



## Playful Encounters: Games for Geopolitical Change

Daniel Bos

### ABSTRACT

Bringing together literatures on play, (video) games, and alter-(native) geopolitics this paper explores how digital games offer playful encounters that challenge popular understandings of geopolitics. While geographical scholarship has exposed the ways video games promote geopolitical and militaristic cultures, this paper concentrates on the disruptive qualities of play. More specifically, the paper focuses on *This War of Mine* (2014), a game which fosters playful encounters that encourage the player to reflect on the everyday consequences of conflict in urban spaces and their civilian populations. Drawing on an analysis of player reviews of the game, this paper demonstrates how play shapes imaginaries of the geopolitical context(s) of urban conflict and stimulates players to reflect on their attitudes towards violence. In doing so, the paper critically demonstrates how digital games offer important cultural outlets in encountering alternative understandings of geopolitics.

### Introduction

... the very act of playing encompasses new possibilities for making sense or nonsense of the world

(Katz 2004, xi)

This game makes me to change my mindset about how the world works and I think, i've become a better person (not sure though) [sic].<sup>1</sup>

This paper critically explores how digital games offer playful encounters that challenge dominant understandings of geopolitics. The role of visual culture and the popular mediation of geopolitics, especially concerning (in)security, danger, and the legitimacy of state-sponsored violence, has become increasingly central to critical geopolitical enquiry (Campbell 2007; Hughes 2007; MacDonald, Hughes., and Dodds 2010). Within this focus, military-themed videogames have received growing attention, particularly in terms of how they frame and spatialise the world politics. A central claim from emerging scholarship is that such games propagate "the idea that the non-western world is threatening and needs America's civilising/democratising influence" (Robinson 2015, 452). In such accounts, popular cultural and mediated

expressions are argued to (re)produce geopolitical militarised cultures, overlooking questions of resistance and purposeful use of popular culture in challenging entrenched politicalised norms and values.

Oppositional cultural formats both challenge and offer alternatives that counter such hegemonic geopolitical discursive formations (Holland 2012). Yet, such scholarship has often focused on particular media, namely graphic novels (see Burrell and Hörschelmann 2019; Dittmer 2014; Dodds 1996; Fall 2014), documentary film (Holland 2020) artistic interventions (Graham 2011; Gregory 2010; Ingram 2011), and in doing so overlooked the other ways in which geopolitics is being (re)imagined and (re)configured via popular culture, in this case videogames. Videogames have grown beyond mere forms of entertainment. They increasingly have variegated societal applications including being used in journalism, training, teaching, marketing, and drawing awareness on social, environmental, and (geo)political issues (see Bogost 2011; Cauberghe and De Pelsmacker 2010; Gee 2003). *Games for Change* (G4C), founded in 2004, is a not-for-profit organisation that fosters collaborations between Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), practitioners and government agencies to design and distribute critical videogames that have been adopted as part of humanitarian awareness and charitable campaigns (see Burak and Parker 2017; Chin and Golding 2016; CAF 2017 report). As scholars have indicated, videogames present a novel form of persuasive communication in which meaning is made through players' interaction with the gameplay rules and mechanics (Bogost 2007; Crogan 2011). Videogames can not only offer a persuasive narrative, but it is through the "dynamics of play" which "contain[s] real potential to challenge dominant orthodoxies and ideologies" (Robinson 2012, 507). Whilst research has begun to explore the persuasive role of gameplay mechanics, and the motives of the designers (see de Smale et al. 2017), this paper takes an alternative approach by considering the players themselves, to understand how play presents alternatives to dominant understandings of geopolitical cultures.

This paper brings together and advances interests in ludic/playful geographies (Woodyer 2012); ongoing debates around thinking and practising alter-(native) geopolitics (Koopman 2011); and the communicative potential of the videogame medium (Bogost 2007). I move beyond accounts that are skewed towards ideological readings of 'playful' texts and objects. Instead, this paper conceptualises play as a geopolitical encounter aligning with more recent scholarly interests in audiences and the reception of popular geopolitics (see Dodds 2006; Bos 2018). Not only does this acknowledge how audiences understand and internalise geopolitics, but it highlights how such interactive encounters "reinforces as well as challenges ideologies of people and places" (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019, 71). These claims are empirically grounded in a case study analysis of reviews by players of *This War of Mine* (2014 *TWoM* herein), a successful independent game offering an alternative imaginary of

war and conflict. By focusing on the experience of civilians, the game presents an inward critique of the videogame industry's fixation on glorified accounts of military violence and speaks to wider geopolitical considerations regarding the 'reality' of war for civilian populations. To begin, the paper outlines how games have been designed to offer counter-hegemonic geopolitical discourses, and then goes on to conceptualise the process of play as an encounter that challenges (geo)political subjectivities and attitudes.

## Games and (Alter) Geopolitics

Outside of academia geopolitics is widely imagined as (depending on your generation) chess, the board game Risk, or the Total War video games. Big men moving big guns across a big playing field. The world divided into clear sides. It's all on the map, as little figurines ...

(Koopman 2011, 274)

Games and play have a long historical significance to geopolitical thought and practice. Despite connotations of their apparent frivolous and juvenile nature, the principles of gaming have long been embedded in geo-strategizing and continue to remain central to the practices of war-making (Klinke 2016; Salter 2011; Yarwood 2015). Indeed, wargaming, and the simulation of warfare, is implicated in decision-making, strategizing and pedagogical purposes, and has become a means of rendering the spatialities of conflict meaningful and thus actionable (Sabin 2012). Liberal democracies have employed such principles of simulation to prepare and plan for future terrorism events that threaten the viability and integrity of a state's sovereign power. Anderson and Adey (2011, 2012) investigate the state's use of 'game-like' exercises to simulate security protocols. In doing so, they show how the practice of 'playing-out' future scenarios initiates anticipatory actions in which securitisation of the state becomes possible. Games have become both a key *metaphor* and *practice* for understanding contemporary and historical geopolitical cultures.

Beyond the echelons of the state, games and play have become important means in which popular geopolitical sensibilities are argued to circulate and are made meaningful within everyday life. Playful encounters with military toy figures (MacDonald 2008) and boardgames (Ambrosio and Ross 2021) ; hobbyists' engagements with miniature military models (Yarwood 2015); and the digital mediation and interaction with military-themed videogames (Power 2007; Robinson 2012, 2015; Salter 2011) not only draw inspiration from and reflect contemporary and historical geopolitical events but are argued to be actively constitutive in normalising and legitimising cultures of militarism within society. As argued in the context of videogames, this is not least because of the cultural politics of the representational worlds that often

articulate orientalist geographical imaginaries that are constitutive of the political violence they depict (Šisler 2008), but also the ways they have become essential components of the ‘military-entertainment-complex’ and are used both for military recruitment and training (see Allen 2017; Lenoir and Caldwell 2018 on *America’s Army*). Whilst such research has been instructive in the role games have on popular geopolitical thought and practice, games have received little attention in their ability to evoke critiques or alternative encounters with geopolitics.

The focus of popular geopolitics has tended to overlook oppositional cultural formats, “how counter-hegemonic interpretations of the geopolitical are developed” (Holland 2020, 7) through them, and how they are interpreted (notwithstanding Anaz and Purcell 2010; Dodds 1996; Holland 2012, 2020; Ó Tuathail 1996). Military-themed videogames, as an example, are not simply spaces of complicity in the promotion of unproblematised military violence. Rather, games, and play itself can subvert, challenge, and disrupt hegemonic cultures of militarism in ways that encourage new ways of thinking, experiencing, and understanding geopolitics. This is not to deny the ways commercial games are offering playful encounters that counter nationalistic fervour, and which disrupt the affect laden pleasures of playing virtual war (see Payne 2014 on *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012)), or commercial games that skew neat categorisation, and whose engagement by players can belie the intentionality of producers. As detailed by reception studies, mainstream culture promoting hegemonic ideologies may indeed be experienced and encountered with resistant readings by their audiences (Radway [1984] 2009; Shively 1992).

Videogames have been used in a variety of ways to challenge political sensibilities. Following Robinson (2012), in-game spaces have become sites of virtual in-game protests and resistance. The work of digital artist Joseph Delappe ‘*dead-in-iraq*’, used the military recruitment game *America’s Army* to draw awareness to those in the US military killed in the Iraq conflict by naming them in the game’s chat function (see Chan 2009). The content and gameplay mechanics can also be modified through a process called ‘modding’. This can involve altering how the game looks or behaves and can occur in ways which can challenge, resist, and subvert the original meaning and intention of the game designers through altering the landscape, and in-game mechanics and objects. An example of this is ‘Velvet Strike’, a collective who provided a modification to the military game *Counter-Strike* enabling players to spray anti-war graffiti within the game environment (Schleiner 2017). Finally, we have seen the rise of ‘critical videogames’. These are videogames which have been purposefully developed and designed to challenge a wide variety of political, environmental, and social conditions.

It is the contestation of this paper that such critical videogames can offer a form of alter-geopolitics whereby ‘bottom-up’ organisations are (re)thinking and (re)imagining geopolitics in different ways (Koopman 2011). Following Routledge

(2019), alter-geopolitics can be understood to confront hegemonic geopolitics by challenging the *material* realm in terms of the economic and military geopolitical power of states. Second, it also functions to subvert *representational* logics and dominate imaginaries by elite actors and mediators. Finally, it offers *lived alternatives* to norms that are frequently presented and understood as the only viable option. In this way, games, as a tool of alter-geopolitics, can be used to raise awareness, challenge geopolitical scripting, but also, they are increasingly becoming implicated in forms of geopolitical action through charitable purposes.

The existing literature on the potential of videogames has traditionally focused on the particularities of the videogame medium, more specifically, the way they act as cultural expressions that can then be used to intervene in political and social life (Flanagan 2009). A central tenet of this research has been the effort to theorise the ways in which games communicate meaning. Bogost (2007) has conceptualised the unique characteristics of videogames. He argues that they offer selective, mimetic abstractions of complex systems that are explored and made meaningful via users' interaction with them within the architectural rules and structures that the game is governed by. Bogost (2007) thus argues that games can be understood to present a form of procedural rhetoric. This can be understood as a novel form of rhetorical persuasion that conveys understandings of political, social, and economic systems and how they function (for further discussion see Robinson 2012; Sou 2018). Expanding this further, Bogost contends that games create what he terms a 'possibility space'. Players can not only understand the myriad of ways in which societal and political processes work, but also construct alternatives through play.

As war and the conduct of war itself has become increasingly virtualised, it has created a distance and subsequently virtuous depictions of war which seep into popular culture such as videogames (Der Derian 2009). However, games also offer opportunities to disrupt this through the possibility space – offering opportunities to present alternative perspectives of conflict and create a moral proximity through playful encounters. This takes place as players are inscribed with new experiences, and thus new potentialities are produced through interacting with gameplay mechanisms. Sou (2018) argues that the specificities of the medium offer a corrective to more orthodox mediated accounts and representations of, for example, refugee populations. As such, games can

challenge players' perceptions and understanding of refugees by constructing a persuasive procedural rhetoric about the personal challenges and constraints that they face when leaving their home country

(Sou 2018, 519)

Undoubtedly, such work presents a useful framework to structure academic research into the design principles of games, and the types of interactions they encourage. Moreover, it is a useful analytical lens with which to critically

attend to the processes through which games generate meaning, in other words, their constitutive function. However, such work fails to rigorously engage with the practice and experience of play itself. Sicart (2014, 73) argues, "it is in play, and not in games, where politics resides". Thus, **it is important to turn to the** processes through which these 'playful encounters' operate, and the geopolitical meaning-making and transformative potential as understood by players themselves.

### **Ludic/Playful Geopolitical Encounters**

There has been a growing interest in considering the role of encounters in everyday geographies, and yet it is a term that has lacked theoretical clarity. Wilson and Darling (2016, 2) offer a useful overview of the critical analytical scope of encounter suggesting how they are about the maintenance, production and reworking of difference, they frame experiences and subjectivities, produce and incorporate multiple temporal registers, and they offer transformative potential. Such a theorisation has been taken forward to explore how encounters can be geopolitical, and are facilitated and constituted across various sites, practices, and objects (Gillen and Mostafanezhad 2019; Shtern and Yacobi 2019; Williams and Boyce 2013). Benwell (2016), for example, considers how the Falklands War (1982) and memories around it **are** encountered by young people's everyday engagements with their surrounding landscape, material artefacts, and wider social relations. Here, play was noted as an important activity in which young people encounter past geopolitical events and these "embodied and relational encounters with memory can serve to reproduce and rework understandings of the geopolitical past and present" (Benwell 2016, 122). This paper takes this focus forward by considering the role of play in virtual environments whereby players can interact and experience varying geopolitical imaginaries, landscapes, and people presenting encounters that perpetuate and/or challenge popular understandings of geopolitics.

This theoretical interest connects with work emerging under the banner of 'ludic geopolitics', where scholars have argued that the varying performances and experiences of play itself to be inseparable from the spatialisation of the political world (Carter, Kirby, and Woodyer 2015; Klink 2016; Woodyer and Carter 2020). However, it is important to note that whilst play has been considered a geopolitical act, it is not universally received as such. To explore this further, rather than performing critical ideological readings of playful texts, scholars have turned to the practices of play itself to illuminate the circulation, negotiation of, and resistance to, geopolitical power. By focusing on play as the object of study, ludic geopolitics offer an empirical grounding, exemplifying the practice, performances, and encounters in which geopolitics operates in everyday life (Dittmer and Gray 2010 see also Dowler and Sharp

2001; Williams and Massaro 2013). Such a focus has led Woodyer and Carter (2020, 1052 my emphasis) to call for a reformulation of popular geopolitics, to consider it "as an *encounter* between text, objects, bodies and practice". Drawing attention to such encounters opens investigation into their indeterminate nature. In-depth ethnographic research has demonstrated how playful encounters are inherently ambiguous. This provides nuance on the often-causal assumptions made concerning geopolitical meaning-making by audiences (Woodyer and Carter 2020). In exploring videogames, Bos (2018) has considered the event of play acknowledging not just the encounter between player and the game (rules), but how such emergent geopolitical encounters are situated within specific spatial contexts, constituted through social and technological assemblages, and are laden with affective and emotive potential. As Wilson (2017) elaborates "encounters are events of relations" in which different bodies and agents come together and encounter each other in both mundane and transformative ways. The geopolitical meaning of videogames is made possible through playful encounters within the possibility space presented.

Focusing on encounters provides insight into interpersonal, cross-cultural contact and how socio-cultural difference is negotiated within varying physical and virtual spatial contexts (Wilson 2017). Playful geopolitical encounters offer opportunities where such spatial and cultural differences converge and are negotiated. The disparity between the 'self' and 'other' has frequently been problematised in the literature on military-themed videogames (Power 2007). The central criticism is that their representative structures perpetuate orientalist tropes that generate violent imaginative geographies that are both reflective and constitutive of spatial differences. However, critical games offer the ability to play as, and reimagine from, the perspective of the 'other' (Sou 2018). Such shifting power dynamics exemplified in the cultural and mediated forms, however, can also work to reinforce a sense of difference and maintain unequal relations of power between people (Kozol 2015; Saunders 2019). Nevertheless, this is where Woodyer (2012) presents the argument that play encounters can initiate 'ethical generosity' which cultivates an "openness towards the world that encourages us to be more responsive to others [...]". In negotiating alternative geopolitical mediations and socio-cultural difference in and through play, it highlights the possibility that geopolitical knowledge and identity are (re)configured in everyday life and practices.

Play is argued to be laden with transformative political potential. Turning to the concept of encounter opens considerations towards the "political possibilities" of play (Sharp and Shaw 2013; cited in Klinke 2016, 110). There has been a growing acknowledgement in which play has been conceptualised, and adopted, as a strategic practice presenting symbolic and material forms of resistance and that have been embraced by various actors across space and time (Crossa 2013; Routledge 2017; Shepard 2012). As contended by Crossa

(2013), playful strategies were adopted by street vendors displaced in Mexico City to draw awareness around the politics of public spaces, and to cultivate affective bonds that helped sustain communal resistive practices. Thus, it is argued that play "open[s] up the possibility of different ways of seeing, imagining, and performing 'real' space" (Yarwood 2015, 658; see also Katz 2004; Woodyer 2012). Therefore, it is plausible to claim these playful encounters draw attention to the non-linear nature and practice of play that affords the opportunity to experiment within this 'possibility space' and which rework understandings of geopolitical identities.

However, there remains limited insight into the ways in which games are mobilised to present such alternative geopolitical encounters, but more importantly how geopolitical imaginaries and differences are encountered through play itself. This paper departs from a focus on *what* the oppositional geopolitical role of games is, and instead addresses the more complex question of *how* playful encounters are generative of transformative geopolitical potential. Before considering the geopolitics of the case study game *TWoM*, the paper discusses the methodological approach focusing on players' online reviews of encountering the game, and its implications for geopolitical attitudes and subjectivities through, and beyond, the screen.

## Methodology

This paper explores playful encounters, albeit indirectly, to understand how *TWoM* aims to generate intimacies between players that aim to reflect those experienced by civilians during conflict. To do this, online user reviews on the popular online platform<sup>2</sup> *Steam* are examined. *Steam* (developed by *Valve Corporation*) is a digital distribution platform that facilitates the purchasing, playing, and reviewing of digital games. Within the field of popular geopolitics, the analysis of online reviews has been a staple means of eliciting individual and interpretative communities' geopolitical reflections and encounters with popular cultural texts. Many of these studies are skewed towards film and exploring the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)* to consider the reception of cinematic geopolitical representations (Dittmer 2011; Dodds 2006; Hastie 2021; Ridanpää 2014). Like the *IMDb*, *Steam* offers the ability for users to write reviews, but only if they have played the game, presenting an opportunity to collate a wide variety of comments and interpretations pertaining to the playing of *TWoM*.

Whilst such reviews are distant from the immediacy of play captured by ethnographic studies, they do provide important insights into how play is discussed and how it is critically reflected upon by players. Ridanpää (2014) states that such online reviews produce 'intertextual knowledge' which can operate as "'guide books' for the audience, offering multiple 'instructions' [...] about how to dissect the film [or game] in question and thus how to

understand the political meanings related to it". In other words, reviews can help elucidate how the encounters of play, and its geopolitical values are made meaningful within the broader gaming community and beyond the moment of play itself.<sup>3</sup> As experienced in this research, such reviews offered opportunities for players to reflect on their personal experiences of gameplay and to connect this to wider (geo)political events and issues, to critically discuss the aesthetics and gameplay mechanics, and to creatively rework gameplay experience into fanfiction, extending the popular geopolitical interpretation of the game.

This research is based on users' reviews of *TWoM* collected from the first review posted November 2014 up until the end of June 2018. In total, 41,495 reviews were written during this time, and 94% of the reviews are cited as positive towards the game. With the global reach of *Steam*, less than half of these reviews were written in English.<sup>4</sup> Due to the language constraints of the author, the research focused on these reviews. The remaining 16,249 reviews were transferred to Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. An extensive process of data cleansing was undertaken where blank reviews and those containing limited information, such as single emoticons, were removed from the sample. It was, of course, neither possible nor appropriate to code all the online exchanges and so comments such as "good game" were ignored, instead focusing on themes that tie into the production of geopolitical knowledge based around users' in-game encounters, experiences, and interpretations. Ultimately, this led to the dataset for this study being reduced into thematic codes including player motivation and agency (n = 58); the representation of war and conflict (n = 75); discussions on the videogame industry and intertextual references (n = 77); personal experience and geopolitical knowledge (n = 59); gameplay mechanics and structures (n = 101); and game design including music and art (n = 73).

An important limitation of the data selected is that the review system on *Steam* only provides a restricted amount of information regarding the user themselves. This is not to deny that players bring their own subjectivities, histories, knowledge, experiences, and skillsets to such playful encounters. However, beyond what was written in the review itself, there were limited characteristics, or identity markers, such as gender or geographical location of the user, discussion of which is therefore absent from this study. Metadata of the user is limited to username; products in *Steam* Account; number of reviews; if the user recommended the game; and hours played alongside the time played when the user reviewed the game. This information provides a proxy of engagement and the potential motivation of the work of reviews. In providing a comprehensive analysis of user behaviour and the nature of reviews posted on the *Steam* website, Lin et al. (2019) shows how users play a game for a median of 13.5 hours before posting a review; negative reviews are posted after significantly fewer playing hours and are slightly longer than positive reviews, and players write longer reviews for games which they have

paid for. The review section is also semi-interactive as other users can indicate if the review was ‘helpful’ and ‘funny’ and present opportunities for discussion and insights into the social capital imbued in review work. Quotations used in the below analysis have been stripped of the username and are presented as verbatim and therefore may contain spelling or grammatical mistakes.

### ***The Geopolitics of This War of Mine***

One of the most successful independent games that has emerged from the critical game movement is *This War of Mine*. Released in November 2014,<sup>5</sup> and developed by the Polish studio *11 Bit Studios*, an independent [game developer](#) based in Warsaw, Poland, *TWoM* received wide-spread international success and critical acclaim. Since 2019, over 4.5 million copies have been sold across six gaming platforms, and it has won over 100 gaming awards since its launch (Fogel 2019). [Moreover, upon its release, the studio was able to recoup the production costs within two days of sale.](#) Due to this success, it has also drawn scholarly interest exploring its transgressive gameplay (Bjørkelo 2018), its connection to feminist values on war (Saklofske, Arbuckle, and Bath 2019), and the methods of its production (De Smale, Kors, and Sandovar 2019), yet player reception has received limited focus.

A key aspect of its success has been down to the game offering an alternative perspective to contemporary popular imaginings of urban conflict – playing through warfare as civilians. Whilst the absence of civilians in military-themed videogames does much ideological work in presenting distant locations as “little more than ‘terrorist nest’ targets to soak up US military firepower” (Graham 2006, 255), *TWoM* offers an alternative vision of the everyday experiences and lived realities of urban conflict that has occluded both academic scholarship and mediated accounts (see Fregonese 2017). From this perspective, *TWoM* can be seen to offer a compelling means of attending to feminist geopolitical interest into the ways violence and “geopolitical power [is] (re)produced and negotiated” (Williams and Massaro 2013, 753) at scales beyond the nation-state, and which aims to evoke the intimacies in which the consequences of militarised violence are experienced [in particular](#) spatial contexts.

The game’s aesthetics present a dystopic imagining of urban conflict in which the aim is for the player to survive the conflict. Set in the fictional city of Pogoren, Graznavia, the player assumes control civilians who are occupying a ‘safe house’. What makes the game compelling and increases empathetic connections is that the characters are given names and are provided biographies and personalities that emerge during gameplay. A selection of reviews indicated strong attachments to the player characters through the creation of fanfiction, creatively reworking, and rearticulating their own gameplay experience in a manner that extends the interpretations of popular geopolitical texts 

(Dittmer and Dodds 2008). The central premise of the game is for selected characters to survive by reaching a randomly implemented endpoint in the game whereby a ceasefire is declared.<sup>6</sup> To reach this endpoint, a player controls individual members of the group, using the different characters' key strengths to scavenge for food, collect, create, and distribute resources, and provide medical attention in order to survive. A key emphasis of the gameplay is encouraging the player to adopt practices of care and empathetic connections towards *playable and non-playable characters*. The in-game characters require constant varying interventions to maintain the characters' health, hunger, and mood which fluctuate throughout the gameplay. Whilst the game attempts to highlight the consequences of war, it also provides a playful encounter in which players are forced to "reinvent society in the face of social and institutional breakdown" (Roy 2016, online).

The in-game action is framed by specific geographies and temporalities. During daylight hours, the action is confined to a make-shift home that has been ravaged by the conflict. For the group to survive, the player must ensure individual in-game characters are fed, rested, sheltered, and entertained to maintain both physical and psychological health. Daylight hours provide the opportunity to build and repair and maintain objects, and the home itself, which enables the group to outlast the siege. Under the cover of night, however, players are given the option for one in-game character to explore the wider geographies of the city and to visit select areas to scavenge, steal and trade items that are used to feed the group and repair and create objects. Amid the conflict, players face not only the dangers of military forces but also rogue bandits who guard key sites and who raid the home, stealing supplies. What makes the game compelling and engaging is its internal mechanics which stimulate uncomfortable decisions and invite critical reflection over the broader consequences of war on urban life.

The capacity to offer compelling storytelling via players' interaction with gameplay mechanics, coinciding with the prominence of videogame culture and its potential outreach to wider demographics (see Quandt, Grueninger., and Wimmer 2009), encouraged the studio to consider the medium's ability to speak to the social consequences of warfare. However, the game deliberately chose to avoid focusing on a single specific geopolitical conflict. The development process instead was informed by various personal events, biographies and geographical contexts, as senior writer *Pawel Miechowski* states:

Please keep in mind we are from Warsaw, Poland. Warsaw was heavily touched by the Second World War so most of us have grandfathers who survived heavy bombings and then the Warsaw Uprising (Warr 2014: online)

The developers' own personal family biographies were drawn upon, reflecting on the historical context of the place of production, Warsaw – and its past occupation by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – in which stories of their

grandparents' experiences were translated into the gameplay. Furthermore, the team were influenced by a variety of sources and several historical and contemporary conflicts based in cities and between nations including the siege of Monrovia, Aleppo, Kosovo, Libya, and the siege of Sarajevo. The game *becomes* both a way of accounting for the prosaic, embodied consequences of military violence, and – through player encounters – stimulates new ways of thinking about and experiencing the precarity of human life under the conditions of urban warfare.

### ***Playing and Encountering Urban Conflict***

Digital games, and in particular military-themed videogames, are important cultural outlets that spatialise the world into dangerous and threatening locations, and culturally legitimise the use of military violence. However, as the examination of player reviews shows, *TWoM* disrupted these geopolitical logics. First, it breaks away from established generic conventions evident in military-themed videogames by focusing on civilian experiences of conflict. Second, it facilitates geopolitical encounters that encourage the player(s) to reflect on the intimate spatialities of urban conflict and violence.

Many of the reviews analysed cited positive aspects of the game. At the time of writing, 94% of the 41,495 reviews written on the *Steam* website are suggested to be positive. These included comments championing the gameplay mechanics, the aesthetic presentation, and the overall concept of the game. Such appraisals were often juxtaposed against other, more commercially successful military-themed videogames, namely *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*. Here, reviews not only demonstrated a demand for play that allowed players to understand mediated representations of wars alongside their own playful practices, but they also included a distinct appreciation for it. What was praised by reviewers was the fact that *TWoM*'s representations of 'war' did not rest on generic, normative framings of conflict usually found in the commercial videogame industry:

[...] So many of us are sick of the gung ho blood and glory of unrealistic and dishonest war games. Big publishers won't try anything new because they just want to milk their mainstream cash cows and lowest common denominator violence and explosions sell.<sup>7</sup>

This game is amazing yet depressing, it sends a powerful message about the negative effect of the war on people in a very realistic way which is something new considering all other games make you the hero that stopped the war.<sup>8</sup>

Reviews recognised how the game ran counter to more established generic conventions in which war and military violence have become glamorised, sanitised, and virtuously rendered in the media and in popular culture (Der Derian 2009). The comments show how individuals sought out new playful experiences that offered more nuanced understandings of military violence,

and its subsequent effects on civilian populations. Such readings also indicated more reflective consumers that were contemplative of the broader conditions of the production of popular culture. In this way, they made comparisons with commercial AAA games<sup>9</sup> and their tendency to conform to generic conventions due to industry's risk averse nature and reluctance to stray from established norms that have proven to be profitable (Kerr 2006). Despite this, games can and do "take on, and challenge, the accepted norms embedded in the gaming industry" (Flanagan 2009, 1). Indeed, according to one reviewer, *TWoM* offered an alternative encounter of morality [compared to the wider gaming industry](#):

Too often in games I can be cold and very heartless. I relish being the 'bad guy' in a lot of games, often opting for the 'easy choice' of choosing the mentality of 'the needs of one, outweighs the needs of the many'. I wanted a new challenge and perhaps something that could change my 'evil persona' in games ... and boy, do I get a challenge with this [TWOm] game.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being understood as exclusively passive towards the broader political economic structures that shape players' experience of conflict, as well as an uncritical acceptance of the glamorisation of war, the analysis of reviews reveals that players actively seek out alternative playful encounters that depart from the traditional norms of the gaming industry. They seek out more nuanced, less reductionist representations of war and warfare, and in doing so, are better placed to envisage urban conflict within their *own* geopolitical imagination and their *own* sense of self.

By designing the gameplay perspective from that of a civilian, *TWoM* aims to provoke a grounded insight into the consequences of urban conflict. Significantly, it draws attention to, and emphasises the multi-scalar, lived and embodied impact of geopolitical conflict on everyday life. In this way, the game resonates with feminist geopolitical epistemologies that seek to "challenge masculinist accounts that normalize, naturalize, and glorify war" (Tyner and Henkin 2015, 288). *TWoM* uses a fictive setting to situate the gameplay, yet the game provides limited insights into the broader geopolitical context. Instead, the gameplay [narrative](#) emerges through the stories and actions of the avatars whom the player controls. As suggested earlier, the concept of the game draws inspiration from a range of sources, including testimony, literature, and personal accounts of family members. However, according to Pawel Miechowski, there was a deliberate attempt to avoid direct comparisons with contemporary and/or historical conflicts:

We did not want to point at any specific conflict to stay away from political connotations. The message was intended to be universal. And it worked. For Israeli people – it was about them, for Palestinians – about them, and so on. Not surprisingly, if you're a person

caught in a war, it doesn't matter if you're Jewish, Polish, Italian or Swedish – you just want to survive and protect the ones you love. The origins of conflict are irrelevant, what matters is your suffering.

(Preston 2015: Online)

While the inspiration behind the game was suggested to largely come from the Bosnian conflict – and first-hand accounts of the siege of Sarajevo – the game location is set in a fictional setting. The lack of geopolitical specificity was a deliberate manoeuvre to encourage players to imagine the city to be their own – to imagine it was them [the player] needing to survive. However, as a number of review comments made apparent, connections with contemporary and historical conflicts were made. Review comments included:

"Welcome to Ukraine simulator"<sup>11</sup>; "Aleppo simulator 2016"<sup>12</sup>; " ... kinda like a simulator of life in Kosovo or the Donbass".<sup>13</sup>

In these cases, the notion of simulation stressed the perception that *TWoM* presented a grounded account of war and its effects on civilian populations which drew on certain players' wider geopolitical imaginaries of where war is situated and experienced. Rather than an unspecified geographical conflict encouraging players to internalise and imagine the conflict through their own personal context, the game, as suggested in the previous comments, evoked a geopolitical imaginary of 'conflict-at-a-distance':

... the fact that there are people in the world having to make choices like this for real in Syria for example, brings home that war is a game best not played.<sup>14</sup>

An amazing game that will make you think about the atrocities of war. This really made me think about Palestine and Syria.<sup>15</sup>

These reviews suggested how *TWoM* projected a critical insight into the realities of warfare, and through the act of play, encouraged a sense of identification (through the avatar) with the conditions and choices being made by non-combatants. Yet, despite the producers' aim to encourage players to feel like it was their own city, players tended to imagine the context of the violence as being 'elsewhere' and made references to specific conflicts at the time of writing their reviews. As one review stated, this can challenge geopolitical sensibilities: 'Looking elsewhere' has been a crucial visual strategy in ways that attempt to destabilise and disrupt the "authoritative power of Western visuality" (Kozol 2015, 7). However, as Kozol (2015) goes on to argue, such strategies can also work to reinforce a sense of 'othering' and spatial difference.

In a world where we are all too quick to dismiss the wars in the Middle East or Ukraine with "not my problem", turn down asylum seekers based on our prejudices of race, religion and ethnicity, This War of Mine provides us (especially the Western audience) with a fresh perspective and maybe even a lesson in humanity ...<sup>16</sup>

Although *TWoM* was set in a fictional setting, players connected the game and its progressive message to geopolitical realities. Reviews indicated a sense of distance created between the populations deemed vulnerable and the location of the player themselves.<sup>17</sup> Questions of the power dynamics remain important to consider as Saunders (2019) shows seemingly progressive popular cultural forms are still wedded to capital accumulation that continues to perpetuate the logics of ‘othering’ and profiteering over matters of human suffering. This was drawn out further through the gameplay mechanics in which the player was required to negotiate ethical encounters concerning the use of violence.

### ***Playing and Encountering (Non)violence***

If *TWoM* evokes geopolitical encounters that connected players to the purported grounded realities of historical and contemporary urban conflict, the game also stimulated ethical encounters concerning the role of violence within and beyond videogames. Indeed, players are often considered as morally disengaged from the violent actions performed in the game world, especially concerning mediations of militarised violence that is suggested to subdue moral-ethical reasoning and where “[T]here are no such questions or responsibilities, only the pleasures of vicariously dealing out or experiencing violence” (Stahl 2010, 72). *TWoM* represents a significant departure. It was explicitly designed to create a range of moral and ethical deliberations which players were required to negotiate between and as such one player argued that gameplay prompted a “*moral quandary*”.<sup>18</sup> *TWoM* focuses on the ethical and moral ambiguity that defines conflict for both combatants and civilians. There may not always be a correct choice that can lead to ‘success’, and this ‘success’ can often come at a high cost for others [in the game](#). As one review stated:

You may be lucky to end up in a scenario where you can survive scavenging, or have the option of killing cruel soldiers and thugs and thieves that make you feel good about yourself. You may also end up in a situation where you have to make the choice between stealing the only provision an elderly woman and her son have to survive, and letting you and/or your friends starve to death.<sup>19</sup>

The above quote bolsters the claim that a central tenet of *TWoM*’s design was intended to allow players to make their own decisions rather than “giving [the player] moral answers”.<sup>20</sup> Players are given no tutorial when starting the game as “when war breaks out no-one would tell you what to do . . .”.<sup>21</sup> Importantly, this also encouraged players to respond in their own way, rather than be guided by the gameplay structures. Thus, the centrepiece of the game’s design was the attempt to generate “emotional realism” (de Smale et al. 2017, 11)

whereby both aesthetic and mechanical encounters were intended to generate genuine emotive experiences for players. What became evident in the review comments was the different ways in which such moral reflections played a central aspect of the experiential pull of the game, and *how* play was encountered:

I personally played the game the way I would have acted in real life as well and it ended up being a happy and rewarding experience:<sup>22</sup>

I have tons of fun trying different crafting, scavenging, trading, and combat strategies, and still never kill innocent people in all my hours of playing. I'm slowly working on surviving with each combination of characters just for the satisfaction of getting a nice little "survived" badge on each one in the opening screen<sup>23</sup>

*TWoM* cultivates a range of moral and ethical decisions from the player, which are made relative to the game structures, individual strategies, and ethical values concerning questions of violence. Such reflections draw parallel to Moran and Etchegoyen (2017) study on videogames on the topic of prisons and incarceration. In this study, players noted how their 'offline' dispositions and their attitudes towards incarceration shaped how they interacted with the game. Through the gameplay mechanics, players performed in ways that reflected their own values concerning the use of violence.

One of the recurring mentions in the reviews involved an encounter with an elderly couple in the game. As the resources, and their effective management, progressively become *more* difficult within the game, players are faced with what they describe as uncomfortable decisions, whether they should steal from more vulnerable populations – in this case an elderly couple – to extend their own characters' survival chances. As comments suggested such acts were felt emotionally and affectively beyond the immediacy of play itself and led to extended discussion between reviewers:

I try to loot them [the elderly couple] ASAP and take the sadness hit at the beginning. There are plenty of opportunities later to help people. You can always go back and break up their furniture later when winter hits.<sup>24</sup>

Was desperate for food on day 24, and everywhere that still had food was blocked by fighting, so I had to do a raid. Showed a pistol and they just ran upstairs and hid. Got the food and left, but felt horrible for it, and not just in-game.<sup>25</sup>

It is through such encounters that players are encouraged to reflect on the application of violence beyond the initial moment of play. As described in earlier comments, certain moments of inflicting violence were met with a sense of responsibility for the lives of others in the game world. In turn, the emotive registers evoked responses that generated sensitivities to the enactment of (non)violence. As Woon (2014) argues, it is through such emotional encounters in which commitments to non-violence can emerge as a broader geopolitical collective endeavour. On the other hand, and as

suggested in earlier comments, players reflected on this moral ambiguity and attempted to negotiate them through strategies – such as not stealing everything from vulnerable populations, or by situating it within the wider gameplay mechanics knowing that there will be opportunities to redeem themselves later in the game. Through acknowledging the players, we see how a range of ethical and moral decisions are provoked, but moreover, how these decisions are negotiated relative to the game structures and mechanics, personal strategies and wider cultural and individual values based on political-ethical concerns relating to violence.

Whilst the game design and mechanics demonstrate a desire to promote an alternative geopolitical perspective, *This War of Mine* also works beyond the digital spaces of the game itself. Realising the influence of games to afford such spatial relational modes of being has encouraged game developers and charitable organisations to connect players directly to matters of social and political concern. In 2015, *TWoM* released new DLC (Downloadable Content) entitled ‘*War Child Charity DLC*’. Here, unique street art pieces made by international artists were added to the game environment which players were able to collect as in-game rewards. To connect with the game’s theme, all profits and donations were given to the charity organisation *War Child* who “protect, educate and stand-up for the rights of children in war” (War Child 2018, online). The donations claimed to help support the lives of 350 children and were used directly in providing child-friendly spaces, psychological support, and non-formal education for Syrian refugees in Iraq and Jordan. These charitable associations, and the ability to donate through purchasing the game, were overwhelmingly [seen positively](#) in the review comments:

[...] Also knowing this game donates to a charity that helps people to go through things like this is even more satisfying than the gameplay itself<sup>26</sup>

Get the War Child Charity DLC. You get to help those in need AND get an achievement for it. It’s a win-win<sup>27</sup>

The power of games for social change is not just through challenging geopolitical discourses but also through connecting the practice of play as an act of humanitarian intervention – through providing monetary donations in relation to present-day geopolitical conflicts.

### ***Player Criticisms of TWoM***

While *TWoM* undoubtedly made significant departures from its peers in the gaming industry by prioritising a more realistic depiction of war, and was received positively by many players, there is some scepticism regarding its persuasive capabilities:

One of my only complaints is that once I beat the game, I felt like I learned the "formula" needed to be successful in this game.<sup>28</sup>

... I simply can't find enjoyment by doing the same things over and over again, in such a slow-paced game while 40% of the time just watching the screen for the day to pass<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note that not all the reviewers suggested *TWoM* offered meaningful (geopolitical) encounters. Reviewers critiqued the progressive elements of the game suggesting that it detracted from the game's 'value' particularly in terms of the cost and duration of gameplay. While the persuasive capacity of the game was made possible through interaction with rules and structures (Bogost 2007), users suggested that their performances and indeed their understandings of the game were instead heavily influenced by their desire to learn what the game wanted from them – in other words, how they could 'win'. The moralistic message became increasingly ambivalent for some of the game's players, with one reviewer suggesting that "*once you are desensitized it becomes a resource mining game*".<sup>30</sup> In addition, questions concerning the entertainment value of the game were a prominent criticism:

This game is just pure frustration. Nothing about it is fun. It's a great concept for a game but the absolute frustration in the day-to-day in this game makes it not worth playing.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, this quote is indicative of a broader trend in the user reviews, which is reminiscent of what is termed 'compassion fatigue' in the humanitarian realm whereby the public become saturated with images and descriptions of human suffering and are suggested to become immune to their emotive impact. The producers suggested the slow temporalities of the game were a means of exemplifying the banality and boredom of conflict, over its more spectacularized renderings expressed more prominently in the commercial military-themed genre of videogames (see Lenoir and Caldwell 2018). According to some reviewers, this numbed them to the ethical and moral encounters that the gameplay presented. However, such encounters were intended to remind players about the repetitive daily struggle of war and draw parallels to the fact that people in these situations in real life are trying to survive by stimulating gameplay encounters and mechanics that reflect this.

## Conclusion

This paper investigates the role of games and play in replicating, encountering, and informing geopolitical cultures. Whilst the field of popular geopolitics continues to expand its focus towards a wide array of popular media, there remains limited exploration of the diversity of oppositional cultural media. Here, I have argued digital games are an expressive and persuasive cultural form, which through play can disturb and critique dominant mediated understandings of geopolitics. As others have shown, digital

games can encourage a novel form of critiquing, and raise public consciousness towards a range of (geo)political issues including environmental conservation (Fletcher 2017), migration (Sou 2018), and incarceration (Moran and Etchegoven 2017). Drawing on the case study example of *TWoM*, this paper has shown how the game critiques the industrial norm of mass-produced military-themed videogames – offering an alternative, grounded viewpoint into the geopolitical consequences of military violence on urban spaces, and the vulnerability of civilians that inhabit them. Yet, it is not just a question of making visible the civilian experience of conflict, but it is through play that users encounter the possibility space and make decisions that evoke moralistic and ethical considerations of the place of violence.

This is not without critiques. There are important questions around the role of profiteering of human suffering and the distancing and desensitising when engaging in these virtual worlds. Yet, considering the critiques in which popular geopolitical scholarship has remained wedded to deconstructing dominant visions of the state (Holland 2012), and how the critical geopolitical enterprise has seldom reached beyond the academy (see Jones and Sage 2010), this paper argues that games encourage new possibilities of communicating a range of socio-spatial inequalities and injustices that emerge around geopolitical issues and militarised violence. Such a concern must be allied to a more critical appreciation around exactly what geopolitical change is made possible through play.

The focus on players makes an important contribution to understanding the actual geopolitical reception of oppositional cultural formats, and how they come to matter in everyday life. Considering these reviews enables further insights into how play is understood and encountered, and its implications on emerging geopolitical attitudes and subjectivities to war, conflict, and violence. By focusing attention on other online communities, in this case *Steam*, it presents additional opportunities to consider wide-ranging geopolitical meaning making through encounters with ‘less mainstream’ popular cultural texts. Reviews are accessible and present popular produced texts which provide varying geopolitical interpretations. This is notwithstanding methodological limitations including global disparities in access to the Internet, overlooking non-English posts, and how such data is stripped from the immediacy of play itself. There remain further questions into the force and longevity of such geopolitical encounters, and the way they continue to inform geopolitical subjectivity beyond the initial encounter. Players’ investment into the game indicates varying levels of sustained encounters, and as Wilson (2017) argues, it is important to consider “how encounters accumulate, to gradually shift relations and behaviour overtime – to both positive and negative effect”. Nevertheless, by turning to the player reviews, the paper shows the complexities in which gameplay, and subsequent meaning, is negotiated, and it is through such encounters in which the geopolitical disruptive power of play resides.

## Notes

1. Steam Review, November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014, 6.2 hours played, 28 people found this review helpful
2. *Steam* has over 8,000 games available and a community of over 184 million active users (Sergey 2014 cited in Lin et al. 2019).
3. It is important to note reviews go beyond the player community and are instrumentalised by game developers themselves, offering insights into improving gameplay, and for future development purposes. Feedback in the form of reviews remains important to the cultural industrial (re)production by which popular understandings of the geopolitical are constantly reworked, collapsing simplistic distinctions between audience and producers.
4. Less than half of the reviews were written in English and other languages included Russian, Polish, and Mandarin.
5. The game was originally released for Microsoft Windows, Apple OS X, Linux, and Android (2015). An expansion pack; *This War of Mine: The Little Ones* was released in 2016 and also became available on PlayStation 4, X-Box One and Nintendo Switch (2018). In addition to the videogame, a cooperative board game was released in 2017, and in 2018 and 2019 a live action role-play game was held in Texas and sponsored by the game developers with proceeds going to the charity *Children in Conflict* (see <http://www.awarofourown.com/>)
6. The ceasefire is randomly declared within the game but usually occurs between day 30 and 50 of gameplay.
7. Steam review, November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 93.2 hours played, 150 people found this review helpful
8. Steam review, May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, 14.5 hours played, 29 people found this review helpful
9. Or often referred to as "triple A" games indicate videogames that have the highest development and promotional budgets.
10. Steam review, February 8<sup>th</sup> 2016, 9.5 hours played, 3 people found this review helpful
11. Steam review, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, 3.7 hours played, 2 people found this review helpful
12. Steam review, December 28<sup>th</sup> 2016, 11.6 hours played, 3 people found this review helpful
13. Steam review, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2014, 6.2 hours played, 15 people found this review helpful
14. Steam review, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2014, 3.9 hours played, 25 people found this review helpful
15. Steam review, January 6<sup>th</sup> 2017, 20.3 hours played, 6 people found this review helpful
16. Steam review, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, 34.3 hours played, 5 people found this review helpful
17. USA, Germany, UK, and Russia are suggested to be the biggest market of the game.
18. Steam review, March 9<sup>th</sup> 2015, 2 hours played, 51 people found this review helpful
19. Steam review, December 16<sup>th</sup> 2017, 45 hours played, 52 people found this review helpful
20. <https://www.pluralsight.com/blog/film-games/pax-south-showcases-war-mine>
21. <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2014/10/25/this-war-of-mine-interview/>
22. Steam review, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2015, 26.8 hours played, 86 people found this review helpful
23. Steam review, March 31<sup>st</sup> 2015, 140.5 hours played, 15 people found this review helpful
24. Steam review, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2017, no data
25. Steam review, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2014, no data
26. Steam review, November 17<sup>th</sup> 2016, 157.3 hours played, 62 people found this review helpful
27. Steam review, December 26<sup>th</sup> 2015, 20.2 hours played, 24 people found this review helpful
28. Steam review, February 17<sup>th</sup> 2018, 44.6 hours played, 4 people found this review helpful
29. Steam review, March 12 2015, 1 hour played, 1,145 people found this review helpful

30. Steam review, August 22 2016, 33.9 hours played, 45 people found this review helpful  
 31. Steam review, July 14 2016, 28.2 hours played, 14 people found this review helpful

## Acknowledgments

I would like to give my gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers and their close reading and critical engagement with the paper. Thanks to all the attendees of the ‘New Frontiers of Political Geography’ event at St John’s College, University of Oxford where an earlier version of the paper was presented. I would also like to thank individually Ian Klinke, Marion Ernwein, Ruth Healey, and Muireann Meehan Speed for reading through the paper in its various iterations and for providing constructive feedback. Finally, thanks to the editor for their support and guidance during the publication process. All errors remain my own.

## Disclosure Statement

The author has no financial affiliation or conflicts of interest to disclose.

## References

- Allen, R. 2017. *America’s digital army: Games at work and war*. US: University of Nebraska Press.
- Ambrosio, T., and J. Ross. 2021. Performing the Cold War through the ‘The best board game on the planet’: The ludic geopolitics of Twilight struggle. *Geopolitics* Advance online publication: 1–33. doi:10.1080/14650045.2021.1951251.
- Anaz, N., and D. Purcell. 2010. Geopolitics of film: Valley of the Wolves—Iraq and its reception in Turkey and beyond. *The Arab World Geographer* 13 (1):34–49. doi:10.5555/arwg.13.1.lh6435231vuu2114.
- Anderson, B., and P. Adey. 2011. Affect and security: Exercising emergency in ‘UK civil contingencies’. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (6):1092–109. doi:10.1068/d141110.
- Anderson, B., and P. Adey. 2012. Governing events and life: ‘Emergency’ in UK civil contingencies. *Political Geography* 31 (1):24–33. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.09.002.
- Benwell, M. C. 2016. Encountering geopolitical pasts in the present: Young people’s everyday engagements with memory in the Falkland Islands. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41 (2):121–33. doi:10.1111/tran.12109.
- Bjørkelo, K. A. 2018. “It feels real to me”: Transgressive realism in This War of Mine. In *Transgression in games and play*, ed. K. Jorgensen and F. Karlsen, 169–85. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Bogost, I. 2007. *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Bogost, I. 2011. *How to do things with videogames*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Burak, A., and L. Parker. 2017. *Power play: How video games can save the world*. New York, US: St Martin’s Press.
- Burrell, K., and K. Hörschelmann. 2019. Perilous journeys: Visualising the racialised “refugee crisis”. *Antipode* 51 (1):45–65. doi:10.1111/anti.12429.

- CAF Charities Aid Foundation. 2017. Giving through gaming from CAF research. Accessed February 1, 2019. <https://www.cafonline.org/about-us/publications/2017-publications/giving-through-gaming>
- Campbell, D. 2007. Geopolitics and visuality: Sighting the Darfur conflict. *Political Geography* 26 (4):357–82. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.11.005.
- Carter, S. R., P. Kirby, and T. Woodyer. 2015. Ludic – or playful – Geopolitics. In *Children, young people and critical geopolitics*, ed. M., . C. Benwell and P. Hopkins, 61–75. UK: Ashgate.
- Cauberghe, V., and P. De Pelsmacker. 2010. Advergaming: The impact of brand prominence and game repetition on brand responses. *Journal of Advertising* 39 (1):5–18. doi:10.2753/JOA0091-3367390101.
- Chan, D. 2009. Dead-in-Iraq: The spatial politics of digital game art activism and the in-game protest. In *Joystick soldiers: The politics of play in military video games*, ed. N. B. Huntemann and M. T. Payne, 288–302. US: Routledge.
- Chin, E., and D. Golding. 2016. Cultivating transcultural understanding through migration-related videogames. *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 26 (1):83–98. doi:10.1177/1326365X16640346.
- Crogan, P. 2011. *Gameplay mode: War, simulation, and technoculture*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Crossa, V. 2013. Play for protest, protest for play: Artisan and vendors' resistance to displacement in Mexico City. *Antipode* 45 (4):826–43. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01043.
- De Smale, S., ., M. J. Kors, and A. M. Sandovar. 2019. The case of This War of Mine: A production studies perspective on moral game design. *Games and Culture* 14 (4):387–409. doi:10.1177/1555412017725996.
- Der Derian, J. 2009. *Virtuous war: Mapping the military-industrial-media-entertainment-network*. New York, US: Routledge.
- Dittmer, J. 2011. American exceptionalism, visual effects, and the post-9/11 cinematic superhero boom. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (1):114–30. doi:10.1068/d4309.
- Dittmer, J. 2014. *Comic book geographies*. Mainz: Coll. Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Dittmer, J., and K. Dodds. 2008. Popular geopolitics past and future: Fandom, identities and audiences. *Geopolitics* 13 (3):437–57. doi:10.1080/14650040802203687.
- Dittmer, J., and N. Gray. 2010. Popular geopolitics 2.0: Towards new methodologies of the everyday. *Geography Compass* 4 (11):1664–77. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00399.
- Dodds, K. 1996. The 1982 Falklands War and a critical geopolitical eye: Steve Bell and the if . . . cartoons. *Political Geography* 15 (6–7):571–92. doi:10.1016/0962-6298(96)00002-9.
- Dodds, K. 2006. Popular geopolitics and audience dispositions: James Bond and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2):116–30. doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2006.00199.
- Dowler, L., and J. Sharp. 2001. A feminist geopolitics? *Space and Polity* 5 (3):165–76. doi:10.1080/13562570120104382.
- Fall, J. J. 2014. Put your body on the line: Autobiographical comics, empathy and plurivocality. In *Comic book geographies*, ed. J. Dittmer, 91–108. Mainz: Coll. Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Flanagan, M. 2009. *Critical play: Radical game design*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press.
- Fletcher, R. 2017. Gaming conservation: Nature 2.0 confronts nature-deficit disorder. *Geoforum* 79:153–62. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.02.009.
- Fogel, S. 2019. This war of mine sells 4.5 Million copies since launch. Accessed July 13, 2021. <https://variety.com/2019/gaming/news/this-war-of-mine-sold-4-5-million-copies-since-launch-1203179576/>

- Fregonese, S. 2017. Affective atmospheres, urban geopolitics and conflict (de) escalation in Beirut. *Political Geography* 61:1–10. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.04.009.
- Gee, J. P. 2003. What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. *Computers in Entertainment (CIE)* 1 (1):20–20. doi:10.1145/950566.950595.
- Gillen, J., and M. Mostafanezhad. 2019. Geopolitical encounters of tourism: A conceptual approach. *Annals of Tourism Research* 75:70–78. doi:10.1016/j.annals.2018.12.015.
- Graham, S. 2006. Cities and the ‘War on Terror’. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30 (2):255–76. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2006.00665.
- Graham, S. 2011. *Cities under siege: The new military urbanism*. UK: Verso Books.
- Gregory, D. 2010. War and peace. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 35 (2):154–86. doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00381.
- Hastie, A. 2021. Postcolonial geopolitics: Reading contemporary geopolitics in Maghrebi-French war films. *Geopolitics* Advance online publication: 1–18. doi:10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426.
- Holland, E. C. 2012. To think and imagine and see differently”: Popular geopolitics, graphic narrative, and Joe Sacco’s “Chechen War, Chechen Women. *Geopolitics* 17 (1):105–29. doi:10.1080/14650045.2011.573512.
- Holland, E. C. 2020. The anti-geopolitical cinematic eye: Documentary film and critical geopolitics. *Geography Compass* 14 (10):1–11. doi:10.1111/gec3.12536.
- Hughes, R. 2007. Through the looking blast: Geopolitics and visual culture. *Geography Compass* 1 (5):976–94. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00052.
- Ingram, A. R. 2011. Making geopolitics otherwise: Artistic interventions in global political space. *The Geographical Journal* 177 (3):218–22. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4959.2011.00415.
- Jones, L., and D. Sage. 2010. New directions in critical geopolitics: An introduction. *GeoJournal* 75 (4):315–25. doi:10.1007/s10708-008-9255-4.
- Katz, C. 2004. *Growing up global: Economic restructuring and children’s everyday lives*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kerr, A. 2006. *The business and culture of digital games: Gamework and gameplay*. London, UK: Sage.
- Klinke, I. 2016. Self-annihilation, nuclear play and west Germany’s compulsion to repeat. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41 (2):109–20. doi:10.1111/tran.12108.
- Koopman, S. 2011. Alter-geopolitics: Other securities are happening. *Geoforum* 42 (3):27–4284. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.01.007.
- Kozol, W. 2015. *Distant wars visible: The ambivalence of witnessing*. Minneapolis, US: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kuus, M. 2019. Political geography I: Agency. *Progress in Human Geography* 43 (1):163–71. doi:10.1177/0309132517734337.
- Lenoir, T., and L. Caldwell. 2018. *The military-entertainment complex*. Canada: Harvard University Press.
- Lin, D., C. P. Bezemer, Y. Zou., and A. E. Hassan. 2019. An empirical study of game reviews on the Steam platform. *Empirical Software Engineering* 24 (1):170–207. doi:10.1007/s10664-018-9627-4.
- MacDonald, F. 2008. Space and the atom: On the popular geopolitics of Cold War rocketry. *Geopolitics* 13 (4):611–34. doi:10.1080/14650040802275479.
- MacDonald, F., R. Hughes., and K. Dodds. 2010. *Observant states: Geopolitics and visual culture*. London, UK: IB Tauris.
- Moran, D., and L. Etchegoyen. 2017. The virtual prison as a digital cultural object: Digital mediation of political opinion in simulation gaming. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 49 (2):448–66. doi:10.1177/0308518X16673366.

- Ó Tuathail, G. 1996. An anti-geopolitical eye: Maggie O’Kane in Bosnia, 1992–93. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3 (2):171–86. doi:10.1080/09663699650021873.
- Payne, M. T. 2014. War bytes: The critique of militainment in Spec Ops: The Line. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31 (4):265–82. doi:10.1080/15295036.2014.881518.
- Power, M. 2007. Digitized virtuosity: Video war games and post-9/11 cyber-deterrence. *Security Dialogue* 38 (2):271–88. doi:10.1177/0967010607078552.
- Preston, D. 2015. Interview: Pawel Miechowski of this war of mine & 11 bit studios. Accessed October 11, 2018. <http://outermode.com/interview-pawel-miechowski-this-war-of-mine-11-bit-studios>
- Quandt, T., H. Grueninger., and J. Wimmer. 2009. The gray haired gaming generation: Findings from an explorative interview study on older computer gamers. *Games and Culture* 4 (1):27–46. doi:10.1177/1555412008325480.
- Radway, J. A. 2009 [1984]. *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill, US: University of North Carolina Press.
- Ridanpää, J. 2014. ‘Humour is serious’ as a geopolitical speech act: IMDb film reviews of Sacha Baron Cohen’s The Dictator. *Geopolitics* 19 (1):140–60. doi:10.1080/14650045.2013.829819.
- Robinson, N. 2012. Videogames, persuasion and the war on terror: Escaping or embedding the military-entertainment complex? *Political Studies* 60 (3):504–22. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2011.00923.
- Robinson, N. 2015. Have you won the war on terror? Military videogames and the state of American exceptionalism. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43 (2):450–70. doi:10.1177/0305829814557557.
- Routledge, P. 2017. *Space invaders: Radical geographies of protest*. London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Routledge, P. 2019. Dawn of the debt: Tactical performance, humour and the practice of alter-geopolitics. *Political Geography* 68:146–53. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.09.010.
- Roy, G. 2016. This war of mine: Human survival and the ethics of care. Accessed July 13, 2021. <https://www.playthepast.org/?p=5618>
- Sabin, P. 2012. *Simulating war: Studying conflict through simulation games*. US: A&C Black.
- Saklofske, J., A. Arbuckle, and J. Bath, eds. 2019. *Feminist war games? Mechanisms of war, Feminist values, and interventional games*. UK: Routledge.
- Salter, M. B. 2011. The geographical imaginations of video games: Diplomacy, civilization, America’s army and grand theft auto IV. *Geopolitics* 16 (2):359–88. doi:10.1080/14650045.2010.538875.
- Saunders, R. A. 2019. (Profitable) imaginaries of black power: The popular and political geographies of Black Panther. *Political Geography* 69:139–49. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.12.010.
- Schleiner, A. M. 2017. *The player’s power to change the game*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Shepard, B. 2012. *Play, creativity, and social movements: If I can’t dance, it’s not my revolution*. UK: Routledge.
- Shively, J. 1992. Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of western films among American Indians and Anglos. *American Sociological Review* 57 (6):725–34. doi:10.2307/2096119.
- Shtern, M., and H. Yacobi. 2019. The urban geopolitics of neighboring: Conflict, encounter and class in Jerusalem’s settlement/neighborhood. *Urban Geography* 40 (4):467–87. doi:10.1080/02723638.2018.1500251.
- Sicart, M. 2011. *The ethics of computer games*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Sicart, M. 2014. *Play matters*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Šisler, V. 2008. Digital Arabs: Representation in video games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11 (2):203–20. doi:10.1177/1367549407088333.

- Sou, G. 2018. Trivial pursuits? Serious (video) games and the media representation of refugees. *Third World Quarterly* 39 (3):510–26. doi:10.1080/01436597.2017.1401923.
- Stahl, R. 2010. *Militainment, Inc.: War, media, and popular culture*. UK: Routledge.
- Tyner, J., and S. Henkin. 2015. Feminist geopolitics, everyday death, and the emotional geographies of Dang Thuy Tram. *Gender, Place & Culture* 22 (2):288–303. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2013.879109.
- Warr, P. 2014. Interview: Warzone survival in This War of Mine: A war game with a civilian focus. Accessed July 9, 2021. <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/this-war-of-mine-interview>
- Williams, J., and G. A. Boyce. 2013. Fear, loathing and the everyday geopolitics of encounter in the Arizona borderlands. *Geopolitics* 18 (4):895–916. doi:10.1080/14650045.2013.780035.
- Williams, J., and V. Massaro. 2013. Feminist geopolitics: Unpacking (in) security, animating social change. *Geopolitics* 18 (4):751–58. doi:10.1080/14650045.2013.816842.
- Wilson, H. F. 2017. On geography and encounter: Bodies, borders, and difference. *Progress in Human Geography* 41 (4):451–71. doi:10.1177/0309132516645958.
- Wilson, H. F., and J. Darling. 2016. *Encountering the city*. UK: Routledge.
- Woodyer, T. 2012. Ludic geographies: Not merely child's play. *Geography Compass* 6 (6):313–26. doi:10.1111/j.1749-8198.2012.00477.
- Woodyer, T., and S. Carter. 2020. Domesticating the geopolitical: Rethinking popular geopolitics through play. *Geopolitics* 25 (5):1050–74. doi:10.1080/14650045.2018.1527769.
- Woon, C. Y. 2014. Precarious geopolitics and the possibilities of nonviolence. *Progress in Human Geography* 38 (5):654–70. doi:10.1177/0309132513501403.
- Yarwood, R. 2015. Miniaturisation and the representation of military geographies in recreational wargaming. *Social & Cultural Geography* 16 (6):654–74. doi:10.1080/14649365.2014.1001430.