REROUTING HISTORY: ON DELTA FORCE: BLACK HAWK DOWN

In *War and Cinema*, Paul Virilio maintains that communication technologies have had an undeniable impact on the ideological precepts subtending the manufacture of war in the popular imagination. In language that immediately brings to mind the events of September 11, Virilio writes,

"…from everyday terrorism to live-broadcast assassinations, the living pan-cinema is spreading before us that chaos which was once so well concealed by the orderly creation of war." (67)

For Virilio, the increasingly sophisticated uses to which communication technologies are put have opened a new chapter in the story of how war is represented in popular culture, a chapter that is potentially antagonistic to the version of war traditionally thought of as the product of a propagandistic collusion between governments and media. Before satellites and cell phones, before the Internet, before the speed and immediacy afforded to media by such technologies, the representation of war was filtered and edited, many times removed from the battlefield, ideologized, and, in Virilio's words, "concealed." Virilio's thesis was, however, written before the 1991 Gulf War, and seems almost naïve in retrospect. For if there was once a moment, maybe during the fall of Saigon or thereabouts, when media seemed determined to move beyond the Clausewitzian "orderly creation of war," this impulse was surely stifled by a government aware that visual representations of the inherent chaos of war were not in its best interest. Douglas Kellner has shown quite clearly that the 1991 Gulf War was the most manufactured war in the United States' relatively short history, a war in which media were literally drafted in the service of the Bush administration's propaganda machine. Acknowledging this fact, we need to inject a dose of pessimism into Virilio's words: technology has the potential to marry war with its rightful signified, but given the control over media product that characterizes the industry at least in the United States, this marriage seems unlikely.

By Andrew Kurtz

What I am about to embark on in the following is a meditation on the ways in which dominant media and government navigate the tension between chaos and order to create an acceptable version of modern warfare. By acceptable I mean warfare that suc-

in other words, this is a version of modern warfare in which the United States never loses, that ignores the complexities of post-Soviet geopolitical relations, and which consequently becomes the expression of a seeming disdain for actual historical realities.

cessfully promotes an array of ideological values, from U.S. economic and military supremacy to the pivotal role played by the individual citizen in the support of U.S. foreign policy; in other words, this is a version of modern warfare in which the United States never loses, that ignores the complexities of post-Soviet geopolitical relations, and which consequently becomes the expression of a seeming disdain for actual historical realities. My point of reference for this analysis will be the events surrounding efforts by the United States and the United Nations to quell famine conditions in southern Somalia between 1991 and 1993. More specifically, I am concerned with the so-called "Battle of the Black Sea" of October 3, 1993, in which over 500 Somali citizens died during a bungled raid to extract opera-

tives of clan-leader Mohamed Farrah Adid from a private residence in Mogadishu. I believe that the range of cultural texts that have been devoted to these events attest to hegemony's failure to incorporate Somalia into the ideological structures that form its understanding of warfare and political conflict. There are many possible reasons for this disconnect, not the least of which is a near total ignorance of Somali culture and the role of the clan in everyday life. Notwithstanding the importance of Somalia's cultural history in the critical analysis of texts such as Mark Bowden's book *Black Hawk Down* and Ridley Scott's film of the same name, my goal in this short piece is to show how Novalogic's first person shooter (FPS), called *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, demonstrates a contradiction between a nostalgia for a war on two fronts -- the good versus the bad, us versus them -- and a post-colonial context that is, in Samir Amin's words, "a sort of military framework to accompany the savage order of neoliberal capitalism." (120) Additionally, in reproducing a range of narratives that underlie and legitimize military aggression in the global south, the Novalogic game inhabits a representational space that articulates racist ideologies endemic to popular culture in the United States.

Delta Force: Black Hawk Down is part of a relatively new trend in game development that began around 1999 with the release of *Counter-Strike*, a fan-created modification of the popular FPS *Half Life*. Throughout the '90s, the vast majority of FPS titles employed the generic conventions of horror, science fiction, and espionage thrillers to create the semblance of a narrative. However hackneyed, the narrative of a game such as *Unreal* or *Half Life* performed the critical function of lending some interest to gameplay that would otherwise be simply the same violent scenario repeated ad infinitum, much as in a pornographic film. In almost all of its aspects, from the narrative and setting to smaller details such as weapons, clothing, even interface

design, the FPS had only a very limited connection to plausibility, much less historical accuracy. *Counter-Strike* is notable, therefore, because of its contemporary setting and weapons modeled after actual product, like the AK-47 and Glock 18C. In themselves, these minor aspects of the game do little to make *Counter-Strike* less fantastic than its predecessors. Nevertheless, the game seemed to have opened the door for more sophisticated elements of realism to be injected into the genre. Subsequent games such as *Operation Flashpoint, Delta Force,* and *Global Operations* shifted the thematic emphasis away from horror and science-fiction to engage traditional military themes, the mainstay of turn-based war games. EA Games'

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Medal of Honor: Allied Assault (2001) became the first FPS to simulate a real historical event. Set during the Normandy invasion, the game is played from the perspective of Lieutenant Powell who is given a series of increasingly difficult missions to complete in the French countryside. Place names, uniforms, weaponry, even the French and German spoken by non-player characters point to an effort by game developers to create a heightened verisimilitude approaching something like historical accuracy.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to suggest that a game such as *Medal of Honor* is realistic in any conventional or theoretical sense of the term. In the historical FPS, real-ism is a mask, a series of costumes and set-pieces, arrayed to resemble not a documentary but rather something like a Hollywood film. In this sense, it is even further removed from reality than its Hollywood cousin -- it is a representation of a representation, and as such, its ideologies are shrill and unambiguous. For example, Stephen Spielberg and Tom Hanks collaborate to seduce the viewer into thinking a character's heroism is all the more real because it is suffused with ambivalence. When Private Ryan witnesses the death of Captain Miller, the viewer understands the

'true' meaning of heroism. While far from a subtle message, even this cannot be conveyed in the first person shooter, precisely (and maybe ironically) because its limiting factor is interactivity, which is structured around an inherently Machiavellian dynamic. When Lieutenant Powell is sent off to rescue a bazooka team behind enemy lines, he does not question his orders; he cannot swerve from the correct path; he cannot lay down his two pistols, sniper rifle, Thompson submachine gun, 5 grenades or 1200 rounds of ammunition. He must only complete the mission or die in the process -- left-click to begin again.

Just as it would be a mistake to affix the label of realism to the historical first person shooter, it would also be wrong not to acknowledge that such a critique utterly ignores the cultural milieu within which such representations are produced and consumed. Of this milieu, Baudrillard writes,

[Americans] do not know that facts are factitious, as their name suggests. It is in this belief in facts, in the total credibility of what is done or seen, in this pragmatic evidence of things and an accompanying contempt for what may be called appearances or the play of appearances… that the Americans are a true utopian society, in their religion of the fait accompli, in the naivety of their deductions, in their ignorance of the evil genius of things. (85)

Taken in the context of his work *America*, one might think Baudrillard is describing a genetic predisposition, which, given the unhistorical nature of this thought, may very well be the case. His characterization, nevertheless, rings with a kernel of truth. To the extent that mass culture erases the possibility of critique and interrogation, it needs not work all that hard to create pictures of reality. Adorno writes, "The less the culture industry has to promise, the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life, and the emptier is the ideology it disseminates." (147) Of course, Adorno did-

n't play *Unreal Tournament* on a LAN, else he might have gone on to notice that, in fact, the culture industry promises more while at the same time offering less, that as I have pointed out in a previous essay, interactive media's promise of individual agency is circumscribed by the limits imposed upon it by both the hardware and the code (Kurtz 115 - 118) -- in essence, agency is slavery, or in Adorno's word, entertainment is mass deception. Circumscribed interactivity combined with representations without factitiousness result in a system stripped bare of modernist trappings. The FPS becomes an icon to ideology, a one-dimensional religious figure imbued with the holy power to translate individuals into subjects.

What, then, are the facts of October 3, 1993, as presented by the game developers at Novalogic? Although it would be possible to delve into the games' representational minutia, I rather think that larger swathes of description will better convey the ideological elements of the game. First, there is the landscape. Mogadishu is represented to the player through a series of establishing shots, to borrow cinema terminology. These establishing shots are literally birds-eye, POV -- from the perspective of the player. What stands out in the artwork is that nothing really stands out. Once again, borrowing from film, there is no dominant contrast to the frame, nothing that gives indication that any place is more important to the plot or gameplay than any other. The landscape is a bleak mixture of dusty browns and tans; the square, flat-roofed buildings can be distinguished only by their relative size. The occasional palm tree -- green in a sea of tan -- merely serves to punctuate the barren monotony of the cityscape. The lack of contrast and variety to the color scheme is heightened even more by the technology used to create the scenes. Far from being photorealistic, the models seem more real than real -- the desert tan is a color that exists only in one's imaginary of the third-world landscape. It is a color that does not contradict -- it is perfect. Similarly, spoken

language functions to articulate with the individual player's limited historical understanding of military jargon, and like the landscape, is indebted to cinema. There is what we might call "mission-specific language." These are details of the current operation being undertaken by the game character. Written in a kind of 5th grade military speak sprinkled with enigmatic acronyms and bereft of articles, the mission briefings are interesting because of their ambivalence toward historical specificity. For the missions themselves are not, strictly speaking, simulations or enactments of real historical events, as might be the case in a squad-level wargame. Rather, the missions are more or less historical probabilities -- they might not have happened, but they surely could have. In this context, facts display their facticity but are cloaked by the use of proper names, such as Habr Gadir and other clan names, arguably deployed for verisimilitude. More interesting are the in-game remarks of non-player characters. Rendered in a stereotypical military drawl, these are generally comments upon the situation that, like the birds-eye shots of the landscape, establish a context for the gameplay. In many instances, non-player remarks relay the theme of chaos. For example, while flying into a U.N. compound to extract hostage U.N. workers, one character remarks "It looks like a riot down there." The obvious implication, the fact carried in this remark, is that the player will create order out of chaos by simply eliminating chaotic elements.

In spite of the fact that the mission to Somalia occurred under the auspices of the United Nations and was framed within the discourse of "peacekeeping," landscape and language in *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down* provide an overall context that situates game play within a straightforward ideological dynamic that we may very simply call "us versus them." The representation of people in the game works to intensify this impulse. Two distinct groups populate Mogadishu, U.S. Special Forces and the anonymous "black sea," most of

whom carry one of several types of weaponry, including the infamous rocket propelled grenades -- in-game called "RPGs" -- that fell 2 Black Hawk helicopters. Whereas it can be argued that the landscape gives itself as the imaginary third-world environment appropriately cast as a kind of hidden, yet all-encompassing enemy, a more complex identification occurs in the representation of people. Because the first-person shooter assumes the presence of a central point of identification and a series of violent encounters under the guise of that character, it is reasonable to conclude that the choices made by game designers become limiting factors and can only ever present a myopic version of the historical narrative. People are facts of history as presented by the game to the player, as are the landscape and the language. All of these foreground "the other" as that which must be contained and eliminated. But because the weight of representation falls to the first person interface, representations of people become far more important to the ideological dynamic of the game. Told from the perspective of a Delta Force commando, otherness is represented as a homogenous mass of skinny, gun-toting, dark-skinned, goateed Africans, historically differentiated from each other only on the basis of Novalogic's promotional claim that some of them

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run with "oppressive Somali warlords." As is the case in virtually all first person shooters, the fact of otherness comes with the assumption that the other is an enemy who will die. And thus, facts of people, facts of otherness, are also facts of agency and awareness, coded into the game by its designers.

In *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, landscape, language, and people are designed to create a set of binary elements (here / there; us / them; self / other) that are as much a function of the technology making the representation possible as they are elements of hegemonic discourse. Indeed, one should not separate the two. For both the code and the histori-

cal representations made possible by the code are symptomatic of hegemonic discourse. Acknowledging this fact allows us to understand this particular game as a special iteration of the FPS, produced, distributed, and consumed in a historical moment overdetermined by racism and the economic inequities created by globalization.

I would like to expand on this point by amplifying a fairly obvious aspect of the representational scheme described above. In Novalogic's game, facts of otherness -- represented mainly by the character models -- are also more accurately facts of race. In the history of computer gaming, this has never been more the case. While the game developers could easily ascribe this to historical accuracy (it is another fact, after all), Novalogic nevertheless is aware that these representations contain the seeds of a potentially market-busting controversy. In September 2002, *Computer Games* magazine ran a cover story on *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, which, through an interview with Novalogic representative Wes Eckhart, called attention to precisely the problem of the representation of race in the game: "Eckhart is conscious of the sensitivity of this issue. 'It's the nature of where you are,' he says, admitting he's a bit worried about how people will react to a game where everyone you shoot is dark-skinned." (Mayer 53) Novalogic confronts this problem by incorporating it into the game play itself. Missions taking place in public areas

cannot be won if non-combatant casualties are "excessive." This, says Eckhart, because "we do [sic.] want to communicate to the player that not everybody in Somalia is a bad guy." (Mayer 53) Eckhart's charming liberalism is interesting because it obscures the question of the game's racism by shifting the issue to one of national identity. Quite clearly, though, the logic of his statement resonates precisely at the level of race -- invoking a syntax similar to that of the racist who declares not all blacks or not all Jews to be bad. Novalogic's more overt promotion of the game obscures the question of race even further. Of the 50 official screenshots of the game released over the past 12 months, only one contains a depiction of the enemy. This is unusual, indeed unprecedented, for a game in which the main attraction, in fact its only attraction, is the player's confrontation with the enemy.

Novalogic's own awareness of what it would undoubtedly label a misinterpretation of the game's intention is symptomatic of a historical disconnect. While the game is attempting an accurate representation of a historical event, it is conceived, produced and consumed on another historical terrain altogether, one that is characterized by bell hooks as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Such a constellation of oppression suggests the cynicism of Novalogic's promotion of the game, a strategy that can be described as follows: make the people of color disappear from its commercials, magazine articles, and web site, and the problem will go away. Hide behind a cloak of patriotism and historical accuracy by inviting Rangers from the battle itself to act as consultants for the development team, and donate a portion of the proceeds to veterans groups. Wait until the outbreak of another war, one heavily promoted by media and government, to emphasize ideologies of patriotism, national security, and democracy, to release your game. Then

dump it in the laps of white male middle-class young adults. Unaware of the game's racist logic, it simply becomes woven into the fabric of their political unconscious.

Delta Force: Black Hawk Down certainly is not the only computer game to find a connection to racist ideology. Games such as *Grand Theft Auto, Gang Wars*, not to mention Resistance Records' own *Ethnic Cleansing,* all partake of and reproduce the racist discourse subtending much of everyday life in the United States. What makes *Black Hawk Down* different, though, is its relationship to history. Felix Guatarri writes that, "There are periods when everything seems to hang in the balance: the signifying chains of structure lose control, events are written into 'reality itself' according to a short-term, inconsistent, absurd semiotic, until a new plane of reference 'structured like a language' can be established." (180) It may be that *Black Hawk Down* is a single, relatively minor iteration in such a restructuring. As the South is made to deal with economic and cultural exploitation from the North, the chaos that erupts from such incursions threatens capitalism's spread to these regions, and must be countered both militarily and ideologically. Somalia and Iraq twice over are clearly examples of how, at least in the short term, military aggression becomes a single powerful option for the institutions of capitalism. But as Guattari suggests, such conflicts are also conflicts over representation that must find ideological purchase in the minds of people "back home," as it were. *Black Hawk Down* is an aspect of this reportage, establishing an absurd semiotic; absurd because the facts it posits are at once meaningless and transparent; yet they also clearly resonate with dominant ideological structures. Novalogic's PR man articulates the logic of this absurdity, saying, "We're committed to getting this as right and fair as possible, and setting the record straight."

(Mayer 55) If anyone is able to set the record straight, to iron out contradiction, and obscure the political stakes of racism and globalization, it's the codemasters at Novalogic.

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