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FILMIC INFLUENCES ON VIETNAM WAR VIDEO GAMES

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IN his book *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space*, the American astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan (1934-1996) speaks of "the continuing dance between science and science fiction – in which the science stimulates the fiction, and the fiction stimulates a new generation of scientists, a process benefiting both genres" (Sagan 1994, 276). Naturally, with such a "dance of influence" occurring between science and literature—human endeavors somewhat distant and different from one another—it is only to be expected that phenomena sharing more common ground will tend to influence one another more directly and more profoundly.

The aim of this paper is to examine precisely one such "dance of influence" between two closely related cultural phenomena, one rather traditional—films, the other one somewhat more recent—video games,[1] "an extremely successful new medium in its own right" (Lister et al. 2003, 286). Since such an examination could easily fill more than one monograph, were it undertaken on a general level, this paper—a mere case study—restricts itself to examining films and games united via a common theme: the Vietnam War.

Yet it must be stressed that various influences between films and video games are not limited, let alone unique, to those dealing with the war between the Vietnamese and the Americans. These influences have been numerous, varied, and bidirectional—with games influencing films and films more than readily returning the favor. Thus, there has been no shortage of games based on Hollywood blockbusters and inspiration varied from the *Alien* and *Die Hard* franchise to *The Godfather* trilogy and *The Matrix*. In the opposite direction, more than one game—from *Mortal Combat* and *Max Payne* to *Final Fantasy* and

1. The nouns "video game" and "game" are used interchangeably for the sake of style and "videogame" is used as an adjective.

Resident Evil—has made it to the silver screen, although it must be admitted that the success of such movies has been mediocre at best.

In addition to direct remakes, some scholars have also identified other influences video games have had on films, mostly in terms of narrative style and overall aesthetic rendition. Lately, such features have been quite common despite the fact that their presence often "brings a movie down to a trashier, edgier, funkier level [and] sacrifices any claims to serious art" (Brooker 2009, 124). In the long run, however, Hollywood appears to be more influential and this influence has not been limited to video games being carbon-copies of films. In the more recent past (roughly during the last decade), "the filmic" has been infiltrating "the virtual" in a much more subtle way, yet this trend might prove to be much more profound and lasting.

Put simply, new games tend to be heavily indebted to films not so much for their characters or plots (although serious efforts have recently been made to craft gripping storylines and believable *dramatis personæ*), but for the overall rendition of the virtual experience as such: epic narratives, monumental soundtrack, and dozens of long cinematic sequences—all this was not widespread—and technologically possible—in video games some ten or fifteen years ago, but is commonplace now. Probably the most telling manifestation of this trend is the fact that videogame demos (a short playable portion of a videogame available for free) are becoming more and more rare and videogame trailers—readily available on *YouTube* and crafted using the best in the Hollywood tradition – are becoming more and more common. Such filmic and cinematic features are seen as a positive development which can elevate the cultural status of video games since "more cinematic equals 'better' and more distinctive gameplay, a judgment accepted by many reviewers" (King and Krzywinska 2002, 6).

While these general observations hold true for many contemporary video games, within the specific sub-genre of Vietnam War games, only some of these features are present. Most importantly, the exchange has been exclusively one sided, with Vietnam War films exerting great influence over video games but with basically no game having impacted any major motion picture. The reason is quite simple: by the time first prominent Vietnam War video games appeared in the late

1990s, the boom of Vietnam War films was long over. Resulting directly from this "influence monopoly," films have heavily impacted every imaginable aspect of video games, from setting to soundtrack and from storylines to stereotypes.

At the most basic level, influencing video games very directly and more than obviously, certain Vietnam War films were directly reshaped into games to take full advantage of all the features associated with the new medium. In other words, the new film-as-video-game was able to be everything a traditional film was not—digital, interactive, virtual, and simulated (Lister 2003, 13). Thus, the enormous success of *Platoon* (Stone 1986) was followed by several games bearing the film's name, such as the one developed by Ocean Software in 1988 or the much more recent attempt by Strategy First in 2002. Both games are indebted to Stone's movie and this is most obvious in visual terms: taking its visual cue directly from the promotional posters for the film, the cover art design of both games features the word "platoon" rendered using military dog tags for the two letters "o" and showing a dying soldier—kneeling, with outstretched arms—referencing the moment when Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe) meets his doom on the screen.

While the case of *Platoon* might serve as the most illustrative example of a film being directly reshaped into a video game, it is not the only one. Sylvester Stallone's Rambo was resurrected in the virtual worlds of ZX Spectrum, Amstrad CPC, and Commodore 64 in 1985 and another game called *Rambo* was released for Nintendo in 1988. In a similar vein, the adventures of James Braddock (Chuck Norris) were transformed from the silver screen to arcade machines in *M.I.A.: Missing in Action*. Yet such virtual spin-offs are by no means confined to the distant past of 2D graphics and MIDI soundtrack. As late as 2009, *1968 Tunnel Rats* (Uwe Boll, 2008) was followed by a game attempting to bring the horrors of tunnel warfare to players, yet with less than satisfactory results, forcing one reviewer to state that "there's nothing in this game that shouldn't have been substantially improved" and giving it an overall score of 3.8 out of 10 (Butts 2009).

In the "grand scheme" of Vietnam War video games, however, copy-pasting an entire film is not common and games tend to be more subtle when referencing the most well-known Hollywood pieces dealing with the war. Yet the most well-

known films, such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979), *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino 1978), or *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick 1987) have all left their mark on the virtual rendition of the war. Many games have been inspired by films when re-creating the war and this inspiration has been both audio-visual (i.e. formal) and content-related.

On the formal level, soundtrack can serve as a nice illustration of the film-game interaction. The prominence of 1960s music (whether rock and roll, folk, or rock) in Vietnam War culture has been noticed by many scholars and has been discussed at some length. This intricate relationship of specific music with the specific historical event and its subsequent cultural mediation has created "a register of interdependencies which in retrospect seem so intricate that we can hardly imagine one without the other" (James 1989, 122). Thus, due to its prevalence within Vietnam War culture as a whole, not every song of the 1960s appearing in a video game serves as evidence of direct influence. Therefore, the quintessentially 1960s soundtrack of *Vietcong* (Illusion Softworks, 2002) or *Shellshock: Nam '67* (Guerrilla Games, 2004) – ranging from Deep Purple and Country Joe and the Fish to The Stooges and Roy Orbison—might be a result of the general standing of such music within Vietnam War culture as a whole rather than signifying any direct influence of specific films. Similarly, it might simply be a coincidence that Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* ends with the same tune which opens *Conflict: Vietnam* (Pivotal Games, 2002) —the closing credits of the film and the opening cinematic sequence of the game being united via "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones.

In other instances, however, many influences observable in video games can be directly traced to specific films. One such example is offered by *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, 2010). Probably the most obvious reference to film is the beginning of the very first Vietnam mission: after a white fade-in, the player walks out of a military tent to witness dozens of American helicopters landing within the base perimeter, bringing in fresh reinforcements and seasoned veterans alike, including Sergeant Frank Woods, a soldier who is to accompany the player through the upcoming battle. This introductory section of the first Vietnam mission unfolds to the tune of "Fortunate Son" by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

The entire mission segment clearly references the first Vietnam scene from the now classic *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994) and similarities abound. The game and the film are united not only by the same soundtrack, but also by other visual and auditory elements—landing helicopters, arriving soldiers, the sound of propeller blades whizzing through the air. The only difference is that while in Zemeckis's film, the entire scene is witnessed from the point of view of the soldiers (Forrest Gump and Benjamin Buford "Bubba" Blue) arriving onboard a helicopter, in *Black Ops* the player experiences the same occasion on the ground. Finally, direct connection between the film and the video game is emphasized by the fact that similar means are used to mediate a similar occasion—the *first minutes* in Vietnam.

Using all these techniques, a *locus communis* is created—a "point" or "place" shared by a film and a video game. And it is precisely the widespread occurrence of such *loci communes* where the influence of films on games can be seen most clearly. In most cases, such "common places" take the form of a specific segment in a game being modeled on—or at least heavily inspired by—a specific segment in a Vietnam War film. In most cases, inspiration comes from *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Full Metal Jacket*. What follows is a brief overview of some of the most noticeable game segments indebted to this filmic trinity.

The Deer Hunter has left its mark in two of the better-known Vietnam War games – the already-mentioned *Conflict: Vietnam* and *Black Ops*. While neither of these video games develop the "coming home" theme which forms the basis of Cimino's film, both games adapted the Russian roulette segment, incorporating it into their plots, and recreating it very closely, albeit in a shortened version. Thus, in both instances, the player (along with several other central characters) is captured by the enemy and forced to play a game of Russian roulette for the amusement of his captors. After one not-so-central character is killed during the course of the game, an impromptu escape plan is successfully executed and both games continue on with their singleplayer campaigns.

While the overall rendition of the two scenes is in many aspects very similar and attempts to remain faithful to the movie version, there are differences: *Conflict: Vietnam* renders it via

a traditional videogame cinematic sequence with the camera capturing the action from several different angles and thus resembling the original film fairly closely. On the other hand, *Black Ops* uses a "set-piece" segment and the entire game of Russian roulette is seen from a first-person perspective: the player has no control over what happens, but sees the action through the eyes of the game avatar. In addition, the Russian roulette segment in *Black Ops* is somewhat longer than that in *Conflict: Vietnam* and this, combined with the first-person perspective, creates more suspense and additional emotional tension.

Within a wider context, however, what is important here is not so much the specific rendition of the Russian roulette scene but rather the fact that it has been included at all. As of today, there is no historical evidence which would suggest that the Vietnamese ever played this infamous game of chance with American prisoners (Lanning 1994, 92). Thus, this notion owns its imaginative life entirely to *The Deer Hunter* and video games were fairly willing to pick up and reproduce this popular myth.

Yet games picked up more than just myths from Vietnam War films. They also implemented other popular segments and mini-plots and in this sense *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* have proved more influential than *The Deer Hunter*. Coppola's symbolic epic, structured around an up-river journey and itself referencing Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), has left its mark in many games which feature a mission (or a part of a mission) allowing the player to use the heavy firepower of a river patrol boat. Such segments and mini-missions are very common and they come in various shapes and sizes, from a short boat trip up the Sông Hương (Perfume River) through the canals of Huế in *Vietcong 2* (Illusion Softworks, 2005) to entire missions being structured around this theme, such as those in *Conflict: Vietnam* and *Black Ops*. Yet there is hardly an action game set in Vietnam which does not contain such a segment: *The Hell in Vietnam* (City Interactive, 2007), *Marine Heavy Gunner: Vietnam* (Brainbox Games, 2004), *Shellshock 2: Blood Trails* (Rebellion Developments, 2009), and *Men of Valor* (2015, Inc, 2004) all feature such river-and-boat segments.

The most noticeable is the one in *Men of Valor*, precisely due to the fact that it can be linked directly to *Apocalypse Now*. The mission starts with the player standing on the bow of the

boat, unable to move but able to look around. As the boat moves upriver, it passes another American patrol boat which is searching a Vietnamese sampan—a scene directly referencing the one in Coppola's film. Unlike in *Apocalypse Now*, however, where the scene ends with the massacre of the Vietnamese, in *Men of Valor* the American soldiers fall victim to a hand grenade explosion. After this incident the player's boat moves further upstream, and—amidst fire coming from the river banks—reaches a bridge which, in visual terms, is modeled very closely on the Do Long bridge of Coppola's film: a cable-stayed bridge with white lights positioned along the cables. Within the technical possibilities of the game engine, a scene from *Apocalypse Now* has come alive in the virtual world. *Conflict: Vietnam* also pays homage explicitly to Coppola's film: although there is no bridge in the "river mission," the boat is commanded by an African-American soldier nicknamed "Chief" who dies during a firefight, just as it happens to Albert Hall's character (nicknamed "Chief") in *Apocalypse Now*.

Despite the fact that direct references to Coppola's film are widespread, it is probably Stanley Kubrick's satirical portrayal of the war which has left the most lasting mark on Vietnam War video games. The second part of *Full Metal Jacket*, depicting the 1968 Battle of Huế, has been virtually recreated in virtually every game dealing with the Vietnam War. While the omnipresence of war-torn Huế might be to some extent due to the overall importance and the wide-spread media coverage of the event, many games recreate specific details from Kubrick's film: thus sniper duels are common, such details as a lime-covered mass grave also appear (*Men of Valor*) and the entire singleplayer campaign of *Vietcong 2* is structured around the battle for Huế. Most importantly, however, the overall visual rendition of Huế in games is strongly reminiscent of that provided by Kubrick. Thus, the ancient city of Vietnamese emperors devastated by intensive house-to-house fighting has become the most common *topos* of video games and despite the fact that this phenomena cannot be entirely explained by *Full Metal Jacket*, the prominence of the film has undoubtedly played an important role.

In general, it can be said that the above-mentioned similarities between Vietnam War films and video games are easily noticeable by anyone who is at least basically familiar with the

most well-known depiction of the Vietnam War created by Hollywood. In addition, it is not surprising that video games have lent themselves so readily to be influenced by various aspects of films—both films and games being a prime example of an audiovisual media, the potential for influences to migrate from one medium to the other seems endless.

Moreover, it should also not be surprising that movies in particular proved so influential since, as observed by countless critics, "the Vietnam War . . . has thus far been given its imaginative life primarily through film" (Anderegg 1991, 1) and, consequently, films have been "the major influence on [people's] perception of the Vietnam War" (Lanning 1994, ix). Lastly, the fact that certain films were more influential than others is also understandable since, within the enormous body of films related—to a greater or lesser extent—to the Vietnam War, only a few of them have reached canonical status and have become widely known. The general consensus is that films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, or *Platoon* are "the essential" Vietnam War films, "providing the most compelling statements about the war" (Anderegg 1991, 1). Their influence on video games additionally attests to their canonicity and probably even further reinforces it.

All these observations are in accord with what has been noticed about Vietnam War related cultural production in general. For whatever reason, there appears to be a "pervasive intertextuality in the Vietnam discourse, where everything seems to refer to everything else, allusions bouncing from text to text in a seemingly endless sequence" (Fuchs 1991, 16). Thus, certain literary portrayals of the war—such as Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), or Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers* (1979)—have been taken up by directors and screenwriters and in various ways incorporated into films which were in turn taken up by game designers and in various ways incorporated into video games. If there ever is a novelized version of a Vietnam War video game, the circle will be completed.

Yet, even with such a circle still incomplete, the "cultural universe" of the Vietnam War—its popular and well-known parts, at least—are already something of a closed system. Certain images and ideas are so strongly entrenched in this system

that far from being challenged, questioned, or at least ignored by new components entering the system (in this specific case video games), they are readily taken up and reproduced.

Despite serious criticism levied against Richard Dawkins for the concept of meme, in the case of the Vietnam War "cultural universe" such a concept can be, at least partially, useful. In his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), Dawkins defines a meme as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" and "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" can all serve as examples of memes (Dawkins 2006, 192). Using this definition, certain *topoi* present in many Vietnam War films and subsequently successfully migrating into video games might be seen as examples of memes.

For some reason or other, some of them have been more successful than others and, as it often happens with ideas, their success has nothing to do with their truth value. Thus, the two most successful memes migrating from films into video games have been the Russian roulette myth and the visual rendition of Huế, despite the fact that there is no evidence for the former and in spite of the fact that Kubrick's Huế "looked nothing like Vietnam" (Lanning 1994, 317). On a general level, it is possible to say that the "new medium" of video games has brought very little new to the Vietnam War discourse in terms of content and that the dominant position of films has not been challenged.

Yet it would be incorrect to blame popular culture for such developments since "clichés, stereotypes, conventions, and evasions and displacements . . . are the life and blood of popular culture" (Auster and Quart 1988, 84). Rather, it is more reasonable to be aware of such developments and to counter them with informed history or critical analysis. It is questionable, nonetheless, whether such approach will be able to effect the closed system of the Vietnam War "cultural universe."

A pessimist might be inclined to think that a person approaching the Vietnam War via video games will only encounter "more of the same" and will be forever trapped amongst the old clichés and half-truths, surrounded by well-known images and firing his M-16 full-auto to the sound of The Jimi Hendrix Experience's version of "All Along the Watchtower." An optimist might respond that a person encountering the war via video games might pick up a history book—better still a quality history book—and learn that there is much more to the war

than the Russian roulette games which never took place. Which is more likely is difficult to say. Suffice that both options are available.

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the impact of Vietnam War films on video games related to the same topic.

Drawing on c. 10 games, the filmic influences are traceable to specific films in terms of soundtrack, setting, plot, imagery or visual iconography and in certain cases to video games being entirely based on films. In this case, the most lasting imprint has been that of *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Platoon*. Apart from these direct influences, various features are common to both Vietnam War films and video games, such as attempts at (hyper)realism, little (or no) attention to history, and the "American perspective only" approach.

This comparative analysis appears to show that 1.) the influence has been entirely one sided, with films impacting video games but not vice versa and 2.) that the new medium has brought very little new in terms of context to the cultural representation of the war.

AUTHOR

Dušan Kolcún is currently a full-time doctoral student at the Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University. His research focuses on modern American history, literature, and culture in general, and on the various aspects of the Vietnam War, such as its filmic and literary representations.