



# Answering the *Call of Duty*: Everyday encounters with the popular geopolitics of military-themed videogames

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## ABSTRACT

Despite a growing interest in the way the media and popular culture shape geopolitical identities and subjectivities, current scholarship has overlooked the spaces, practices and experiences in which geopolitical sensibilities are made meaningful in everyday life. Whilst previous scholarship considers popular consumption as purely an interpretative act, this paper considers the *event* of geopolitical consumption, noting the social, material, and spatial contexts in which popular geopolitics is encountered in everyday life. In making this case the paper draws attention to military-themed videogames as an important everyday cultural artefact that shapes popular understanding of geopolitics. A multi-method approach is adopted involving 32 interviews and the collection of video ethnographic data, to reveal the everyday happenings of playing virtual war. The paper makes three contributions. Firstly, by drawing attention to the practices and performances of players, it shows how players are predisposed to varying engagements with the geopolitical and avoids assuming the effects and significance of popular geopolitical representations and narratives. Secondly, a focus on the everyday spaces of consuming popular culture broadens understandings into the ways the domestic setting shapes, and is shaped by, popular geopolitical consumption and in which private, public and virtual spheres interact. Thirdly, the paper illustrates the contingency of wider social, material and technological relations which amplify, yet also disrupt, these affective geopolitical encounters.

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## Introduction

"We were playing this game [*Call of Duty*] but I can't actually hear anything, so that kind of takes it away. I was always in this room I was not on the battlefield so it wasn't totally immersive. But yeah, these vibrations [discussing the haptic feedback generated by the controller], the sounds, the kind of aims and zooms, and things like that makes you feel like you are there [in the game], but there doesn't exist. Totally immersive ... apart from smell"

(Alan, 20-year-old male, student)

Military-themed videogames have become hugely popular offering players the ability to immerse themselves in fantastical militarised landscapes and scenarios. For political geographers they are an important cultural artefact which, it can be argued, shape

popular geopolitical imaginaries and are reflective of contemporary cultures of militarism (Power, 2007; Salter, 2011; Shaw, 2010). However, though they are purported to promote insidious geopolitical and militarised cultures, there has been arguably a distinct lack of grounded, empirical insight into the actual ways individuals internalise, engage with and encounter these games (Schulzke, 2013). This view presents individuals as passive receptors, devoid of critical introspection and for whom "only the pleasures of vicariously dealing out or experiencing violence" matter (Stahl, 2010, p. 72). Despite presenting important critiques of the militarisation of popular culture and the articulation of popular imaginaries of global politics, studies have notably overlooked how such videogames become geopolitically implicated and intelligible within the everyday lives of players.

As the opening quote from Alan attests, playing virtual war is always more than just engagements with representational content. Instead, Alan points to the complex interrelations of visual imagery, audio stimulus, spatial context and haptic technologies in which military-themed videogames predispose players to varying embodied and affective geopolitical encounters that unfold

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contingently in their everyday life. To be clear, this is not to negate the importance of the representational (see Dalby, 2010), but to reveal ways in which such popular geopolitical representations are encountered, practised and experienced. Such failures to empirically ground the significance and implications of popular culture and the media overlook the efficacy and particularities in which geopolitical logics circulate and then become meaningful to their audiences.

The paper draws on and advances nascent interests in audience and reception studies (Dodds, 2006). Such studies have turned to the interpretative repertoires of individuals and groups to better understand the ways geopolitical sensibilities are expressed and made meaningful. The key problem with these studies is that they overlook the event of consumption and the ways in which geopolitical meaning emerges in the practices of everyday life. To advance the everyday understandings of geopolitics (cf. Dittmer & Gray, 2010), I draw on Vannini (2015) to explore the *event, doings, relations, affective resonances and the background* in which popular geopolitical consumption occurs. The paper argues that studies into the political significance of popular culture need to better understand the contingent and multifarious contexts in which popular geopolitics becomes implicated in everyday geographies.

Utilising in-depth interviews and video ethnography the paper reveals the nature of popular geopolitical encounters which are shaped in relation to the situated contexts they are played in, players' practices and performances, and the affective experiences that emerge. As such, the paper is interested in the ways in which popular geopolitical meanings cannot be seen as predetermined, but that they unfold in wider spatial, social, and material life. This draws attention to the interrelations between humans and non-humans which amplify, as well as curtail, affective encounters with virtual war and thus have implications for how geopolitical sensibilities gain power and meaning. Through an examination of the contexts of playing war, the paper provides an important, grounded insight into the ways geopolitical sensibilities circulate and become implicated within everyday life.

The paper is structured as follows. After drawing attention to the theoretical, methodological and empirical context, the paper will use data derived from video ethnography and in-depth interviews to present the argument in three parts. Firstly, by drawing attention to the practices and performances of players, it shows how players are predisposed to varying engagements and encounters with the geopolitical and avoids assuming the effects and significance of popular geopolitical representations and narratives. Secondly, it will highlight the domestic setting as a key environment in which popular geopolitical encounters are shaped and shape the spaces of consumption and in which private, public and virtual spheres interact. Thirdly, the paper illustrates the contingency of wider social, material and technological relations which amplify, yet also disrupt, these affective experiential geopolitical encounters. The conclusion will draw attention to future directions in which popular geopolitics might usefully move forward.

### Popular geopolitics, audiences and the everyday

Within Geography, and beyond, there is a growing literature that takes the relationship between popular culture and global politics as a serious site of academic enquiry. Rather than conceived as apolitical, popular culture is argued to be intimately connected to the ways in which “power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised” in the context of everyday life (Grayson, Davies, & Philpott, 2009, p. 156). More prominently, the work under the banner of popular geopolitics has provided insightful, critical readings into a number of popular cultural and media items such as; newspapers (Woon, 2014), radio (Weir, 2014),

art (Ingram, 2016), film (Dodds, 2008) and comic books (Dittmer, 2012), exposing how they propagate, reinforce and challenge hegemonic geopolitical discourses. The banal and ordinary characteristics of popular culture, and its mass circulation and consumption, offers an important lens through which to recognise the ways geopolitical power circulates beyond the formal institution of the state.

The field of popular geopolitics, however, can be criticised for its failure to account for the complexities of the everyday and its tendency to occlude the lived experiences, practices, and encounters in which the varied mediations of geopolitics become meaningful. Instead, cultural and media texts are often elevated as the sole site of meaning, to be deconstructed and analytically characterised by a scrupulous academic eye, whereby underlying geopolitical meaning is made apparent (cf. Dittmer, 2010). By reducing scholarship to an exercise of discursive and representational analysis, it fails to consider how such “representations of the world are made intelligible and meaningful in an everyday setting” (Dodds, 2006, p. 119). The exclusion of grounded empirical insights into consumption is lamentable for it encourages the “crafting [of] lopsided or even unrealistic accounts” (Woon, 2014, p. 660) that omit how geopolitical understandings and imaginaries become constituted in everyday life by the people who actually encounter them.

Turning to the everyday contexts of popular cultural consumption and play remains important in moving to what Dittmer and Gray (2010, p. 1673) have termed ‘popular geopolitics 2.0’. This reorientation and conceptual focus on the everyday advocates the use of “qualitative methods to focus on the everyday intersection of the human body with places, environments, objects and discourses linked to geopolitics”. Drawing on the interconnections between feminist scholars' interests in the multi-scalar entanglements of geopolitics; audience studies concerns with the reception of geopolitical texts; and Non-Representational Theory's (NRT) considerations of the prosaic practices, performance and embodiment of geopolitics, popular geopolitics 2.0 forefronts the everyday as a critical site in which geopolitics operates and is constituted.

Audience studies has offered a crucial area in which to consider how media and cultural texts become meaningful in everyday life. This work has aligned with Cultural and Media Studies in bringing attention to the ways audiences actively negotiate and ‘decode’ cultural texts, which can go beyond the producers' intended meaning (Hall, 2001). This is important as it moved current geopolitical scholarship beyond the view that implicitly, and explicitly, rendered audiences as passive dupes, submissive to the geopolitical ideologies (Dodds, 2006; Dittmer, 2008; Dittmer & Dodds 2013; Anaz & Purcell, 2010; Anaz, 2014; Woon, 2014). These studies have made important contributions in providing empirically grounded insights into the negotiation and interpretations of audiences that reveal how geopolitical sensibilities are informed by the media and popular culture.

A defining issue of these previous studies, however, is that the methodological approaches elevate interpretations of audiences over their actual everyday practices. Here ‘online’ methods place attention on the ‘afterthoughts’ of select individuals. Often the focus has been on the ways explicit political topics are discussed, either in specific online forum threads discussed by invested consumers, or how interpretations of audiences are retrieved by the researcher's direct provocation which encourages particular ‘serious’ political readings (Dodds, 2006). These online message boards are often frequented by individuals with high(er) emotional investments. This predilection towards researching such fandom communities is argued to be limiting to popular geopolitical enquiry as it narrows the analytical focus as “we learn about the ‘fanboys’” (this gendering is intentional) who can identify holes in

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