Games*, 178.

86. *Ibid.*, original emphasis.

87. Kevin Schut, 'Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History', *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007): 216.

88. Squire, 'Open-Ended Video Games'; Iris Mir, 'China's Patriotic Video Games Fail to Excite', *Al-Jazeera*, 3 April 2013. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1tPMAZT>; Simon Parkin, 'The Video Game Invasion of Iraq', *The New Yorker*, 13 November 2013. Available at: <http://nry.kr/1vu6BSn>.

89. Tanja Sihvonen, *Players Unleashed! Modding the Sims and the Culture of Gaming* (Amsterdam: The University of Amsterdam Press, 2011), 189.

90. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*, xxxi.

91. Yong Cao and John D.H. Downing, 'The Realities of Virtual Play: Video Games and Their Industry in China', *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 4 (2008): 515.

This is not to say that the side of the fractal distinction invoked here is obviously and necessarily better. As relentlessly debated across the social sciences, it is in the nature of such fractal distinctions to remain distinctions, so IR cannot take upon itself the task of resolving those that structure Game Studies. Not only would any attempt at resolution come from IR's own distinctions, but it would also inevitably enlist the familiar roster of names – from Adorno<sup>92</sup> or Bakhtin<sup>93</sup> to Bourdieu<sup>94</sup> or Rancière<sup>95</sup> – that epitomize fractal distinctions in other disciplines interested in video games, art, or popular culture.

All is not lost, however. Ironically perhaps, the current limitations of aesthetic IR's engagement with video games provide an excellent platform for a substantial and substantive expansion of its research agenda. The next section explores the potential for this expansion, starting from the *coexistence* of 'anti-commercial ideologies and commodity-completist practices' in game cultures<sup>96</sup> to draw attention to the operation of *multiple* regimes of value in the global ecology of video games.

## The Limits of Beauty and the Price of Pleasure: IR and the Ecology of Games

If our disciplinary starting point is that international politics and contemporary societies are rife with imperial, racist and gendered tropes, it should be no surprise that games are not an exception; how could they be? As Galloway writes, 'in their very core, video games do nothing but present contemporary political realities in relatively un-mediated form'.<sup>97</sup> That, then, is precisely the issue in front of us: since video games reflect the context of their creation and consumption, how can IR engage with this context, beyond just pointing out the presence and mirroring of these 'realities'?

As already argued above, this is a defining aspiration of aesthetic IR, one hampered however by its oscillation between two different imaginations of the disciplinary parameters that guide it: one not straying very far off the traditional 'war, peace, order, justice' path,<sup>98</sup> and the other embracing a deliberate open-endedness as to 'what constitutes the international and its relations'.<sup>99</sup> But whichever path is chosen, research into video games will *always* appear to some like 'a holiday from the struggles of society

92. 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1944] 2002), 95–136.

93. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981).

94. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

95. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009).

96. Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 4; Huyssen, 'Introduction to Adorno', 5.

97. Galloway, *Gaming*, 92.

98. Danchev and Lisle, 'Introduction', 775.

99. Christine Sylvester, 'Whither the International at the End of IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 35, no. 3 (2007): 553.

and theorising'<sup>100</sup> – which is to say, like a *dereliction of duty*. Games are pleasure, and pleasure has a price, which in aesthetic IR is often paid in the shape of a guilt-padded research agenda: guilt that we enjoy playing ('bad') video games, and guilt that we transform that pleasure into a professional output. The price of this pleasure is aesthetic IR's narrow preoccupation with war games, and generally with the very bad, terrible, horrible things that most games, their masters, and their players, surely must be up to.

It is thus easy to forget that the point of games is pleasure, so almost all try to do precisely that, in different ways: some with astonishing visual beauty, some with the things they (try to) make players think, some with the things they (try to) make players feel.<sup>101</sup> Few commercial games deliberately try to make the experience of play unpleasant (as opposed to difficult), because that usually leads to a very short play, and consequently, to an unprofitable game. Which brings us to the other price of pleasure: its monetary price. Any judgement of game content simply cannot bracket out the fact that it is designed within a profit horizon: no matter how thoughtful, true, or beautiful (or not) academics deem it to be, the limits of what a commercial game can and must do are established by the fact that players must be willing to pay for it. The fact that they are (not), whenever they are (not), is worthy of investigation, rather than outraged denunciation.

But any such investigation cannot be limited to a game, no matter how fine the analysis of its content, or how detailed the tracing of its ideological/corporate/state sponsors. The point may seem obvious, but it needs restating: no game exists in a vacuum. To study even (*one* version of) *one* game requires attention to the requirements of originality and familiarity that frame its production in the heavily stratified genre typology of the game industry, taking into account the historical trajectory and typifications of its genre, as well as the indexicalities that reflect its ludic and commercial time-place.<sup>102</sup> The twin principles of pleasure and profit guide not only the production and consumption of every individual game, but also govern the overall aesthetic economy<sup>103</sup> of the games industry, of which all games, and all players, are a part.

From this vantage point, the antidote to both content-focused analyses of singular games, and the positioning of IR itself as a regime of value, is its engagement with the entire ecology of video games – understood as the totality of elements 'from code to rhetoric to social practices and aesthetics [which] cohabit and populate the game

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100. Ibid., 569.

101. Georg Lauteren, 'The Pleasure of the Playable Text: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Computer Games', in *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002), 217–25.

102. Kiersey and Neumann make a similar point with reference to popular culture in general, Kiersey and Neumann, *Battlestar Galactica*, 8–9.

103. See Joanne Entwistle, 'The Aesthetic Economy: The Production of Value in the Field of Fashion Modelling', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2, no. 3 (2002): 317–39; Keith Negus, 'Identities and Industries: The Cultural Formation of Aesthetic Economies', in *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, eds. Paul Du Gay and Michael Pryke (London: SAGE, 2002), 115–31.

world'<sup>104</sup> – and its entanglement in other ‘social, technological, economic, [and] political’ ecologies.<sup>105</sup>

It is in this ‘entanglement’ that the aesthetic economy of video games emerges, one that is however far from homogenous. Video games always ‘proffer a world of meaning [...] that is made with us in mind’,<sup>106</sup> and IR seems particularly well equipped to investigate precisely how these different kinds of ‘us’ are imagined. On the one hand, this means keeping track of the fact that the ‘us’ games have in mind are technologically apt as well as conversant in the full spectrum of ludic conventions invoked or transgressed by every single game. On the other, this means reading the local/global/virtual cultures of production and consumption at whose intersection the regimes of value that construct different ‘us’ emerge.

This includes (1) the operation of industry-level regimes of value, which regulate production and marketing decisions – at which point it is worth reminding that some of the most fierce critiques of the video games industry and mainstream games (including with regard to violence, race, sexism, or representations of war) have been formulated by game designers, not by academics.<sup>107</sup> To this, we can add (2) the constitution of regimes of value ‘delineated around ethnic and national identity’,<sup>108</sup> regimes which bring together gamers, designers and producers in a dynamic different from that constructed and sustained by the global video games industry. Finally, this also concerns (3) the emergence of regimes of value in players’ communities, which includes the very specific regimes constructed around particular games (e.g. in forums or live in-game chat), as well as those that spill over from the gaming community into mainstream media, local politics, international business, and academia (and then back again).<sup>109</sup>

To sum up, rather than position itself as a regime of value, IR can take upon itself the task of examining the interaction of these differently scaled regimes of value and their sourcing of various forms of political mobilisation or resistance, both in game design and in game play. This strategy has the added benefit of turning the tables on IR as an analytical-theoretical-normative *perspective*. As they deliberately and enthusiastically wade through the thick textures of the video games ecology, IR scholars can, and inevitably will catch sight of their own reflection in these waters. What happens *then* is the next, and by no means least significant step on IR’s video games research agenda.

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104. Salen, ‘Towards an Ecology of Gaming’, no. 2.

105. *Ibid.*, 11.

106. Douglas, ‘Playing Games’, 7.

107. See for e.g. Taylor Clark, ‘The Most Dangerous Gamer’, *The Atlantic*, 2 April 2012. Available at: <http://theatlntc.com/1H063sM>; Kris Ligman, ‘Games that Portray the War as Fun... That’s More of an Issue’, *Gamasutra*, 4 September 2013. Available at: <http://ubm.io/1zktRle>; Kyle Orland, ‘Unmanned Presents a Nuanced, Psychological Perspective on Modern Warfare’, *Arstechnica*, 23 February 2012. Available at: <http://bit.ly/1vsiVAS>.

108. Fred R. Myers, ‘Introduction: The Empire of Things’, in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred Myers (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 31.

109. Prominent examples include the #gamergate controversy, and the work of and reactions to Feminist Frequency. Available at: <http://www.feministfrequency.com/>.



## Conclusion: Reflexive Disciplinarity and the Future IR Video Games Agenda

It has not been my intention in this article to argue that, as claimed in successive manifestoes for aesthetic IR, video games can help find ‘new ways to understand the dilemmas of world politics’,<sup>110</sup> and to ‘think and feel our way through difficult political problems’.<sup>111</sup> Sometimes, some games may do that for some people. Often, they probably won’t. Nevertheless, I have argued that this is not a reason not to study video games; the modalities of IR engagement with video games are plentiful and rich in substance, as long as the bar is not set higher than it is for other, more orthodox thematic domains patrolled by our discipline and disciplinarians.

Which brings us back to the central theme of this paper, the *duty* of adding video games to the roster of IR heterodoxy. Until now, the question ‘why play video games with IR?’ has been answered with full attention to the ‘NO (VIDEO) GAMES’ sign that metaphorically guards the metaphorical entrance to disciplinary IR: because with IR we see that war, power and ideology are everywhere. As argued above, this answer not only legitimates an interest in video games, but also legitimates IR as *the* discipline of war, power, and ideology. To this, the answer offered in this article has been a Banksy-esque ‘play more’,<sup>112</sup> and – equally seriously – a call to use the ethical instinct of aesthetic IR to become a part of the ever-expanding, all-horizons discussion on video games, rather than purport to be one of its moral arbiters.

In addition, this playfulness has the not inconsiderable benefit of drawing attention to what ‘we’ do, both when we play, and when we ‘do’ IR, which has at least the potential to become a key component of IR’s future research agenda on video games, given its significance for the way we think about the ‘impact’ of IR, and the ongoing reconfiguration of all aspects of academia, whether institutional, epistemological or deontological, ‘impact’ itself has created.

This is because video games offer, in essence, a window into what is taken for granted out there, in ‘non-IR’. And the more we play, the more we realise that much of what is taken for granted is in many ways similar to what us iron-branded IR academics know about the world *with* IR. So if indeed it is not surprising that games come into being ‘as repetitions of traditional cultural-semiotic formations’,<sup>113</sup> it is intriguing that the content of video games and player strategies strike chords that will sound familiar to the academically trained IR ear.<sup>114</sup>

As a consequence, the question ‘what does it say *about* IR that what IR usually says (about gender, war, globalisation, identity, surveillance, strategy, morality, and so on) is

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110. Roland Bleiker, ‘The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 524.

111. Danchev and Lisle, ‘Introduction’, 777.

112. <http://www.banksy-prints.com/print/no-ball-games/>.

113. Douglas, ‘Playing Games’, 4.

114. See Felix Ciută, ‘Statecraft to Starcraft: Geopolitics as Conceptual Ecology’ (paper presented at the Royal Geographical Society Annual International Conference, London, 27 August 2014).

simultaneously being said in non-academic settings such as video games?’ is far from trivial. This already constitutes the topic of a different article,<sup>115</sup> but an opening answer is that it suggests a co-contamination of the academic and non-academic in a manner that challenges both their separation, and the hierarchies that usually structure representations of their relationship.<sup>116</sup> Video games ecologies are in this sense symptomatic of a circuit of knowledge that expands beyond the application of academic IR-knowledge to the everyday, or the communication of IR research to non-academic audiences. *Mutatis mutandis*, Rancière’s observation that ‘no well-defined boundary separates the discourse of the woodworker who is the object of science from the discourse of science itself’<sup>117</sup> seems to translate particularly well at the intersection between IR and video games. Not only do games deal with the same issues ‘we’ deal with, but they often ask the same questions; and not only do game designers often walk on ‘our’ curiosity paths, but all types of gaming subjects also think, feel, and talk about games in ‘our’ terms (bar our own professional indexicalities, which contribute so much to make us ‘us’).

At least a hint thus emerges that the academia-to-society knowledge circuit envisioned by the impact agenda has always worked both ways. In this respect, the study of video games seems to reorganise academic IR by facilitating something akin to the ‘insinuation of the ordinary into established scientific fields’<sup>118</sup> described by de Certeau. Perhaps inadvertently, the impact and relevance agenda encourages precisely such reorganisation, but research on video games can show that IR has been on the trail of the ordinary all along. Such a non-revelation may bust some myths about academic originality, but it also reinforces the case for studying video games and popular culture more generally in a manner that is not so dependent on the sole subject of war. If video games ecologies need our attention simply because IR is already there, then we also need to engage with them in order to find out how IR got there.

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115. I formulate some preliminary ideas in Felix Ciută, ‘It’s Everywhere! IR-Knowledge and Everyday Impact’ (paper presented at the ISA Annual Conference, San Francisco, 3 April 2013); Felix Ciută, ‘Everyday Impact: IR as Conceptual Ecology’ (paper presented at the BISA IR as a Social Science Working Group workshop ‘The Impact of IR as a Social Science’, London, 23 January 2015).
116. This theme traverses aesthetics, philosophy, sociology, pedagogy and cultural studies, so even the foundational literature is too extensive to reference here.
117. Jacques Rancière, ‘Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge’, *Parrhesia* 1 (2006): 11.
118. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5.

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