This is a repository copy of *Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism*.

Article:

Introduction

> The more things change, the more they stay the same. Boundaries shift, new players step in, but power always finds a place to rest its head … here I am thinking we'd won. But you bring down one enemy and they find someone even worse to replace him. Locations change, the rationale, the objective. Yesterday's enemies are today's recruits. Train them to fight alongside you, and pray they don't eventually decide to hate you for it too.[1]

The post 9/11 period has seen growing interest in the theme of exceptionalism in US foreign policy, prompted in part by the policies of the American 'neo-cons' that were often enacted by George W Bush's administration during its first term.[2] These policies and associated actions have resulted in debates about whether the USA is uniquely vulnerable and threatened, so justifying an exceptional response that should not be constrained by the rules that govern 'normal states'. Consequently, there has been considerable academic interest in seeking to understand why the USA is reacting in the way that it is; in debating whether or not the USA is uniquely threatened, and in reflecting on whether those actions are normatively justified.[3] This article takes a different tack, offering instead a critical analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of exceptionalism in US foreign policy, which have not received anything like the same level of engagement to date.

Concurrent with, yet independent of these events, has been an increasing acknowledgement of the importance of popular culture for world politics and, in particular, of its potential to open up new ways of thinking.[4] As Grayson argues, 'a popular artefact may

---

[1] General Shepherd (mission S.S.D.D.), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*

[2] K. J. Holsti, 'Exceptionalism in American Foreign Policy: Is it Exceptional?', *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 3 (2011), 381.

[3] The literature here is vast but see for example, Trevor B. McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam: US Foreign Policy Since 1974* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Paul T. McCartney, 'American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War', *Political Science Quarterly* 119, no. 3 (2004): 399-423; Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Metropolitian Books, 2008); Holsti, 'Exceptionalism', 381-404; Jason Ralph, *America's War on Terror: The State of the 9/11 Exception from Bush to Obama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On the latter point, see for example, Harold H. Koh, 'On American Exceptionalism', *Stanford Law Review* 55, no. 5 (2003): 1479-527; Michael Ignatieff, 'Introduction: American Exceptionalism and Human Rights', in *American Exceptionalism and Human Rights*, ed. Michael Ignatieff (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005): 1-26.

[4] See for example, Jutta Weldes, 'Going Cultural: Star Trek, State Action, and Popular Culture', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999): 117-34; Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, 'Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics

reveal key dynamics underpinning contemporary politics that might not normally register popularly if expressed through the formal conventions of academic or political argumentation, even as it is complicit in reproducing them'.[5]

This article utilises military videogames as a lens to reveal key dynamics underpinning American exceptionalism in US foreign policy.[6] Military videogames are particularly apposite for this task as, consistent with the literature on American exceptionalism, they portray the USA as an innocent victim of violence so justifying a military response unbound by international norms and law. As Stahl argues, military games 'mobilize rhetorics consistent with the War on Terror', often positioning the enemy as a 'rogue state' beyond the boundaries of reason and diplomacy: 'the appearance of such themes plays a part in the naturalisation of the US military's ongoing self-transformation to a global police force that functions secretly with small rapid deployment teams in a context of low-intensity warfare'.[7] Military games thus serve to position the player as a representative of the US state, upholding national values through the kinds of secret military action argued for by the Bush administration during that 'war'.

The existing literature on military games also suggests that popular culture can be used to further support the exceptionalism narrative by propagating the idea that the non-Western world is threatening and needs America's civilizing/democratizing influence. It demonstrates that most military games portray representations based on Orientalism, with

---

Continuum', *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155-63; Anni Kangas, 'From Interfaces to Interpretants: A Pragmatist Exploration into Popular Culture as International Relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009): 317–43; Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2009); Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: a Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2014), 4th edn.

[5] Kyle Grayson, 'How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in 'A Bear Called Paddington', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2013), 380.

[6] The specific focus is on videogames which portray US military operations within contemporary (and near-contemporary) real or fictional conflicts (e.g. Call of Duty Modern Warfare series (total sales: 73.36m), Call of Duty Black Ops series (total sales: 55.47m), Battlefield 3 and 4 (total sales: 25.6m) and Army of Two series (total sales: 5.09m)) (Authors calculations (April 2014) based on data from vgchartz.com). Such games are the predominant genre of military videogames as measured by player numbers. The analysis thus excludes science fiction war games such as the Halo series (which are here treated as a separate genre) or the minority of cases which depict military conflict from the point of view of the Middle East (on the latter - which are not commercially available in the West - see Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 79-84 and Nick Robinson, 'Videogames, Persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or Embedding the Military–Entertainment Complex?', *Political Studies* 60, no. 3 (2012), 517-9.

[7] Roger Stahl, 'Have you Played the War on Terror?', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 2 (2006), 118. See also Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.* (London: Routledge, 2010).

the Middle East depicted as backward, violent and resistant to civil order. This manifests itself in games in which the streets are devoid of 'normal' citizens and, further, in which society is represented as bereft of domestic law-enforcement agencies such that the only solution is foreign military intervention, not only to liberate but also to restore a sense of legal order.[8]

Overall, reflecting the increasing acknowledgement of the importance of popular culture for world politics, this article argues that an examination of videogames can open up key insights for our understanding of American exceptionalism. It shows that a cross-reading of videogames and American exceptionalism theory can help reveal the foundations and theoretical assumptions on which American exceptionalism is based and can help identify important gaps in focus and understanding within American exceptionalism. This is demonstrated with analysis of the representations and gameplay within military videogames in four key areas: the threats facing the USA, debates on the competence of political leadership in response to those threats post 9/11, the temporal dimension of politics and IR, and analysis of political power as contained within the military industrial complex.

Popular culture and world politics: a framework for analysis

> ... a critique of IR entails an analytical engagement with documents that can mediate between theoretical reflection and the lived dramas of everyday life, such as those mediations produced in popular culture.[9]

There has been an increasing acknowledgement in recent scholarship that popular culture matters for world politics and that world politics matters for popular culture.[10] Neumann and Nexon offer a particularly helpful fourfold typology that demonstrates the full scope of this: *popular culture and politics* (with popular culture seen either as cause of political events or with political events motivating its production; *popular culture as mirror* ('which can force us

---

[8] Johan Höglund 'Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter', *Game Studies* 8, no. 1 (2008); Vit ꓷisler, 'Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 203-20; Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew T.Payne, eds, *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2009).
[9] Matt Davies, 'You Can't Charge Innocent People for Saving their Lives! Work in 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer', *International Political Sociology* 4, no. 2 (2010), 178.
[10] See, for example, Weldes, 'Going Cultural'; Kangas, 'Interfaces', 317-318; Weber, *International Relations Theory*; Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*.

to reflect on our theoretical and pedagogical assumptions'); *popular culture as data*, allowing insight into the 'dominant norms, ideas, identities, or beliefs' within a particular political community; and *popular culture as constitutive of politics* (i.e. as integral to meaning making and myth construction, acting to constrain and enable different political outcomes).[11]

As Weldes makes clear, 'an exhaustive examination of any artefact of popular culture' would involve a comprehensive framework such as Neumann and Nexon's.[12] Yet like Weldes, in part 'for reasons of space',[13] but also due to the central aim of this article which is to enhance theoretical understanding, this article builds on just one aspect of Neumann and Nexon's framework (*popular culture as mirror*) alongside Weber's work (discussed more fully below) to argue that popular culture is crucial as a tool to open up new ways of thinking about theory. In particular it presents a twofold framework of what I term *theory capturing* work (which uses popular culture to help understand theory) and *foundation revealing* work (which uses popular culture to open up gaps and reveal the foundations upon which theory is based [Weber terms these 'myths'[14]]), to enhance understanding of American exceptionalism.

For the student of international relations, *theory capturing* work is perhaps the easiest to understand, referring as it does to the use of popular culture in order to make theory more accessible. For example, Drezner poses the question, what do different IR theories – such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, etc – predict would happen in response to a zombie outbreak?[15] The motivation here is driven by pedagogical concerns, with popular culture being used to help students to grasp the importance of particular complex theories and concepts to enable greater understanding.[16]

Foundation revealing approaches are perhaps best exemplified by Weber's work.[17] She argues that reading films opens up new ways of seeing the world in order to reveal the

---

[11] Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, 'Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics', in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, eds Daniel H. Nexon and Iver B. Neumann (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 6-20. See Kangas, 'Interfaces' for a review and critical application.

[12] Weldes, 'Going Cultural', 122.

[13] Ibid., 122.

[14] Weber, *International Relations Theory*.

[15] Daniel D. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

[16] See also Weldes, 'Going Cultural'; Neumann and Nexon, 'Introduction'; Weber, *International Relations Theory*; Charli Carpenter, 'Game of Thrones as Theory: It's Not as Realist as It Seems – And That's Good', *Foreign Affairs* (2012); Robert G. Blanton, 'Zombies and International Relations: A Simple Guide for Bringing the Undead Into Your Classroom', *International Studies Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (2013): 1-13 – although the former three texts do more than this.

[17] Weber, *International Relations Theory.*

foundations - or 'myths' - upon which theory itself is based.[18] For example, Weber uses the 1963 British film version of *Lord of the Flies* to interrogate Kenneth Waltz's realist 'myth', "international anarchy is the permissive cause of war" – 'the one that is the most well known and the most widely accepted'.[19] Her analysis of realist theory through the film reveals that a crucial determinant of 'what makes Waltz's anarchy myth function' is fear, which is 'both a crucial and an externalized component of Waltz's anarchy myth'.[20] Based on that reading, Weber argues that 'Without fear, there is nothing in the film or in Waltz's myth that suggests that anarchy would be conflictual rather than cooperative'.[21] As she further argues, 'Without fear, Waltz's arguments fail to be persuasive. What would international politics be like if fear functioned differently than it does in Waltz's myth? What would this mean for IR theory? These are the sorts of questions a functional analysis of Waltz's work allows us to consider'.[22]

In a similar way, Rowley and Weldes offer an extremely valuable contribution to 'examine the myth of the evolution of international security studies' using popular culture to 'show how the various components of the myth can be identified'.[23] Through that engagement with popular culture they offer 'some solutions to the shortcomings identified in (international) security studies'.[24] Such insights are crucial to this article, which itself aims to reveal – and to question – some of the foundations upon which American exceptionalism is based.

The purpose of this brief summary of the literature is twofold: to show first, that popular culture can help us to understand politics and international relations more clearly, utilising different objects so that we can reflect on theory in different ways; and second, that popular culture and world politics can be used to open up new ways of thinking or to reveal the edifices upon which different conceptual and theoretical approaches are based. In the rest of this article I utilise these two insights - alongside the literature on American exceptionalism - in order to develop frameworks for *theory capturing* and *foundation revealing* scholarship that opens up new understandings of, and critical approaches to, that exceptionalism, and to the foreign policy that it underpins.

---

[18] See also Michael J. Shapiro, 'The New Violent Cartography', *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 3 (2007): 291-313; Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, 4-15.

[19] Weber, *International Relations Theory*, 16.

[20] Ibid., 18.

[21] Ibid., 33.

[22] Ibid., 19.

[23] Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, 'The Evolution of International Security Studies and the Everyday: Suggestions from the Buffyverse', *Security Dialogue* 43, no. 6 (2012), 514.

[24] Ibid., 515. See also Davies, 'You Can't Charge', who utilises popular culture to reflect on the understated significance of work to international relations.

American Exceptionalism

> Americans think of themselves as exceptional, then, not necessarily in what they are but in what they could be. For this reason the sense of exceptionalism can never die, no matter how unexceptional the nation may appear in reality. Exceptionalism persists because of what it promises just as much as, if not more than, what it delivers. It is tied to what it means to be an American: to have faith in the values and principles that caused the nation to be founded and continue to exist.[25]

This section provides an overview of the existing literature on American exceptionalism, differentiating between what may be termed its *sources* and *manifestations*. The *sources* are the underpinning foundations upon which American exceptionalism is based; the *manifestations* the ways in which American exceptionalism is made real in policy terms: both are strongly inter-related.

Sources

American exceptionalism is seen as a core concept that underpins American nationalism. McEvoy-Levy describes American exceptionalism as 'the "para-ideological" umbrella beneath which extend such related concepts and phrases as "manifest destiny", "city on a hill", "American dream" and "new world order"'.[26] As Ryan argues, '[w]ithout uniform ethnicity, without shared religious beliefs, or without a "common fund of stories, only a shared act of rebellion, America had to invent what Europeans inherited: a sense of solidarity, a repertoire of national symbols, a quickening of political passions"'.[27] This search for shared national symbols is strongly delivered by American exceptionalism.[28]

The key elements that underpin American exceptionalism can be briefly captured as follows:

- America is seen as a 'city on a hill', 'an exemplar for others to aspire to', and a 'beacon of

---

[25] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism,* 10.

[26] Siobhan McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy: Public Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 23.

[27] David Ryan, *US Foreign Policy in World History* (London: Routledge, 2000), 13.

[28] See also Seymour M. Lipset, 'American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed', in *Is America Different? A New Look at American Exceptionalism*, ed Byron E. Shaffer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 16-25; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 6-8; Holsti, 'Exceptionalism', 397-8.

democracy';[29]

- America is seen as a nation underpinned by a modern constitutional settlement, incorporating the separation of powers and embedding liberty as a primary value.[30] These are deemed to have near universal appeal and to exemplify the ideal for others. 'American exceptionalists note that the United States somehow managed to solve the previously intractable challenge to establishing a political regime that is both stable and free, thus demonstrating its possession of some special quality that other states lacked';[31]

- America is thus deemed to be a 'superior nation'.[32] 'American's were simply "better" – especially in comparison to 'old Europe'.[33] While old Europe was dominated by corrupt elites who enslaved the majority as serfs toiling the land, the USA is seen as a 'land of the free' in which the settlers were able to start anew, unburdened by legacies of subservience and elitism.[34]

- America is seen as a progress driven society, in which values, philosophy and enterprise are based on freedom and 'a scientific, forward-looking worldview … If people were free, then they could attain perfection, both individually and as a race'.[35]

- Underpinning all these understandings is the linkage between exceptionalism, the American national psyche and God. America is seen as a country that was 'uniquely blessed by God to pursue His work on Earth'.[36] As McCartney argues, this has particular resonance in the foreign policy field: 'A certain unshakable confidence attaches to foreign policies that are believed to be not only approved by God, but perhaps even required by His inscrutable plan for mankind'.[37]

---

[29] Winthrop 1630 cited in Piotr M. Szpunar, 'The Horror at Fort Hood: Disseminating American Exceptionalism', *Media, Culture and Society* 35, no. 2 (2013), 183-4. See also McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 24; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 9.
[30] Lipset, 'American Exceptionalism Reaffirmed', 8-12; Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York/London: WW Norton and Company, 1996), 39-46.
[31] McCartney, *American Nationalism*, 403. See also McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 10; Ryan, *US Foreign Policy*, 24.
[32] Byers, 2001 in Szpunar, 'The Horror', 184.
[33] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 5.
[34] Ryan, *US Foreign Policy*, 10-11; McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 25; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 9-10.
[35] McCartney, *American Nationalism*, 405. See also McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 24; Andrew Rojecki, 'Rhetorical Alchemy: American Exceptionalism and the War on Terror', *Political Communication* 25, no. 1 (2008), 69.
[36] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 9.
[37] McCartney, 'American Nationalism', 404-5.

The *sources* of exceptionalism can thus be seen in terms of perceptions of superiority in terms of the nature of the constitutional settlement, American democracy, America's rupture with Europe, progress and the USA as exemplifying God's country.

Manifestations

While the list above identifies the beliefs underpinning American exceptionalism, it is the way that such exceptionalism is manifested through American deeds or actions that is perhaps of most interest to scholars of international relations. Here I explore the *manifestations* of exceptionalism by using the case of US foreign policy, which is central both to this article and to the representations contained within videogames. The linkage of *sources* and *manifestations* of exceptionalism allows for reflection on whether US foreign policy is reactive, or instead emerges as a result of a sense of American exceptionalism being driven by a sense of American superiority, resulting from its self-perception as being 'God's country' with a 'unique destiny to lead'.

In order to enable such reflection, this article utilises a typology derived from a recent article by Holsti in which he identifies 'at least five characteristics of an exceptionalist type of foreign policy':[38]

- because America is an exceptionalist nation, Holsti argues that it has a unique obligation to liberate other states who are threatened, particularly when that threat is posed to their democracy or liberty.[39] Thus, America leads not on the basis of self-interest, but on the basis of the obligations that come from exceptionalism;[40]

- to ensure that America can successfully intervene to protect those states whose capacity for self governance is threatened, it cannot (and should not) be bound by international rules which would bind 'normal states'.[41] As an exceptionalist nation it needs the freedom to intervene to protect and help others; if it is bound by the rules of 'normal states' then its capacity to act in an exceptionalist fashion is denied to it so those rules should be resisted;

- the corollary of the pro-active interventionist element of exceptionalism is that the USA sees itself as uniquely vulnerable – the world is hostile and that hostility is directed

---

[38] Holsti, 'Exceptionalism', 384-96.
[39] Ibid., 385-6. See also McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 29.
[40] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*, 11.
[41] Holsti, 'Exceptionalism', 388-90. See also Koh, 'On American Exceptionalism'; Ignatieff, 'Introduction', 3-11.

uniquely at the USA because it is exceptional, once more providing a justification for having the capacity to act with total autonomy;[42]

- the exceptionalist state also sees itself as an innocent victim. 'They are never the sources of international insecurity, but only the targets of malign forces. They do not act so much as react to a hostile world. They are exceptional, in part, because they are morally clean as the objects of others' hatreds';[43]

- finally, as Holsti identifies, it is important to reflect on how real notions of innocence and vulnerability actually are. Is it the case that in order to justify pre-emptive forms of exceptionalist interventions the exceptionalist state has a need or tendency to rhetorically manufacture enemies through discourses in order to rationalise its actions?[44] A reflection on the ways in which videogames function to represent threats to the USA allows us to develop critical responses to such questions.

Holsti's framework is extremely useful and allows for reflection on both the history of US foreign policy and its workings post 9/11 – similarly, military games also cover both the pre and post 9/11 periods. Indeed McEvoy-Levy suggests – citing Manheim – that US foreign policy can be seen as oscillating between periods of American pride and moral superiority with periods of 'widespread self doubt and a sense of insecurity that gives rise and direction to attempts at social purification when domestic problems and international uncertainties coincide'[45], identifying Vietnam as representing a particular period of self-doubt:

> Vietnam undermined American exceptionalism, and cynicism about domestic political institutions simultaneously evolved with this disillusionment about US power abroad. Americans rejected the 'perverted dream' of world salvation and examined their own 'evil' ... The momentum of exceptionalism which had been to this point a national consensus was stopped.[46]

While this article is not specifically concerned with debates over the history of US foreign policy, being focused on the production of videogames during the post 9/11 period that is

---

[42] Holsti, 'Exceptionalism', 391-2.
[43] Ibid., 384; 395-6.
[44] Ibid., 393-5. For an affirmative answer to this question see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), revised edition.
[45] McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism*, 31.
[46] Ibid., 29.

itself widely seen as coinciding with a period of assertive US foreign policy, what is important from such insights is that they alert us to a desire by foreign policy elites to overcome periods of rupture and oscillation within foreign policy.[47] This is a desire which is, I argue here, shared by key military videogames: as I show below, even games which are based on the Vietnam War attempt to re-script that war, replacing a period of self-doubt, uncertainty and rupture with the certainty of moral righteousness which is at the heart of a missionary form of American exceptionalism.

In the remainder of this article, I take this thinking in relation to American exceptionalism and use it in two key ways. First, the article uses videogames as a means of *theory capture*, using what we see and experience in videogames to clarify our understanding of American exceptionalism. Second, and most importantly, the article analyses key videogames for *foundation revealing* work, through which the edifices upon which the concept of exceptionalism itself is based can be explored and critiqued.

American Exceptionalism and Videogames

In this section, I explore the different relationships between American exceptionalism and videogames based on four key themes: the post 9/11 military response; the competence of political leadership; the temporal dimension of exceptionalism, and the military industrial complex. The first three themes provide examples of American exceptionalist themes that are well represented within games (i.e. *theory capturing* insights) while the fourth theme identifies the 'gaps'/myths in American exceptionalist thinking that are revealed by videogames (i.e. *foundation revealing* insights).

The argument is derived from my study of nine military combat games, selected on the basis both of market penetration and that they are representative of 'typical' military videogames in that they portray US military operations within contemporary (and near contemporary) real or fictional conflicts (see also footnote 6 above). The discussion focuses only on the single player element of each game, with the methodology used for analysis focused on narrative/story, visual signifiers and gameplay. Specifically, this involved playing each of the games several times while taking notes and screenshots in order to capture relevant visual signifiers, recording the story and narrative, and analysing the structure of the gameplay. The first playthrough captured the broad meaning and feel of the game, with

---

[47] Ibid; McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*;

subsequent playthroughs focused on specific levels/incidents in order to explore the scope of the gameplay options available to the player and enable reflection on questions such as: what are the choices open to me? How can I complete this objective? Does the game allow alternatives to military violence? In asking such questions, the aim was to reflect on the meaning that comes from the gameplay options *encoded into* and *coded out* of the game (the possibility space, in Bogost's terms.[48]

1) Military Videogames, American Exceptionalism and the Post 9/11 Response

An overarching theme within American exceptionalism is the relationship between the perception that a threatening and hostile environment confronts the USA, thus situating America as an innocent victim, and the resulting sense that this allows the USA to justify a response to such threats based on a pattern of military violence in which it is not bound by international rules. Both aspects of this relationship are fully represented in military combat games.

Within such videogames the USA is routinely portrayed as continuously threatened in a hostile world. For example, the game *Homefront* (2011) begins with a narrative in which North Korea invades the South, ultimately annexing parts of Japan and creating a 'Greater Korean Republic'. The GKR is both hostile and threatening to the USA, eventually unleashing an electro magnetic pulse (EMP) attack as a precursor to a ground invasion by GKR troops.[49] Threat, hostility and vulnerability to invasion are similarly reflected in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), where the USA is invaded by Russian ultranationalist forces; in *Battlefield 3* (2011), where American civilians are threatened by nuclear weapons held by Iranian revolutionaries, and, finally, in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) (set in the 1960s) where the USA is threatened by a chemical weapons attack instigated by the Soviet Union. Thus, whilst other states are threatened from time to time, the idea that the USA is unique in being continuously threatened within a hostile world is a near-constant narrative within military combat games. Furthermore – and also reflective of the literature on American exceptionalism – these games portray the USA as being uniquely able to respond to (and defeat) the threats facing both itself and those facing the rest of the world and, therefore, as having a responsibility to protect other threatened countries. For example, as mentioned above, Japan and Korea are initially invaded in *Homefront* and in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (2011) much of Europe is invaded by Russian forces but in both cases it is the action of US soldiers that is central to their

---

[48] Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: the Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT press, 2007)

[49] Cut-scene at: http://www.gametrailers.com/videos/22zl0c/homefront-opening-cinematic

liberation.

These games also reject rule bound negotiation as a possible response, with the enemy always portrayed as beyond reason and frequently making good on the threat that it offers. In the early part of the game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (2007), thirty thousand American troops are killed by a nuclear weapon as they attempt to liberate the people of an unspecified Middle Eastern state following a military coup. The game clearly demonstrates that Al-Asad (the leader of the coup) is beyond reason or negotiation as he detonates the bomb within the capital city of his own country so killing many millions of his own citizens along with the US soldiers. Similarly in the game *Homefront* (2011), the post-invasion society is run like a fascist state with the invading GKR army committing acts of genocide against American civilians: the player discovers a mass grave within a baseball stadium. There is no space for dialogue or negotiation with such oppressors.

As a result of the hostility confronting the USA and the impossibility of negotiating with those threatening the USA, military videogames portray a world in which the player should not be bound by international conventions or rules, thus reflecting another important theme within the literature on American exceptionalism. Two particular themes illustrate this trend which is present in the majority of military combat games: the use of enhanced interrogation techniques by US operatives, and the dominant control that US operatives assert within multinational military alliances.

A number of games contain gameplay mechanics in which some form of enhanced interrogation technique (or torture) is used by the player in order to extract mission critical information to advance the narrative.[50] In the game *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) the mission 'Numbers' begins with the Special Ops character Hudson forcing a renegade scientist Dr. Clarke to eat broken glass in order to extract information from him in relation to the development of the chemical weapon Nova 6. In the middle of Clarke's interrogation, the torturers are attacked by Russian ultranationalist forces who are trying to prevent you acquiring the information you need. Dr. Clarke, having supplied you with crucial information as a result of your successful torture, now actually fights alongside you to help you to escape from the Russian ultranationalists.

While this is perhaps an extreme example, the notion that violence against individuals is justified in order to gain mission critical information is integral to many games. In *Splinter Cell: Conviction* (2010), interrogation is an integral gameplay mechanic – your character, Sam Fisher, frequently relies on torture of key targets in order to yield critical information that allows you to advance to the next stage of the game.

---

[50] In order to leave the value judgement as to whether or not this action constitutes torture or interrogation I use the terms interchangeably here. I am fully minded, however, of the significance attached to which term is used to describe such action.

A number of games also show American soldiers as having the right to subvert rules, and ignore authority, for the greater good. For example, in the game *Medal of Honor Warfighter* (2012) (missions 'Changing Tides' and 'Rip Current') you are cast as a member of US Special Forces operating within the Philippines alongside Filipino Special Forces to rescue hostages held by terrorists. After a failed attempt to assassinate the terrorists by the Filipino Special Forces, the Phillipine tactical commander orders you to stand down so that he can negotiate the release of the hostages. In contravention of this order, the US squad takes control of the mission, rejecting Philippine operational command and assuming leadership of the Filipino squad, as the following dialogue between Tiger 12 (leader of Filipino Special Forces) and Mother (leader of US Special Forces) demonstrates:

> Tiger 12: What do we do? Tell me what to do?
> Mother: We go in and get those hostages. They're dead if we don't move now. From this point on, I have control of this.
> Tiger 12: Ok. Switch your radios to One-Four. We listen to this man only. We're going after the hostages.[51]

This passage from the game demonstrates a clear example of American exceptionalism, with the US rejecting the imposition of rules/constraints by Filipino command even though they are operating within their territory. The game thus reflects the American military's actual stance toward the Philippines – historically, the US has regularly acted in an advisory capacity and cast the Philippines as a country that needs America to lead its security efforts.[52]

Furthermore, the game can be seen as reflective of an Orientalist position in that the Filipino Special Forces are willing to be led by the Americans: the Americans are represented as having superior military capabilities and greater capacity for effective decision making and leadership. The American-led force subsequently hunt down the terrorists/kidnappers and rescue the victims, killing all of the kidnappers in the process and showing a reluctance to negotiate with those already shown to be beyond reason.

The games discussed here thus drive home the message that the USA is not willing to be bound by external constraints, reinforce the authority and righteousness of the US position and justify the subservience of others to that position. Cumulatively they communicate to

---

[51] Cut-scene (Part 6A) at: http://uk.ign.com/wikis/medal-of-honor-warfighter/Rip_Current?objectid=101082. See timing 6.50-7.42

[52] See for example Paul A. Kramer, 'Empires, Exceptions, and Anglo-Saxons: Race and Rule between the British and United States Empires, 1880-1910', *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 4 (2002): 1315-53; Alfred W. McCoy, *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

their players a view of American exceptionalism as demonstrated through its exceptional capacity to lead. All of the examples in this subsection – where America is shown as being uniquely threatened in a hostile world and therefore justified in maximising its freedom of action by shedding the constraints of international rules – thus provide very powerful illustrations of American exceptionalist thinking within military videogames.

2) Military Games, Debates on Political Competence and American Exceptionalism

There are a small number of games that also open up spaces for critical reflection on the *sources* of American exceptionalism (e.g. 'America as God's country' and 'America as an exemplar nation') as identified earlier in the article.[53] Yet military videogames do this in a very particular way, suggesting that the escalation of American military action (and the subsequent 'failure' of that action) are products of a failure of Washington-based political competence and leadership. Such concerns have taken on an important contemporary aspect with the rise of the Tea Party and associated groupings which advocate the return to what may be termed a 'reified golden age of American politics' as idealised in the American constitution: that is, to small government, an absence of bureaucracy, a purity of vision and mission, and a sense of America as a beacon of democracy with a unique destiny.[54]

The game *Medal of Honor* (2010), set in late 2001 during the initial phase of the invasion of Afghanistan, provides perhaps the clearest example of a game that exposes the links between the 'purity of American democracy' (represented here through political leadership) and its relationship to American exceptionalism.

The game, which is openly acknowledged by the developers to be based on events from the Afghan war (in particular Operation Anaconda),[55] raises explicit questions about American political leadership, which its narrative implicates in the failures of the contemporary Afghanistan conflict. Of central importance are a series of separate arguments centred on battlefield strategy that precede key missions between the Washington-based General Flagg and Afghanistan-based Colonel Drucker. In the first of these (Mission 3, 'Power it Up'), General Flagg (who is characterized as a bureaucrat, sitting behind a desk and wearing a suit) orders Colonel Drucker (portrayed in army fatigues within the Afghan war room,

---

[53] In addition to those cited in the following discussion, see for example Bioshock Infinite and Assassins Creed 3. Yet neither of these are military videogames and they are thus beyond the scope of this article.

[54] Anatol Lieven, *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2nd edn, 73-8; Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 48-53. For the case of the Tea Party and foreign policy see also Brian Rathbun, 'Steeped in International Affairs? The Foreign Policy Views of the Tea Party', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 9, no. 1 (2013): 21-37.

[55] Chris Suellentrop, 'War Games', *New York Times*, 8 September 2010.

establishing him as a credible soldier) to escalate the numbers of 'boots on the ground' against Drucker's advice.[56] Washington's orders prevail: the subsequent military action (Mission 5, 'Send in the Rangers') results in serious battlefield errors, with Afghan allies killed in the collateral damage directly resulting from US military action, and a number of American Special Forces being captured and killed, so escalating hostility in Afghanistan.[57] This battlefield catastrophe results in a further argument between Drucker and Flagg, with Drucker wishing to commit military personnel to rescue the captured operatives whereas Flagg rejects this course of action (Mission 10, Back in the Fight).[58] Here Drucker goes against Flagg's direct order and commits US Army Rangers to rescue the captured operatives. Whilst the mission is successful one of the key playable characters (Rabbit) dies while awaiting extraction (Mission 11, Drucker's Call).[59]

So what are we to make of this game in light of debates about American exceptionalism? At one level, the game reflects a common discourse in 'real world politics' that Operation Anaconda was itself a failure because of political constraints.[60] The game thus serves as a fictionalized story about real fears and a real operation that elicited those fears. At another level, this analysis of *Medal of Honor* suggests that underpinning exceptionalism is a desire to reaffirm or return to a 'golden age of American politics'. The character of Drucker represents autonomy from centralisation (here represented by the Washington-based Flagg). Flagg, in contrast, represents a nation bloated with big government, which is prone to make mistakes, driven by battlefield incompetence and which ultimately undermines the endeavours of the 'heroic troops' on the battlefield to deliver on the missionary potential of exceptionalist foreign policy. The message is clear – if decision making were placed in the hands of Drucker then the USA could return to the golden age of exceptionalism in which its troops (who personify virtuous American values through their behaviour on the battlefield) could deliver on America's historic mission and succeed in the liberation of Afghanistan.

In this way, I would suggest, *Medal of Honor* reveals a deeper yearning within exceptionalist thinking itself, and enables us to identify the normative underpinnings of a call

---

[56] Cut-scene at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaekUJIJyDU. See timing 4.43-7.09.
[57] Cut-scene at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaekUJIJyDU. See timing 7.52-10.26.
[58] Cut-scene at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDMY4IBGs1A. See timing 0.13-1.23.
[59] Cut-scene at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDMY4IBGs1A. See timing 1.23-3.35.
[60] For discussion of the tensions between military operations, strategy and tactics in Afghanistan and Iraq since 9/11 see for example Hew Strachan, 'Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 52, no. 5 (2010): 157-82; Matt Waldman, 'System Failure: The Underlying Causes of US Policy-Making Errors in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 825-43. For two accounts offered by policy insiders see, Yaniv Barzilai, *102 Days of War: How Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda and the Taliban Survived 2001* (Dulles, VA: Potomac, 2013); General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (London: Penguin, 2013).

for the USA to return to an idealised vision of small government as contained within the original mission of the founding fathers. The ideological roots of American exceptionalism as revealed within this game thus share a number of affinities with the political project of the contemporary Tea Party and neo-conservative thinkers in the USA.

Overall, in offering a very particular framing of the way in which American exceptionalism is linked to concepts such as 'unique destiny', 'the beacon of democracy', America as 'God's country' and America as the 'exemplar nation', military videogames such as *Medal of Honor* work to offer a particular questioning of the ideological, ethical and moral foundations of exceptionalism itself, eliding the possibility of debate over the nature of the actions that are taken on the basis of exceptionalism. The conflation of the consideration of the 'sources of exceptionalism' within military videogames to questions of the bloated contemporary state thus effectively frames the way in which apologies are offered for past or present actions that have yielded negative political and social consequences.

3) Military Games, The Temporal Dimension and American Exceptionalism

There are a number of military videogames that offer important insights into relationship between American exceptionalism and the discussion of historical events (the temporal dimension of IR).[61] In particular, such videogames offer a unique response to the notion of historical 'rupture' that we have seen is prevalent in many accounts of American exceptionalism, often focused on the 'failure' of the Vietnam War that resulted (from the perspective of more conservative commentators) in a more introspective form of foreign policy, reducing the confidence of the USA in its capacity to act and downscaling its role as an international actor.[62]

While such insights are standard in academic accounts of American exceptionalism, the narratives of military videogames work to deny or efface such ruptures, effectively 'writing out' such tumultuous events or US foreign policy catastrophes from their representations of American history, and thus removing the need for any retrospective introspection and ethical questioning of past actions. Two examples here – indicative of the pattern in almost all military games – can be seen to work to remove all uncertainty over past actions, so presenting an absence of ethical ambiguity in relation to the need to justify historic actions

---

[61] For some important insights on the temporal dimension of IR in general see for example Kimberly Hutchings, 'Happy Anniversary! Time and Critique in International Relations Theory', Review of International Studies 33, no. S1 (2007): 71-89; Ty Solomon, 'Time and Subjectivity in World Politics', *International Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1111/isqu.12091 [early view]. For specific work on trauma, time and memory, see Jenny Edkins *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
[62] McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism*

based on exceptionalism.

Set in the late 1960s and told via a series of flashbacks, *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) casts you in the role of Alex Mason, a former US Special Forces operative. In the context of this discussion of American exceptionalism, what is particularly interesting about the game is how it deals with what may be termed 'problematic periods of American history', such as the Vietnam war and the Bay of Pigs invasion, and places them within a broader narrative that justifies American military action at that time. In the first mission in the game ('Operation 40'), which is based on the Bay of Pigs invasion into Cuba, you play as Mason with the objective of killing Fidel Castro. At the end of the mission you kill a man who, initially at least, appears to be Fidel Castro – soon afterwards, however, it is revealed that the person you killed was in fact a double for Castro and that Castro is working alongside Russian ultranationalists and a former Nazi genocidal scientist to develop the nerve agent that will be used to kill millions of civilians in the USA. The game thus seeks to affirm the CIA's historical 'obsession' with killing Castro – an objective at which it failed on countless occasions in reality – and revealing that Castro could only survive your assassination attempt because of his duplicity, again a consistent theme in US portrayals of Castro.[63]

Similarly, in a number of missions spanning the middle of the game you spend a considerable amount of time re-enacting aspects of the Vietnam War, and again through the development of the game's narrative the history of the USA's military action in Vietnam is justified. The game presents a version of history in which the Russians are actively working alongside the Vietnamese, with the chemical nerve agent being stored in Vietnam and Laos (e.g. Mission 8, 'Project Nova' and Mission 9, 'Victor Charlie'). Once more the game offers important *theory capturing* insights since the war in Vietnam was largely sold to the American public on the basis of perceived close co-operation between the North Vietnamese and Russia/China.

Thus throughout the game, a period of history that is generally seen as one of rupture, based on regret for past actions and prompting a significant debate about the nature of American exceptionalism, becomes neutralised. Ethically problematic historic actions undertaken in Cuba and Vietnam in the 1960s are refigured through the narrative and gameplay of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* as ethically and politically justified responses to a global conspiracy between the Soviets, the Vietnamese and the Cubans.

Furthermore, the game also has implications for the rewriting of American domestic

---

[63] See for example, Thomas M. Leonard, *Fidel Castro: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 64-5; Athan Theoharis, 'A New Agency: The Origins and Expansion of CIA Covert Operations', in *The Central Intelligence Agency: Security Under Scrutiny*, eds Athan Theoharis et al (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006), 169; Howard Jones, *The Bay of Pigs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

history during the McCarthyite period, as *Black Ops*' portrayal of an active network of communist sleeper cells starts to justify the McCarthyite period of witch hunts in which suspected communists were outed and incarcerated. The game's narrative establishes both that such communist networks *did exist* and that they had *the potential to pose huge and real threats* to the USA. *Call of Duty: Black Ops* thus presents its players with a convincing and interactive rewriting of history in which the actions of the McCarthyite period, the US incursion into Vietnam and the Bay of Pigs operation are all justified and where the Soviet Union of the Cold War era is established as a state that *did* pose a real threat to the USA.

The second example of such 'winning' or reconceptualising of history that has implications for revealing the temporal ruptures within American exceptionalism comes from the game *Army of Two* (2008), which casts the player as a mercenary engaged in a number of contemporary conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq. The game's narrative again constructs an alternative, convincing version of history for its players: here one in which weapons of mass destruction existed in both Afghanistan and Iraq and in which Bin Laden (or his equivalent) actually did have a highly organised network, with sophisticated command structures and extensive military facilities. The game, therefore, re-iterates and confirms the position taken by many American media outlets at the time of the 9/11 attacks, even though these 'facts' have subsequently been called into question. This game is typical of many military combat games, not only in its depiction of scenarios that we now know to be untrue but also in its portrayal of the view that the only solution to the political problems in states such as Afghanistan and Iraq is through the use of force.

So what does this mean for American exceptionalism? I would argue that a reflection on the ways in which you 'play the past' and 'play the present' within military videogames has implications for an understanding of how debates about the historical implications of American exceptionalism, particularly those centred on the notion of rupture, can be challenged and closed off by popular culture. For McCrisken, an examination of American foreign policy failures in the past are vital as they enable exploration of the idea that the USA did have its own interests and that it acted in ways that were self-interested. In replaying and reshaping the past, videogames close off such debate: within *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010), the incursions in the Bay of Pigs and into Vietnam were not driven by self-interest nor should they be seen as periods of national regret, as they were justified by very real threats and vulnerabilities, through which the USA is positioned as an innocent victim. This has important implications for the extent to which the theory of American exceptionalism should have more to say about the way in which time (both the historical past and the contemporary) can potentially be reclaimed in order to justify actions that – with accurate hindsight – should raise questions about whether or not America is an exceptionalist nation that is acting without national self-interest.

4) Military Games and the Military Industrial Complex - Unpacking the 'Myth' of
Exceptionalism

Finally, this article offers some thoughts on one particular gap, or missing 'myth', in American exceptionalist thinking that I argue is revealed by military videogames and which is largely absent from current understandings of American exceptionalism: the military industrial complex. The phrase came to prominence in 1961 when President Eisenhower warned in his 'Farewell Address to the Nation' of the dangers to American liberty from 'the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex'. Such concerns are reflected in Mills' earlier conceptualisation of a 'power elite', which saw American power concentrated within a triangle between political, military and industrial institutions so making America 'a permanent war economy' such that '[v]irtually all political and economic actions are now judged in terms of military definitions of reality'.[64]

Building on this work, a number of popular culture scholars have identified the importance of what is generally termed the 'military-entertainment complex'. This similarly identifies a symbiotic relationship between the military, academic institutions and popular cultural industries, resulting, for example, in the production of Hollywood films that are strongly supportive of the military, containing hyper-masculine heroes and celebrating techno-fetishism,[65] and in the increasing collaboration between the military and videogames industry.[66]

The military industrial complex is a prominent theme in both a number of games and in

---

[64] C. Wright Mills, 'The Structure of Power in American Society', *British Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 1 (1958): 29-41; see also James Der Derian, 'All But War is Simulation', in *Rethinking Geopolitics*, eds Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby (London: Routledge, 1998); James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network* (London: Routledge, 2009), 2nd edn.

[65] Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, 'Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism', *New Political Science* 28, no. 3 (2006): 335–351; Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: US Militarism and Popular Culture* (Boulder, Co: Paradigm, 2007). See also Jonathan Burston, 'War and the Entertainment Industries: New Research Priorities in an Era of Cyber-Patriotism', in *War and the Media: Reporting Conflict 24/7*, eds Daya K Thussu and Des Freedman (London: Sage, 2003); See David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (New York: Prometheus, 2004) and Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades our Everyday Lives* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 103-12 for a list of the films supported by the Pentagon.

[66] See, for example, J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (London: Abacus, 1997), 197-213; Tim Lenoir, 'All But War is Simulation: The Military-Entertainment Complex', Configurations 8, no. 3 (2000): 292-298; Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood, Theaters of War: The Military-Entertainment Complex (2003). Available at: http://stanford.edu/dept/HPST/TimLenoir/Publications/Lenoir-Lowood_TheatersOfWar.pdf; Robinson, 'Videogames', 507-10).

other forms of popular culture such as the *Bourne* movies (2002; 2004; 2007), the film *Enemy of the State* (1998) and the TV series *24* (2001-10). Within popular culture, the military industrial complex is presented as an insidious power within American politics, based on an alliance between political elites and the military, in which 'the higher military have ascended to a firm position within the power elite of our time', so reflecting Mills' contention that this has made America a 'permanent war economy'.[67] The exposure of the growing militarisation and securitisation of politics resulting from the military industrial complex is thus not unique to games, but in looking at games we can reveal important gaps within contemporary debates about American exceptionalism. Here, I offer three examples of mainstream military shooter games that specifically engage with the military industrial complex.

Splinter Cell: Conviction (2010) provides perhaps the clearest example of a game that opens up such a space for critical reflection, presenting a story that is strongly reflective of the *Bourne* films. The game places you in the role of ex-Special Forces operative Sam Fisher, who is brought out of retirement by his former handler at the beginning of the game when she makes it clear that she has information about why and how Sam's daughter was killed. Later Sam's handler reveals that his daughter is in fact being held captive by members of 'Third Echelon' (a secret counter-terror branch of the US government) who wish to use her as leverage against Sam. The plot of the game reveals that a private military contractor ('Black Arrow') is working alongside forces within Third Echelon to overthrow the liberal tendencies of President Caldwell (the first female President of the USA) who aims to downscale American militarism.

The game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) contains a similar narrative, with the end of the game revealing that a conspiracy of convenience between an American military general (who wishes to maintain the military capabilities of the US) and a Russian ultranationalist (who is similarly motivated to enhance/maintain the military credibility of Russia) prompted the Russian invasion of the USA. Both these individuals are seen as products of the Cold War, with an overwhelming desire to maintain the military capabilities of their respective nations, whose actions lead to all out global war.

Finally, *Army of Two* (2008) places the player in the role of one of two former military personnel (Rios and Salem) who work for a Private Military and Security Corporation, 'Security and Strategy Corporation' (SSC), undertaking assassination operations as paid mercenaries. Early missions in the game appear to conform to a typical post 9/11 narrative arc with the player engaged in missions in Afghanistan and Iraq to kill terrorists who have control of WMD (Afghanistan) and who have taken US army hostages (Iraq). As the game unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the Middle Eastern terrorists are actually

---

[67] Mills, 'The Structure of Power', 33.

collaborating with SSC who stand to gain considerable political and economic power from proposals to privatise the US military. Rios and Salem thus become involved in direct conflict with their employers as they reveal the conspiracy and ultimately kill the corporate conspirators.

Whether these games offer a critique of the military industrial complex or affirm its dominance is a subjective judgement that, while important, is beyond the scope of this paper. My concern, instead, is to show how these games offer an example of *foundation revealing* insight so allowing for critical reflection on the sources of American exceptionalism. As we have seen above, in her book *International Relations Theory* Weber is concerned to show that different theories (in her case IR theory, here American Exceptionalism) are underpinned by particular 'myths'. Weber discusses nine different theories in turn including realism, constructivism and gender, in each case selecting a single particularly apposite film in order to reveal the myth that underpins the particular theory. Here the exposition of the narrative and gameplay within these three military games serves a similar role, exposing the role of the Military Industrial Complex as integral to American Exceptionalism and thus providing a quite different explanation of the primary cause for the use of force by the US military.

The meaning and insight offered by the player's actions as they traverse the games' narrative arc is also given additional importance through Michael Shapiro's recent work on what he has termed an 'aesthetic subject': 'characters in texts [here games] whose movements and actions (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains'.[68] As he argues, 'their movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives than *what they tell us about the world to which they belong*'; such insights have clear implications for the foundation revealing capacity of games.[69]

The existing literature on American exceptionalism does not account for the possibility of the military industrial complex being an integral source for American exceptionalism, but if we re-examine the foundational myth that exceptionalism is the product of American ideology – as exemplified in notions such as the 'beacon of democracy', America as 'God's country' or America as a county with a 'unique destiny' – and consider it instead as the product of a military industrial complex that serves to rationalise and justify the mobilisation for war under the cloak of exceptionalism, then this raises very serious implications not only for scholarship but also for the justifications that are used for American military action. To address this lacuna, scholars of American exceptionalism need to link those debates to the existing literature on militarization and militarism, thus opening up a very different critical space for reflection on why it is that America believes itself to be an exceptional nation.

---

[68] Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* (London: Routledge, 2013), xiv.
[69] Ibid., 11. Emphasis added.

Conclusion: Suggestions for Future Research

A central preoccupation of this article has been to employ analysis of key military videogames both to make theory more accessible (*theory capturing* work) and to demonstrate the potential for such games to reveal the foundations on which theory is based (*foundation revealing* work). Going forward, a key challenge to scholars is to use videogames - with their particular possibility spaces of gameplay - to expand the work that has already been done with popular culture (in particular film and TV) in this field.[70] How do videogames, as a different form with their focus on gameplay and interaction, enable new insights into existing theories? Do they provide a way of affirming or critically engaging with Weber's comprehensive discussion of IR theory, for example?

This article also affirms the position that popular culture matters for world politics and US foreign policy. Existing research not only identifies the importance of film, poetry, novels and other cultural forms for politics and IR but also demonstrates that politics is itself performed and revealed through studies of the practices undertaken by protagonists within popular cultural spheres.[71] Future work on videogames offers a new and valuable popular cultural site for study of the way in which politics is revealed through the permitted actions of in-game playable and non-playable characters and through the performative actions of players and their avatars.

In addition, analysis of videogames will contribute to the development of the aesthetic turn in IR, which itself has done much to reflect on the complexities of capturing affect, analysing visuals, sound and narrative, and in opening up debates into ontology and epistemology. Existing work on popular culture and IR demonstrates the pressing need for IR scholars to interrogate the particular methodological challenges posed by such aesthetic objects: as this paper has shown, games are 'made to be played', and investigations of the political consequences of the choices that are scripted into and out of games are profoundly important for politics and IR.

Finally, much of the motivation for the use of popular culture within IR theory and foreign policy analysis centres on questions of pedagogy. Indeed, Weber's primary motivation for her book *International Relations Theory* (now in its 4th edition) was to exploit the intrinsic interest and critical faculties of her students in relation to film and utilise these to sharpen up

---

[70] E.g. Davies, 'You Can't Charge'; Rowley and Weldes, 'The Evolution'; Weber, *International Relations Theory*.

[71] See, for example, Davies, Ibid. on work in 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'; Rowley and Weldes, Ibid. on security/insecurity and everyday practice; Michael J. Shapiro, *Studies in Trans-Disciplinary Method* (London: Routledge, 2013) on what he terms 'aesthetic subjects' in a variety of media.

their critical thinking skills in relation to IR theory.[72] Videogames, many of which explicitly engage with issues of major interest to IR and politics, offer rich opportunities for student engagement with key concepts in IR. Cumulatively, then, this article contends that videogames matter politically, theoretically, aesthetically, methodologically and pedagogically - the challenge, I conclude, is for scholars to take up a controller and play!

---

[72] Weber, *International Relations Theory*, xxiii-xxvi.