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**Melanie Swalwell's Paper was delivered at *Plaything*;**

**Body Count: Chaired by David Cranswick.**

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This panel explores the relationship between war and digital games, moving beyond the cliches evolving from public debate about violent content in games and it's contribution to aggressive behaviour.

**Captain Simon Geddes (Aus)**

*Instructional strategies for scenario based eLearning software.*

**Melanie Swalwell (Aus)**

*This isn't a computer game you know! Revisiting the computer games/televised war analogy.*

**Jason Wilson (Aus)**

*Videophones and America's Army: games and/of/for war?*

# **“This isn’t a computer game you know!”**

## **Revisiting the computer games/televised war analogy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

During the Gulf War of 1991, the television coverage was frequently observed to be ‘just like a video game’. This analogy primarily derived from the specific, ‘bombs-eye’ perspective of camera-equipped weapons, approaching their targets. The troubling nature of this coverage was said to derive from the viewer’s sense of direct involvement: the argument was that viewers were able to marvel at the ‘high tech’ nature of the weapons, at a remove from the bloody reality on the ground. These criticisms of a vicarious aesthetic (dis)engagement were taken to also characterise the playing of computer games. At a time when we have once again been confronted by TV coverage of war in the Gulf, this paper revisits the TV war/computer games nexus, informed by research on players’ engagements with games. It argues that comparisons between televised war and games have little to offer to those concerned with theorising games, at least in their current form. Research with players of games is, however, able to provide insights useful for theorising the fraughtness of watching televised war. Considered in this way, the analogy can be revealing. Drawing on previous research on players’ aesthetic engagements with games, as well as a range of other sources, this paper re-considers televisual war spectatorship, in terms of the figures of proximity/distance; here and there; negotiations between different materialities and realities; and virtuality. It proposes these figures as bases around which a more productive dialogue on computer games and televisual war might be conducted.

### **Keywords**

War, distance, spectacle, empathy, engagement.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Being “glued” to the screen for extended periods of time is an association that is commonly made with playing computer games. But in this immediate post-war period, these criteria describe perhaps even more people’s experiences watching televised war than playing computer games. I find myself pondering the way in which these two activities – watching television and playing digital games – are conflated in the claim that watching televised war is “just like playing a video game”. Although up to this point comparisons between TV and computer games have not been particularly useful, this claim suggests that further consideration of the similarities in audience experiences of the two media is warranted. In an attempt to rethink this stereotypical and (usually) quite unhelpful analogy about war, this paper revisits some of the powerful moments from the televisual coverage of the latest war in Iraq, reading

these through a number of themes developed in previous research with computer gamers on the nature of their engagements in and with games [24].

As a number of theorists have noted, the associations between war and games have a long history. Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, two classic theorists of play and games, both consider the relation with war in some detail, with Caillois advancing the intriguing claim that "...tournaments are games, wars are not" [14, 5]. However, as my concern is with more recent comparisons between war and games, specifically televised war and digital games, I will not rehearse the historical configurations between play, games, and war. Instead, I will begin by noting the range of ways in which the comparison is drawn at the present time, before discussing the moment when this idea – of televisual war as a video game – had its most famous outing.

## **THE ANALOGY**

Even before the 2003 Gulf War began, video or computer games were being invoked by commentators as that against which war's seriousness could be defined. Three brief examples illustrate this. In February 2003, an article by George Monbiot, a syndicated British columnist, invoked video games as a metaphor for apathy about the impending war. In his assessment, the reason why many Britons were not prepared to act to stop the war was because, "New military technology has removed the need for a draft, so the otherwise unengaged young men who might have become the core of the resistance movement are left to blast imaginary enemies on their Gameboys" [19]. Australian Federal Labour M.P. Craig Emerson's speech to Parliament on the 19th March continued this theme, of war being treated with insufficient seriousness, in this case by the Murdoch press. He said "I despise the treatment of this war by American citizen Rupert Murdoch, his editors and their journalists. They portray it as a video game". And, "It is not a video game...They are callously desensitising the Australian people and our children to the horrors and grotesqueness of war" [8]. Finally, one week into the fighting, members of the public added their voices to the "this is not a game" chorus. Jamie Brown commented on the censorship of news reporting:

I think it is essential to show the real carnage of war. We all live in The Matrix. We are a generation of gamers cut off from reality...[and] it's so easy to sit in our comfortable armchairs and pontificate about the rights and wrongs of war and never have to see the messy human dimension, the blood, the guts, the decapitations.

In a similar vein, Adam Smith argued that,

The Media should publish the shocking pictures because they are the results of this war that John Howard has dragged us into. It is time to face the harsh reality. Otherwise people still think it is a video game. The blood is real in this game. [3]

What is interesting about these comments is that all situate the practice of playing games in terms of popular stereotypes: players are deemed to be apathetic, disinterested in what is going on in the "real world" (Monbiot); games are said to be trivial and are linked with desensitisation (Emerson); and invoked as a metaphor for being "cut off from reality", "liv[ing] in the Matrix" (Brown, Smith).

Television, itself a medium often thought to be lacking in seriousness, furnishes its own examples of inappropriate games being played with war. I was particularly interested to read Raymond Williams' 1982 indictment of the Falklands War coverage in which he touches on a number of the arguments that Baudrillard would later develop. As he writes, "can any of us be

sure there is no television director waiting to say ‘Cue Harrier,’ ‘Cue Marines?’” Williams singles out the “studio war-games” for particular criticism, not just the “model of the islands with ships and planes on stalks surrounding it”, but the televisional professionals who are “so deeply integrated with the out-of-action military professionals they have been interviewing that it felt like suddenly entering another country”. For Williams, this is all evidence of a “culture of distance...at times reaching its morbid last phase, in the culture of alienation” [27].

The specific comparison of TV coverage of war to video games, of course, dates from the first Gulf War of 1991. The claim that the television war coverage *looked* – or *was* – just like a video game derived from the particular footage provided by the military and broadcast on news channels during that war, most especially the footage relayed from cameras aboard so-called smart bombs, which enabled viewers to “ride” the weapon to its point of detonation. Frances Dyson and Allen Feldman provide thoughtful accounts of this coverage. Dyson reflects on the cleanliness of this “hi-tech”, “bloodless war”, and the media/public’s conflicted desires for virtual reality, evident in their reactions to the “‘Nintendo’-like weaponry”. She describes the footage of the smart bomb trajectory which guided the disembodied gaze, noting that “it soon became obvious from public reaction that the spectacle was doubled-edged. The image and maneuver it represented were almost ‘too clean,’...[with] the unappealing simplicity of a video game” [7]. Feldman, meanwhile, focuses on the electronic disappearance of Arab bodies, writing,

The eulogized smartbombs were prosthetic devices that extended our participant observation in the video occlusion of absented Iraqi bodies. What were these celebrated mechanisms but airborne televisions, visualizing automata, that were hurled down upon the enemy creating his conditions of non-visibility? Their broadcast images functioned as electronic simulacra that were injected into the collective nervous system of the audience as antibodies that inured the viewer from realizing the human-material consequences of the war. Visual mastery of the campaign pushed all other sensory dimensions outside the perceptual terms of reference. Culturally biased narrations, abetted by information technology historically molded to normative concepts of sensory truth, precluded any scream of pain, any stench of corpse from visiting the American living room. [9]

Dyson’s and Feldman’s accounts summarise the substance of objections to this footage: that it presented a humanly impossible perspective, which in turn provided viewers with feelings of mastery; and that it was thoroughly detached from the reality of war on the ground, all qualities which have been alleged to also characterise computer games. This Gulf War footage was disturbing, and these arguments are legitimate ones that should concern us. However, the account of watching spectacularised war that has arisen from these comparisons is limited, as Dyson’s reference to viewers responding negatively to the “simplicity” of the coverage begins to suggest. What these arguments articulate is an account of war as phantasmagoria, wherein audiences just enjoy the spectacle from a distance – the “fireworks over Baghdad” – unaware (or uncaring) of any other dimension. While this is one response to television footage of war, it does not exhaust the range of responses and resonances amongst individual viewers. There are other possible modes of engagement and response which in general this account neglects to even gesture toward, and which have been foregrounded in the coverage of the 2003 Iraq War.

If these are serious limitations, then the extension of this particular mode of (dis)engagement to digital games is highly problematic, and appears to have been based on, and in turn given rise to, disparaging and incorrect assumptions about what it is to play a computer game. The analogy to which this particular war footage gave rise has now become so clichéd that, mixed with other pathological accounts of computer gaming, an uninvolved detachment has come to be accepted as true of computer gaming in general (as the above comments indicate). For

extended sessions of the coverage of this war, I do not believe that this account can adequately explain the types of stories, images and sounds we have recently experienced via our TV screens, or the disturbing affects they have generated in viewers.<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that I revisit it now, while the event is still close.

I acknowledge that there has been a “gamey” approach taken to this war, particularly (though not exclusively) by the commercial networks who have treated it as a big adventure, complete with animated graphics of maps and battles and movements of military personnel, weapons and the like. But does this, or the presence of, for instance, night vision green television footage [1], really make watching the coverage of this war just like playing a computer game? On these grounds, the comparison seems superficial at best. However, the testimony of an ex-Iraqi soldier (now living in Australia) on a current affairs show at the beginning of the war prompted me to think that the comparison was at least worth considering, beyond these limited visual similarities. This man agreed with his interviewer that having been there last time, actually involved in the 1991 Gulf War, it was hard for him to watch the war on TV “as if it were a video game,” a comment which both bothered and intrigued me. Though his comment seemed to once again invoke the games metaphor in a simplistic way, it also pointed beyond it to a different possibility: this man’s (no doubt highly visceral) memories of war were being stirred by the TV coverage, pointing to a decidedly non-spectacular mode of viewing and involvement, suggesting other similarities to computer games engagements. Rather than simply argue in the negative, then, that televisual war is *not* like a computer game, I find there is value in turning the proposition around, approaching it from the direction of computer gaming. This requires thinking about games engagements in greater complexity than is often the case, as well as going beyond (and temporarily staying the temptation to pronounce on), the games industry’s implication in the military-industrial-entertainment complex. Thinking through the similarities between the virtual environments of games and those of television introduces a greater degree of nuance to conceptions of gameplay and televisual spectatorship of war. This paper takes four main figures that I’ve developed and theorised from qualitative research on gaming: distance/proximity; here and there; the negotiations between different materiality and reality contexts that are moved through; and virtuality [24]. Reversing the usual priorities, I ask whether there are things about the ways that players engage with games that can shed light on what this ex-soldier (and other viewers) felt, while watching TV coverage of this war?

The TV coverage of this war has been quite different to that of the 1991 Gulf War. The standout moments in the reporting of this war, at least for this viewer, included the TV report by the British news crew who captured the “friendly fire” incident they were involved in on tape, when the military convoy they were travelling in was bombed by U.S. planes. Beginning seconds after the impact, the cameraman filmed much of the shocking incident, with his (?) blood remaining on the lens for some time, as the dazed crew searched for their Iraqi translator, who later died. There was the remarkable voice report by Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) journalist Eric Campbell, after he was injured in a suicide bombing in the Kurdish controlled zone in Northern Iraq, an attack in which his cameraman, Paul Moran, died. There were stories of village reunions, as an Iraqi exile, turned U.S. interpreter, returned to his village to be met with great emotion. There were stories of hospitals not being able to cope with the wounded, and then being looted, and later of children with typhoid with little hope of receiving effective treatment in those hospitals. There was a story which featured relatives of the disappeared, who believed they could hear voices from an underground prison complex which could not initially be accessed, but which it was feared (and hoped) contained prisoners of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Then there was the incredible footage captured by the “embedded” ABC crew (containing reporter Geoff Thompson) of nervous U.S. marines who, thinking they were under fire, emptied their automatic weapons into a car that came too close; as it transpired, this car had been carrying three civilians, who had no chance of surviving the bullets sprayed at them. On various current affairs shows, more personal stories were also aired, such as that of the

his family when an American missile struck their house on the outskirts of Baghdad [10]. While I would concur with media watcher David Marr's assessment that the reporting of this war has, in general, been "amazingly bad", these were all incredibly moving accounts, moments which aroused a mixture of emotions – horror, shock, pathos, disbelief, and various empathic resonances – in me and others with whom I've spoken [18].

## **DISTANCE/PROXIMITY**

While everyone will have had a different war, I want to suggest that these moments and stories are significant because, in some way, each of them puts spectators *there*, in the picture. Even though Iraq is geographically distant, there are a number of senses in which this war took place at close proximity for viewers. It is television's "nature" to enable such a seeing at a distance, as Samuel Weber has noted. Weber also notes that "considerations of space have received less attention in English-language discussions of television than has the dimension of time". Like film and photography, television is a medium that overcomes distance and separation, but unlike these other media, television combines this with "the presentness associated with sense perception". Television then does not so much transmit images or representations, Weber argues, as "*the semblance of presentation as such*, understood as the power not just to see and to hear but *to place before us*," something which it shares with computer games [26]. As well as television's own qualities, specific techniques and circumstances have contributed to make the distant seem proximate, resonating with the (complex and negotiated) sense of "being there" that gamers have described to me. Think of those first person shots from the top of moving tanks, and the way that they move us, the viewers, through the desert landscape, even as we sit at home in our loungerooms. Players of first or third person perspective games will recognise the sense of being moved through space, though the pronounced shakiness of the camera work in the aforementioned "friendly fire" report told of a chaos and urgency beyond that of any game. Viewers may also have been "touched" and "drawn closer" as a particularly affecting story grabbed them, taking them out of their everyday familiar surrounds and putting them there, with family members standing around the entrance to underground cells wondering at the fate of their loved ones, for instance.

In Raymond Williams' terms, we could say that this war has been a "close-up war": comparing the television coverage of the conflict in the Falklands to that of the Vietnam War, he argued that the latter was "a close-up war: physically distant on the earth, but physically close in the lens" [27]. I would add that this war has not *just* been brought close by lenses, but also by the microphone, the mobile phone, the satellite phone, radio, the net and the blog, all technologies which have brought information about this war *home* to us, in both senses. Eric Campbell's remarkable voice report of the suicide bombing he survived in Northern Iraq shows that this experience of closeness is not just a visual phenomenon: Campbell, the professional reporter, begins recounting the story as a journalist would, on a line direct to an ABC TV anchor. Mid sentence, his voice cracks, there is silence, before he chokes back something which seems to turn into a strangled laugh-cry. "Sorry", he says, taking a breath and attempting to regain his composure, launching back into the story, his voice again wavering and trailing off. The unmissable affect in his voice – the disbelief, the shock talking – moved me, and, befitting the nature of the attack, put me there, up close and in the picture as it were [6]. Indeed, the suicide bomber is an expression of proximity – the one who comes too close – challenging the well-equipped U.S. military's preference for war at a distance.

What I'm describing is an *empathic* mode of TV spectatorship, where empathy's projective qualities are activated. Viewers, in a sense, cross a threshold that puts them on the other side of the interface [2, 4, 25, 24]. This movement into the picture is both metaphorical and, in a sense, literal [23]. Like playing a computer game, watching the war coverage has been a (partially) immersive television experience, in which viewers are both faraway and very close to people telling their stories or experiencing the action onscreen. In these ways, watching television can

be thought of as akin to entering a virtual environment, of which games are one of the most readily accessible forms. Writing about artist's early experiments with live TV, Kathy Rae Huffman describes television in just such spatial terms, and viewers' involvement as physical involvement. Such experiments, she says, were about "creating electronic territory and involving the viewer in it as a physical entity". As such, these TV performances were direct predecessors to contemporary interactive multimedia art and immersive technology, in that they facilitated a kind of "being together in electronic space". Furthermore, Huffman notes, both immersive and interactive art and TV art work with an "expanded redefinition of the virtual as real", an interest in the physical properties of electronic data space [13]. Networked games continue a number of these themes, and so also provide useful models for thinking about questions such as: where are we positioned when we are "in" a virtual environment?; and why and how are we affected by what happens in such environments?

A final example of the proximity/distance of the war coverage is one that is, from the start, closer to home. A number of news stories have reflected on the significance of this war for Australia's Iraqi and Kurdish communities, such as the story I mentioned by the Special Broadcasting Service's (SBS) *Insight* programme on the Sydney Mendaen community's mourning for family members in Iraq. The story opens with Esselle Hattom, a Mendaen man, travelling to a wake in Sydney. He's recently learnt that thirty-five members of his community have been killed in Iraq. The camera cuts to Khalid El Kuhaili. The subtitles tell us what he is saying, but his face and demeanour also clearly communicate his immense grief. "It was a disaster. A catastrophe. I feel very sad. I'm in pain. All my family is gone". Next, the narrator tells us,

According to Mandaen custom, it is forbidden to weep for the dead, but for Khalid El Kuhaili, it's hard. It's less than 24 hours since he learned that 17 members of his family are dead, killed by an American missile that hit their residential compound at El-Sawira in the outskirts of Baghdad.

We see the man who has lost most of his family fighting back the tears, before listing them; each family member he speaks brings him great pain: "My brother and his wife, and their five children. My niece, her husband and their four children. My aunt and three of my cousins". We next learn that he had tried to get them all out, to bring them to Australia. And that he fears for those who are left.

I wish...I still have one brother there, my mother and my sister. I wish they were here with me. I wish all our people were. Saddam is gone, but there are those who are worse. The Shi'ites and the Sunnis will harm us. Everyone will. Infidels. They regard us as infidels. Infidels. [10]

Khalid El Kuhaili's grief is so unfathomable – to lose so many family members all at once – that it resonates, evokes responses. I feel myself reach out responsively. My response seems to bring me closer to this virtual stranger. If, as Weber says, television does not overcome separation and distance but renders them invisible, then this encounter seems the affective equivalent; it is so immediate and his grief so fresh. The reporting does not sensationalise his grief, presenting it as spectacle to be consumed in an exploitative way; rather it seems to invite, as well as problematise, empathic response. It stages a meeting with *another*, a virtual face to face perhaps, in which, as Alphonso Lingis writes, "The otherness of the other is envisaged and not viewed, responded to and not represented. The encounter with the other is a being affected by him or her" [16]. I feel for Khalid El Kuhaili; it is all I can do at that moment in time. This is not a vicariousness; it is empathy. His grief is not my grief, yet I share something of it. In Levinassian terms, this raises questions regarding the responsibility implicit in this respons-

## HERE AND THERE

In hearing and watching these war stories (I project myself so that) I am *there*, experiencing it directly. But I'm also still *here*, in domestic space. Perhaps it is not quite the same as in a game, where players often describe the game space as "here", so immediately experienced and inhabited is it. But, like them, I am in a sense proximate *and* distant; both here and there. Isn't it because the virtual is experienced directly that the ex-Iraqi soldier cannot bear to watch the war coverage on TV, because, like me, a part of him finds himself there? How much stronger the familiarity must make it for him, who has actually been there and lived it, fighting the last Gulf war. I accept that for this man, watching the war on TV *would* bear some similarities to playing a computer game, in that television presents the elsewhere of Iraq with an immediacy, a "hereness" that resembles player's reports of the way they experience the virtual spaces of games.

In another example, artist and designer Jeff Gates blogged about his own sense of "being there" as well as "here", as CNN embedded reporter Walter Rodgers and his film crew captured the U.S. 7th Cavalry tending to a wounded Iraqi soldier:

I was there. Yet I was simultaneously walking on a treadmill at my gym (ironically in the basement of the US Department of Justice). I am no longer in awe of moments like these...

...In fact, I can hardly watch these visual diaries from the front. I can't make myself participate, to be immersed in their lives [exactly whose lives, he doesn't say]. This is not an anti-war statement. The experience simply leaves me feeling shallow as I realize the dissociative nature of my reactions. When viewing these reports in a group, as I was on Friday, I was not only attending to the wounded soldier but was noticing everyone watching in the gym. As soon as the report was over, we all returned to our exercises without comment. [11]

What Gates describes is not a thrilling experience of "being there". Dissociation entails the splitting off of an aspect of a person, for instance in situations where remaining present would be too traumatic. For gamers and some viewers of television, this is perhaps better expressed as a multiplication, given that both sites are simultaneously able to work on them. Gates clearly finds this experience an unsettling one. In labelling his reactions "dissociative" and "shallow", his account reminds me of Roger Caillois' pathologising interpretation of mimetic "spacing out": invoking schizophrenia, Caillois answers the question "where are you?" with the response "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself" [4]. And although Caillois later distanced himself from this earlier work, his treatment remains significant, particularly in relation to computer gaming, where his view would likely still find supporters [5].

## NEGOTIATIONS

Gates' reactions are not readily comprehensible to him because they are complex. Feelings of dissociation are entirely understandable, though, when one is simultaneously in or across multiple locations, both here and there. At a time when entering virtual environments is fast becoming commonplace, the feelings associated may come to seem natural before too long. As Margaret Morse observes, operating in virtual environments can involve "crossing through a variety of reality statuses...[as well as across] different degrees of materiality" [21]. Morse's schema is one that I find valuable for exploring the confluences and divergences between the different materiality and reality statuses that gamers move through in the course of play. The figure here is one of *negotiation* as users toggle between the virtual and the material, enjoying the tensions between these different zones. Thinking about VR, Morse writes that it is the *links*

the same is true of many computer games [20]. Indeed, much of the pleasure of gaming for the players with whom I spoke derived from the fact that “you can do things that you can’t do in real life”; in-game actions were, for them, able to be experienced as improvisational and experimental.

Negotiation would seem to be a useful figure for understanding the paradoxical immediacy of experiences across multiple zones which television viewers, like gamers, can be exposed to. However, Gates’ discomfort with his reactions highlights an important difference between games and television negotiations. Television viewing of war is associated with a fraughtness that is absent in playing games. Without exception, the players whom I interviewed reported enjoying the possibilities that negotiating different realms provided. Players reported that playing games eased their stress levels, whereas the gap between being on a treadmill and “being there” clearly generates stress for Gates. The irreconcilability of these positions perhaps explains his reluctance to watch at all: the participant-observer, like the gamer, is not wholly in one space *or* the other, but experiences the friction of the both/and. Different realities overlap and intertwine, but they don’t resolve or cohere into anything resembling a unity. This is made worse by the knowledge that, even in a digital age, the images on TV – for instance, of the dead and grief stricken – more or less reflect what is happening. The war is not a (total) simulation: while it remains important to recognise its constructedness, this clearly does not lessen the high human cost that has been demanded. Moreover, there is little that viewers can do to affect what is happening on the ground *there*, at the moment they watch. This is the paucity of round-the-clock emergency television news schedules: though they provide a sense of immediacy, of being up to date and directly “in touch”, they still leave viewers powerless to effect much change. At least within the confines of a game, players know how to respond. The performative element, discounted by some as insignificant, at least provides players of a game with a model for expected response (plus, there is something in *doing* which is absent in just watching). Compared to the gamer, the involved television viewer has few opportunities to *do* anything to ease the suffering of war, at least not then and there.

## VIRTUALITY

The anything-could-happen, open quality of the virtual also makes it difficult to watch coverage of TV war. Once again, though, war activates a much heavier and pervasive sense of the virtual than do games; typically, players reported *enjoying* the openness of gameplay, the “what if?” of play featuring as an important pleasure of playing computer games. By contrast, if Fairfax correspondent Paul McGeough’s reflections are any indication, the openness of war – its unpredictability and essential fluidity – affects those who report on it as well as those who watch it. By Day 3 of the war, McGeough diarised that he and other foreign journalists in Baghdad were afflicted by “a near overpowering sense of what might happen now”, something which many viewers of the war coverage could probably relate to [17].

Significantly, this almost overwhelming sense of what *could* eventuate from this conflict was being clearly articulated by means of a computer game, well before the start of the invasion. From November 2002, Dermot O’Connor’s Flash game *Gulf War 2*, available for download from the internet, modeled with economy and elegance something of the volatility and the knock-on effects that could conceivably follow a U.S. lead invasion of Iraq [22]. Drawing inspiration from Sid Meier’s *Civilisation II*, O’Connor’s game manages to convey something of the geo-political complexity and the multiple wildcard factors that continue to feed into this conflict. It conveys in a way that perhaps only a game is able to, the inexorable process that a few wrong moves would set in train (“all it would take...”), demonstrating how it is possible for a game to do something other than just make a spectacle out of war, as mainstream discourse on war and games would seem to suggest. On the contrary, as O’Connor explained to me, “first you laugh and then you stop laughing and then it becomes disturbing.” Writing with the benefit of hindsight some four months after George W. Bush declared major combat operations over, it is clear that

this volatility has not abated. The end of the war was not, and could not have been, scripted, despite the confidence expressed by military media people. So many of the post-war complications that it was feared would develop have eventuated that the early sense of foreboding many felt regarding this military adventurism has been well and truly justified.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

On their own, each of these four factors (distance/proximity; here and there; tensions and negotiations; and virtuality) would be enough to produce discomfort or anxiety. Combined, they are a potent mix. At times, watching this war on TV did get to be *too much*, and this excess didn't (necessarily) anaesthetise viewers. What happens during these moments? What do viewers do with their responses? Some, it would seem, make a conscious decision to withdraw. My doctor described that this was one of his responses: he admitted that he simply couldn't read any more reports of the "poor bastards" trying to work in the hospitals in Baghdad. For him, this "abstract", "informational" war was all too imaginable and distressing. He made a conscious decision to disengage, in order to get some peace and help establish some "perspective" again. Significantly, his decision to withdraw and not read or watch any further reports resulted not from desensitisation, but from precisely the type of engagement I have been discussing; it was the result of his involvement in, and responsiveness to, human stories of people struggling to get by.

While the confluence of war and games is a sensitive subject, inverting the stereotypical relation between televised war and digital games is, I contend, a useful strategy. I will conclude by suggesting three ways in which it is useful. First, reversing the direction of analysis and comparing television to digital games is useful as a defamiliarising strategy. Rather than the more usual process of comparing newer media to older media to see what insights can be borrowed or supplanted (a technique that digital games have been subjected to *ad nauseum*), analysis performed in the opposite direction seems remarkably fresh. Second, games are useful for reflecting on the televisual spectatorship of war because gaming itself is such an involved, visceral activity. The strongly suggestive resonances between Huffman's descriptions of early artistic experiments with television and the more contemporary approaches to considering (games as) virtual environments I think made this point, suggesting not just a number of fruitful avenues for thinking further about the experiential and physical qualities of virtual spaces, but also suggesting why watching televisual coverage of war is so discomforting. Finally, moving beyond questions of method, it is clear that both digital gaming and television spectatorship can furnish examples of involved participation and empathic responsiveness which challenge notions of (necessarily) distanced and disengaged subjects of these media. In this short paper, I am unable to do justice to the range, complexity, or significance of these engagements. What is clear is that other models of engagement need to be developed for media such as television and digital games, that combine aspects of both spectacle and participation.

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<sup>i</sup> This goes to broader concerns in my research, regarding sensory-aesthetic relations with technology. I am particularly interested in the work of Walter Benjamin (and his commentators) on shock, anaesthetics, and the numbing and alienation of the senses in relation to modern technology. Benjamin's treatment of these questions is nuanced in that he is not just concerned with numbing, but supplements insights on the atrophy of experience with an interest in the innervation of sensory experience, as Miriam Hansen observes [12].