

# ***Velvet-Strike: War Times and Reality Games***

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## **About:**

*Velvet-Strike* is a collection of spray paints to use as graffiti on the walls, ceiling, and floor of the popular network shooter terrorism game *Counter-Strike*. *Velvet-Strike* was conceptualized during the beginning of Bush's "War on Terrorism." We invite others to submit their own "spray-paints" relating to this theme.

## **Velvet-Strike: War Times and Reality Games (War Times From a Gamer Perspective)**

When I first heard about the attacks on September 11, just a fraction before I felt a wave of sadness, a nauseating thought passed through my mind. What terrible timing – with this president in office, perhaps even more so than previous ones, he could use this event as justification for dangerous actions on a global scale and at home. A few weeks later, I left for Spain to give a workshop on modifying computer games. When I arrived the next morning at the workshop I learned that the U.S. had declared war on Afghanistan. The workshop organizers had installed a new demo of *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, a remake of an old Nazi castle shooter game, on all the PC's. The sounds of the weapon-fire echoed off the concrete walls of the workshop warehouse space – what I once approached with playful macho geek irony was transformed into uncanny echoes of real life violence. At that moment, that room was the last place I wanted to be. Joan Leandre, (one of the artists presenting at the workshop), and I discussed creating some kind of anti-war game modification.

Not long after the Sept 11 attacks, American gamers created a number of game modifications for games like *Quake*, *Unreal* and *the Sims* in which they inserted Osama Bin Laden skins and characters to shoot at and annihilate. Since *the Sims* is not a violent game, one Osama skins distributor suggested feeding *the Sims* Osama poison potato chips. If you cant shoot him, then force him to overeat American junk food, to binge, death by over-consumption, death by capitalism. (*The Sims* is essentially a game whose rule sets are based on capitalist algorithms, although according to the Sims designers these rules are balanced by other factors.)

The most disturbing Osama mod I saw was on display in October 2001 at a commercial game industry exhibit in Barcelona called "Arte Futura". To give the exhibition organizers the benefit of the doubt, they were probably unfamiliar with

urban American ethnic cartography. In this mod, Osama is represented as an Arab corner grocery store owner, as is common in many tough inner city neighborhoods in North America. The goal of the mod is to enter the corner liquor grocery store and kill the Arab owner. (At the time I saw this I had just gotten an email from my sister in Seattle describing how she and other college students were taking turns guarding mosques from vandals.)

Harmless release of tension or co-conspirator in the industrial war complex? Playful competition or dangerous ethnic and gender politics of the other? The first computer game, created at MIT by Slug Russell and other “hackers”, was called *Spacewar*; an outer space shooter influenced by cold war science fiction. Since *Spacewar*, computer games evolved and bifurcated into multiple genres, some related to war and fighting simulation, (and using technology occasionally directly funded by the US military), and others less so. (RPG, Real Time Strategy, Shooter, God Game, Action/Adventure, etc). In the 1990’s, within the shooter genre, characters evolved from white guy American soldiers into oversize funny male monsters of all shapes and stripes and pumped female fighting machines. It seemed to be about a kind of monster fantasy workshop, humorous macho role-play, taking things to their frag queen extremes. Within online *Quake* and game hacker culture, gender restrictions and other boundaries opened up.

Then beginning with *Half-life* and continuing with shooter games whose alleged appeal is “realism”, a kind of regression took place. In terms of game play games like *Half-life* are universally seen as advancements. Yet in *Half-life* you are only given one white guy everyman American geek guy to identify with. And all of the NPC researchers and scientists in the game are male. *Half-life* remaps the original computer game target market back onto itself, excluding all others and reifying gamer culture as a male domain. (Not that I didn’t play *Half-life* but I would have enjoyed it more if I could have played a female character.)

The trend towards what male gamers call “realism” solidified in 2000 with the *Half-life* mod *Counter-Strike*. *Counter-Strike* is a multi-player game where you choose to play on either the side of a band of terrorists or on the side of counter-terrorist commandos, (all male). The tactics of the terrorists and the counter-terrorists are essentially indistinguishable from each other. (Perhaps this similarity between terrorist and counter-terrorist is telling about the current situation in Israel and other places where the “war on terrorism” has been forged for a while or is only just beginning.)

People who love *Counter-Strike* have told me that the appeal is the “realism” – its not about “silly” muscly monsters bouncing around space ports like in the *Quake* Series – in *Counter-Strike* you play realistically proportioned soldiers and commandos killing each other in stark bombed out bunkers. When you are killed in *Counter-Strike* your character really “dies” instead of immediately regenerating. (Although you get to play again in a few minutes as soon as the next round begins.) So “realism” is not about faster game engines, graphics processing and “photorealism”. It is about reproducing characters and gameplay environments that are considered closer to “reality” and farther from fantasy.

But now, in the wake of Sept 11, are these games too “real”? Or is the real converging with the simulation? Who defines what is real? According to an email

rumor, President Bush recently approved of a deal between an American television network and the US military to create a series of wartime docudramas of US soldiers fighting the “war on terrorism” abroad. The news section of the TV network was apparently miffed at the arrangement because they had been unable to gain access to reporting on the war in Afghanistan. (Recall in Orwell’s *1984* the merging of state controlled war time news and docu-fiction.) The trend in brutal reality TV, beginning with popular shows like *Cops*, and continuing with a slue of reality game shows like *Survival* is another field of convergence.

You are for or against us, you are with us, “the one”, or you are with the enemy is the underlying logic of the West, as I understood a talk by Marina Grzanic at an international cyberfeminist conference in Germany in December 2001. (Pre-axis of evil.) Although computer games replicate this binary competitive logic maybe there is something ultimately subversive in the knowledge that it is only a game, that at any moment you may switch sides with the “other”, you may play the terrorist side in *Counter-Strike*. But reality games pretend to erase this awareness. And if you are going to converge network shooter games and contemporary middle eastern politics into a game, (*Counter-Strike*), then you leave out a number of complexities such as economics, religions, families, food, children, women, refugee camps, flesh bodies and blood, smell etc.

Maybe the problem is that convergence with “reality” is happening with the wrong game genre. Instead of replicating the binary logic of the shooter genre, of Cowboys and Indians, of the football game, if the US government borrowed tactics from real time strategy gamers or RPGers, we might be looking at a different global response. (But then again given who our leadership is now, its unlikely he is capable of the intellectual planning required of a strategy gamer.) “Winning” or advancement in massively multi-player Role Playing Games like *Everquest* is enhanced by strategically building social bonds amongst players. And strategy games like *Warcraft* and *Command and Conquer*, while directly enacting tactics of imperialist colonialist expansionism, at least take into account other factors in addition to military might.

After playing *Counter-Strike* for a couple weeks I must confess it incorporates social maneuvers beyond shoot and kill, (and I must also confess to enjoying many aspects of the game – I have actually always enjoyed shooters.) Team play and communication between members on your side are complex, including live voice radio, and a number of coded chat “smileys” and automated radio commands that take some time to learn. Formulating strategies is also necessary for survival, as in other network shooters. As a *Counter-Strike* newbie I was sometimes even able to solicit help from my enemies, indicating a clear awareness of the game as fictional play space. Some of the combat environments are quite beautiful. But I still am critical that this domain, the network of thousands of international *Counter-Strike* servers spanning Taiwan to Germany, has been reified as an exclusively male “realistic” combat zone. (You can hear live audio voices of male players on many servers.) I am also disturbed that the binary logic of the shooter is being implemented on a global military scale.

Personally I would like to see computer games move towards fantasy, away from military fantasy which pretends to “realistic”. I like fantastic environments where there is more room for imaginative habitats and characters. Japanese

games for children and adults are engaged in this undertaking, filled with curious animal Pokemon creatures, Robo-cats, transformers, Anime people, monsters, demons and fairies, of all genders. I identify more with these characters than with counter-terrorist or terrorist soldiers and they are what I want to be my reality. Reality is up for grabs. The real needs to be remade by us.

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