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The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, procedural rhetoric and the military-entertainment complex: two case studies from the War on Terror.

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Abstract

This article explores how the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea is represented in video games developed and played during the height of the War on Terror. Drawing on Šisler (2008) and Robinson's (2012; 2015) work on video game rhetoric, US exceptionalism and visual typifications of Middle Eastern countries, the paper will explore two case studies *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* (2005) and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2* (2004) using Bogost's concept of 'procedural rhetoric' (2008; 2010) to unpack and detail the visual signifiers and gameplay mechanics of these titles in comparison with other work on games set in 'Axis of Evil' countries. The paper will conclude by situating the games within the military-entertainment complex more broadly (here focusing on film), arguing that North Korea is ultimately framed paradoxically in video games, a country that is viewed on the one hand as a threat to world peace and on the other as an absurdist dictatorship.

This article explores how the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (henceforth North Korea) is depicted in video games developed and played during the height of the War on Terror (WoT). The paper will initially consider the significance of popular culture before exploring the idea of the 'military-entertainment complex'. Following this, and drawing on Šisler (2008) and Robinson's (2012; 2015) work on video game rhetoric, US exceptionalism and visual typifications of Middle Eastern countries, the paper will use content analysis to detail two case studies *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* (2005) and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2* (2004) – *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2* – using Bogost's concept of 'procedural rhetoric' (2008; 2010) to unpack and detail the visual signifiers and gameplay mechanics of these titles so as to highlight the similarities and differences between games set in, or featuring, countries identified at the time as being part of the 'Axis of Evil'. The paper will conclude by arguing that North Korea is framed in video games as strong *and* weak, a paradoxical position which challenges a straightforward binary interpretation and suggests parallels with other popular cultural representations of the country from the same time, in this case in film. Simply put, this paper will focus on games which feature militaristic narratives and problematize the representation of North Korea in a way akin to Šisler's (2008) and Robinson's (2012; 2015) work on 'digital Arabs' and depictions of the Middle East in the early 2000s respectively: how might their ideas play out with regards to North Korea? The analytical insights that Šisler, Robinson and others have applied to video games featuring the Middle East will be explored to unpack the similarities and differences between their work and titles where North Korea is the focal point.

It is important to highlight why engaging with video games in relation to international affairs might be a worthwhile endeavour. As Grayson, Davies and Philpott (2009) argue, popular culture is a space that facilitates, develops and challenges ideological constructions

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and power dynamics and 'all of these elements contribute to a terrain of 'exchange, 'negotiation', 'resistance' and 'incorporation' where the construction of the political and the type of politics it engenders are formed' (155-6). In essence, popular culture enables and engenders debate, and not in a way that can be '…reduced to a superstructure that reflects a political base [as] visual and representation imaginaries [but] sites where politics and political subjectivity are constituted' (157). Video games as one manifestation of popular culture are therefore vital in terms of understanding the underpinning of narratives about the social world, a point also advanced by Robinson in relation to fictionalized military intervention (2015).

Before exploring the development of the military-entertainment complex it is worth thinking through the ways in which video games construct meaning and represent different political narratives and ideologies. Following Robinson (2012), the approach utilized in this paper conforms to Bogost's (2008) view of games as 'deliberate expressions of particular perspectives' (p. 119) that are realised through the 'possibility space' created by different constraints such as the game environment and the game narrative: this is called 'procedural rhetoric' (see also Bogost 2010, Seiffert and Northaft 2015). Rather than a focus on narrative or play as separate entities (for a more detailed consideration of these arguments, see Walther, 2003; Simons, 2007; Spokes, 2017) Bogost argues that *procedures* play an important role in experiencing, comprehending and processing information related to gameworlds. He explains the persuasive power of games as follows:

> Video games can […] disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and
> beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term
> social change. I believe that this power is not equivalent to the content
> of video games, as the serious games community claims. Rather, this

power lies in the very way video games mount claims through

procedural rhetorics. Thus, all kinds of video games […] possess the

power to mount equally meaningful expression (2010: ix)

How does procedural rhetoric operate? Bogost (2008: 122-4) sees video games as spaces where procedural models of imagined – and real – systems are developed to impose particular rules and processes for engagement. Through these procedural models, games reflect specific aspects of our experience of the world, be they material, social or cultural. Video games are not simply empty vessels of meaningless content but are instead spaces that make claims about the world which might include, pertinent to the two cases studies in this paper, ideology (p. 125-128) especially in relation to 'the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political or cultural behavior (p. 128)'. Video games reflect real-world actions, including the ideological biases of the developers (ibid.). Procedural rhetoric moves beyond other forms of rhetoric – verbal, visual, textual – to consider the role of *processes that persuade*, combining the classical model of rhetoric that changes opinion or action, and a contemporary model for the effective conveyance of ideas (p. 125). Together, as Matheson outlines, playing video games allows 'the player to model something extant in the world of flesh, blood, steel, and glass that exists outside the game […] Procedural rhetoric is the persuasive aspect of simulation' (2015: 464).

McAllister situates the rhetorical action of video games as intersecting with the video game production process more broadly, stating that games are influenced by 'developers' and marketers' idiosyncratic, homological, and inclusive ideologies' alongside the meaning gained through player interaction (2004, p31-32 cited in Robinson 2012). The implicit meaning and ideology that are communicated procedurally (and indeed via more traditional forms of visual/textual rhetoric) cannot be understood without taking into account the

relationship between the development of video games and the military-entertainment complex from which they were initially developed, and it is this I will turn to in the next section.

The military-entertainment complex

As Ottosen (2009: 123) identifies, the history of the video game runs in tandem with the development of the military-industrial complex, from the Cold War to the present day and a wide variety of games trace their origins to military simulation and training equipment. Following on from the notion that procedural rhetoric can reflect and impart ideology, there is a case to be made that the relationship between video game depictions of real-world conflicts and the ideological apparatus of the military can be understood as a 'military-entertainment complex' (see Lenoir, 2000; Lenoir and Lowood, 2005). There are some necessary subtleties in terminology here with Der Derian (2009) using 'military-industrial-media-entertainment complex' to reflect the role of the military in a concrete sense – for example this relationship between games and the military can be seen in the adapting by the US Marine Corps of the first-person shooter *Doom* in the mid-1990s (Riddell, 1997) and the development of multiple iterations of the training simulator *America's Army*, which began life as a recruitment tool (Robinson 2012).

In the context of the titles discussed in this paper, these games were not developed specifically for the military, but rather function as representations of military activity, bound up in associated ideological and political entanglements. For instance, as Robinson (2012) and Poole (2004) argue, in many video games released following 9/11 - and the subsequent escalation of the WoT - the 'possibility space' in military-framed titles routinely promoted the idea that the principle solution to complex political problems in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan is 'through the use of force: the war on terror is only to be won by indiscriminate killing' (Robinson, 2012: 510). This is where we see the sort of interconnectivity between the

real and the simulated that Matheson (2015) outlines. Similarly, Allen (2011) argues that this interconnectedness increasingly blurs the lines between entertainment and simulation, both of which contribute towards the cultural imagination of a militarized American cultural discourse (see also Hall 2000). This also ties in with Crandall's (2005) discussion of the role of imperialism as a rhetorical tool and when considered in conjunction with the ideological role of militarization, video games can be seen as 'a field of articulation that carries its own logic' (p. 20), one that facilitates and operationalizes, through popular culture, narratives that simplify conflicts and forward territorialisation.

This is further helped, in a procedural sense, through visual representation where military-focused video games 'proudly transport the gamer into immersive, gut wrenching virtual battlefields. They persuade the gamer that, in an echo of WWII era journalism, "you are there" – on the beaches of Normandy, in the jungles of Vietnam, in modern military hotspots' (Cowlishaw, 2005: 1). There are some exceptions to this model (see Payne, 2014; Payne 2016) but we can also see how the lines between the imagined and real might become foggier, an issue Shaw (2010) has acknowledged with regards to how the US Army use games as a transitional space when distinctions become blurred. Here, the two trade-off one another in what could be viewed as the third stage of hyperreality, where the signifier and significant are increasingly indistinguishable (Baudrillard, 1994). Players are able interject in historical events through procedural means, but *cleanly*, experiencing violence-without-consequence as the player is not responsible for their actions in the gameworld (Power 2007: 284-5). This type of engagement, Power argues, has the effect of 'making US militarism appear benign' (ibid), which may be problematic in the context of present-day fields of conflict in terms of how these are represented as sanitized spaces for achieving military aims (Gagnon 2010). However, to counter this, Reisner (2013) suggests that the sorts of player

agency afforded in other genres is notably curtailed in shooting-based titles, diminishing a player's ability to truly connect with the sorts of historical spaces depicted.

Nonetheless, as Power argues (citing Woodward (2005, p.14) '…the digital-games industry enables us to pay more attention to "the small, the unremarkable, the commonplace things that military activities and militarism make and do", and also offers a different point of entry into thinking about popular, everyday understandings of geopolitics' (2007: 274). This demonstrates how the procedures and representations which govern the experience of military-based video games can be understood as interactions not just between player and the game environment, but between player and real-world geopolitics more broadly.

North Korea in video games

A variety of military-themed video games – spanning multiple genres - feature North Korea as an antagonist in largely fictionalized conflicts. These include a mixture of first and third-person shooters, such as *Battlefield 4* (DICE Los Angeles, 2013) and *Rogue Warrior* (Rebellion Developments & Zombie Studios, 2009) alongside the covert operations featured in the two case studies in this paper. Others involve airborne craft (*Falcon 4* [MicroProse, 1998]; *Nuclear Strike* [THQ, 1997]) or are tactical and strategy-based titles (for example *Spec Ops II* [Zombie Studios, 1999] and *Wargame: Red Dragon* (Eugen Systems, 2014). Many of these games predate the WoT and have been discounted in this paper as a result, though they do suggest some continuity in the use of North Korea as an antagonist historically. *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2005) and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2* (Red Storm Entertainment, 2004) were developed and released at the height of the WoT and are therefore useful exemplars to explore as parallels to academic work on titles set in the Middle East, such as Šisler's (2008) work on *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Delta Force* and Robinson's (2012) discussion of *Army of Two* amongst others. This is not to intentionally preclude other titles from recent years – Robinson's (2015) work on the game *Homefront*

(THQ, 2011) is a useful touchstone – but rather to situate the two titles in relation to the features of the Bush Administration's framing of the Axis of Evil (which included the DPRK) and contemporaneous research on games developed and consumed at the height of the WoT. In addition, the plots of both titles are interlinked through the sinking of the *USS Clarence E. Walsh* and both titles are prefaced by 'Tom Clancy' – the US author best known for his military-based novels - implying a strengthened relationship to an interconnected military-entertainment complex.

The two case studies of *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2* will be unpacked in relation to the procedural features of each game, considering what Šisler delineates as iconographical features, visual signifiers, narrative structures and gameplay (2008: 205). For *Splinter Cell*, this will involve pushing at key identifiers from Šisler's work to try to understand how North Korea is portrayed, and how this is similar or differs from titles that use the Middle East as a setting. For *Ghost Recon 2*, this will also involve Robinson's (2015) discussion of US exceptionalism in relation to North Korea. In both cases, the methodological approach mirrored Šisler's (2008) content analysis in the use of playthroughs by the researcher, alongside watching playthroughs of each title from other gamers hosted on YouTube so as to identify points of similarity and difference between gamers; this was combined with note taking, screencaps, recording and transcribing vocal exchanges by in-game characters and analysis of the flow and structure of the gameplay as well as contemporaneous games reviews of both titles.

Splinter Cell and a paradoxical North Korea

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory (Ubisoft Montreal, 2005) was released in early 2005 and was a commercial success, selling 2.5 million copies in the first three months of its release (Gamespot Staff, 2005). The principle avatar the player controls is Sam Fisher, a

covert agent who works for 'Third Echelon', a secret operations branch of the National Security Agency. Kasavin (2005) described the game as featuring a fictionalized conflict stemming from the 'tenuous relationship' between the US, North Korea and Japan' with North Korea seemingly taking on the role of a 'rogue state'. This aligns with Stahl's (2006) observation that military-framed games produced during the War on Terror routinely utilise rhetoric consistent with US foreign policy positions at the time, situating North Korea as an antagonist identified as part of Bolton's (2002) 'Axis of Evil'. The convoluted plot involves North Korea being accused of sinking an American warship – the *USS Clarence E. Walsh* – which is followed by an invasion of South Korea by the North. However as the game moves towards its conclusion both of these events are revealed to have been orchestrated by a private military company called *Displace International*, complicating a straightforward reading of the country as a generic State antagonist.

The player is sent on a covert mission to a military facility in North Korea during the seventh section of the game ('Battery'). Robinson (2012: 510) talks of the importance of the role of the central character/player's avatar in guiding the use of force and in his example of *Army of Two* (set in Iraq and Afghanistan) 'extra-military activity is justifiable [but] largely uncontrollable'. *Splinter Cell* replicates this through the use of Fisher as a lone agent operating through a shadowy extra-military organization allied to the NSA.

The procedural rhetoric of the game frames North Korea in a multitude of paradoxical ways. The mission begins with the player infiltrating a missile battery using night-vision goggles to move through the space unseen – a key dynamic that engenders trust in the ability of Fisher as an extra-military agent. The space is nondescript, featuring piping, metal grates and assorted paraphernalia such as a sack barrow. The only visual signification to situate this bunker from another military space is provided by a banner written in Korean. Much of the space continues in this format, with occasional differentiation in the use of signifiers such as

large North Korea flags, propaganda posters featuring North Korean soldiers on walls, and portraits of the North Korean leadership in officer's rooms. These examples demonstrate the 'possibility space' offered by assembling certain visual elements to situate the player in a specific location. This corresponds with Šisler's discussions (2008: 205-6) on the ways in which 'iconographical representations' assist the player in their suspension of disbelief. However, whilst striving to convince the player of a location, Šisler also argues that 'the in-game surroundings and setting are rendered frequently by iteration of a limited number of textures and schemes' (206) so rather than depicting an *exact* space, the effect is to produce a relatively generic arena for play, one only differentiated from others by brief representations of archetypal or stereotypical icons such as flags and maps. For Šisler, broad stereotyping is very much a feature of games set in the Middle East during the WoT – with games constructing 'a "fantastical" Middle East, using quasi-historical elements in order to give…an oriental impression' (2008: 207) – but in the case of North Korea this appears to be largely window-dressing, connected to a vague notion of what the dictatorship might represent. This is further compounded by the limitations of game development at the time, but equally it could be the product of limited information about what North Korean military installations look like.

Within the Battery mission, you interact with a variety of non-player characters (NPCs) and these exchanges demonstrate the paradoxical strong/weak binary in representations of North Korea. For example, during the infiltration of the Command Room, Fisher interrogates several North Korean soldiers who articulate their opposition to the player by shouting 'I am a loyal solider of the North Korean Army!'. Later, a mission checkpoint in which you strangle-hold a decorated Colonel for information is prefaced by CCTV footage of the Colonel killing one of his subordinates following confusion over a missile launch. The

North Korean military, ruthless enough to execute a man on the spot, is framed as threatening and committed to its position of aggression in this possibility space.

This narrative of strength and threat is bolstered more broadly in relation to the overarching narrative in which the Battery mission sits. Following a subsequent missile launch against the warship the USS Ronald Reagan, North Korea invades the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea and this pre-emptive strike is attributed in the game to a paranoid leadership in Pyongyang. The official line taken by the US government during the WoT is echoed here, most famously when John Bolton described then-leader Kim Jong-Il as a 'tyrannical dictator' during a speech in Seoul in 2003 (Taylor 2018). In doing so, the representation of North Korea in the game parallels contemporaneous diplomacy during the WoT and concomitant coverage in the popular press (see Groll, 2015 on Kim Jong-Un; Goldman, 2011 on Kim Jong-Il), again reinforcing the connection between typifications across multiple forms of media. As previously discussed, Šisler (2008: 204) states that 'the dominant mode of representation of Arab and Muslim cultures in European and American media generally exploits stereotypical generalizations and cliches' and this appears to have similar currency with regards to seeing the North Korean leadership as a threat.

However, weakness is similarly framed through NPC interactions that suggest the North Korean military is *ridiculous* and *cowardly*. One example of the former can be heard through the public-address system announcements which include 'attention all personnel: tomorrow is new toothbrush day'. The function of this type of rhetoric is to belittle despotic power, to portray it as comedic, to demonstrate petty functionality in the management of the lives of North Koreans, albeit fictional NPCs. There is also an appropriate metaphor in giving the player the option of disabling of the PA system by shooting it, implying propaganda can only be challenged through violence, echoing Robinson's (2012: 512) observation that this type of game is often 'dependent on…shoot-and-destroy mechanics' in lieu of actual

diplomacy. The North Korean military are further undermined in the game by having NPCs breaking wind at various times, accompanied by the phrase 'Whoo! Glad no-one was around to smell that!'. This, when juxtaposed with the earlier observation about proud soldiers who are loyal to their cause, highlights the paradoxical nature of this type of representation.

In relation to depictions of cowardliness, this can be witnessed in the procedural rhetoric of one of the interrogations during the Battery level, where a soldier is so terrified of Fisher that he launches into a tirade against the regime, espousing his love of the US by drawing on popular cultural references including Britney Spears and the New York Yankees baseball team. Demonstrating the interconnections across the military-entertainment complex, this exchange is reminiscent of the scene in *Saving Private Ryan* (Dreamworks, 1998) where the German solider nicknamed 'Steamboat Willie', fearing he is about to be executed by Wade's troops, starts listing American films and sings the first line of the American national anthem before denouncing Hitler. These popular culture references are not isolated: after you obtain the abort codes to prevent the second missile attack, your operations officer reminds you that another missile is heading towards the USS Ronald Reagan, to which Fisher responds with the line 'did you just tell me I need to win one for the Gipper', a reference to the film *Knute Rockne, All American* (Warner Brothers, 1940) starring Ronald Reagan.

Whilst articulating some of Šisler's (2008) arguments about stereotyping and visual signification, the various representations of North Korea in *Splinter Cell* complicates things. North Korea is simultaneously ridiculed, whilst being portrayed as threatening, and is ultimately entirely undermined when the game narrative finally shifts to reveal a private corporation is to blame. This leads back to McAllister's (2004) argument that meaning in video games is not a straightforward designer/gamer binary, but instead rests on the competing ideologies of players, developers and marketeers. One explanation then is that

whilst the marketeers might frame the game in one way, the developers – not American, but a French-Canadian firm – may not necessarily adopt the model of assumed US dominance that is more clearly articulated in games featuring the Middle East (Šisler 2008; Robinson 2012; 2015). The procedural rhetoric and the meaning that is subsequently conveyed becomes more complicated and contradictory as a result.

Ghost Recon 2 and US exceptionalism

The second case study, also published by Ubisoft, is *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2* (Red Storm Entertainment, 2004), released on PlayStation 2 and GameCube in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The game was also released for the Xbox but with a different plot. The focus here is on the former, where the *USS Clarence E. Walsh* (as in *Splinter Cell*) has been sunk and the titular Ghosts – a team of veteran soldiers commanded by Captain Scott Mitchell – are deployed behind enemy lines in North Korea to tackle the growing threat posed by General Jung Chong-sun, again echoing the threat posed by senior military commanders. The game differs from *Splinter Cell* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2005) in that the player takes control of numerous avatars depending on the type of mission that is being undertaken, as well as the plot differing despite featuring the same naval vessel. The game play conforms to Šisler's finding that players control US or coalition forces, with enemies controlled by the computer/console so 'playing for the other side is not allowed' (2008: 207). This connects the central gameplay procedurally to a binary of 'us' and 'them', emphasizing the threat of the Other whilst engendering a sense of collective endeavour on the part of the player, represented by US-based extra-military forces.

The plot of the game is introduced via a voiceover that is used as a framing device through which the procedural rhetoric is developed. The way in which the game delivers your mission briefings is via a fictional military history programme called 'Modern Heroes'. The programme is hosted by a retired Major, William Jacobs, an unlockable specialist character

from an earlier iteration of the *Ghost* franchise. Following this, the specifics of the missions themselves are delivered within the game world environment, with instructions offered in conjunction with overlaid graphics on the field of play which show the player where to go and which strategic goals they need to achieve. An example of this would be the airfield infiltration mission where different attack points are highlighted, before the camera zooms in, the black and white imagery is replaced by colour, and you are plunged directly into the action. With mission briefings using this format, the overarching narrative thread and the gameplay itself are closely linked together through procedural logic: you, as the player, are an integral part of the story.

Furthermore, as Šisler suggests (2008) these visual cues, fonts and graphics operate as an effective framing device. Along with the use of a fictional studio for 'Modern Heroes', these stylistic additions operate as a call back to the sorts of historical re-enactment shows seen routinely on television, connecting the video game to popular culture tacitly, further embedding it within the military-entertainment complex. One reading of this rhetoric then is that it offers a level of authenticity, it represents an external referent to the sorts of documentaries gamers might be familiar with. It suggests to the player that the conflict they are about to proceed through is a memorable one, one worth immortalizing in a documentary (albeit a fictional one). The voiceover bolsters this relationship, with the scene-setting opening including a series of bombastic statements that echo contemporary film – 'this time we've come to win a war before it even starts' or that the player is taking the fight to 'those who would seek to disrupt our way of life and that of our Allies'. This might be seen as demonstrating the sort of cultural overlap Ottosen (2009: 123-4) identifies where 'the core components in the imagery in the video games create the same kind of illusions as in real wars portrayed on television'. This framing is offered alongside information about North Korean fragility, highlighting riots over food shortages for instance; this is analogous to the

March of Suffering in the mid-1990s which saw somewhere between 240,000 and 3.5 million

North Koreans die from starvation (Spoorenberg and Schwekendiek, 2012). The effect of

these statements is to suggest that the US is required to interject militarily, for the benefit of

both a threatened US and the North Korean people, articulating Robinson's contention that

games often present intervention as the only solution to what are actually complex socio-

political problems (2012: 510).

Games reviews at the time articulate the supposed threat of North Korea more clearly

whereby the country is shown to be a formidable antagonist. For example, NPC enemies are

'blessed with an eagle's eyes and a surgeon's hands that allows them to supernaturally direct

spreads of AK [gun]fire from football fields way' (Sulic, 2004). In a procedural sense, the

relative difficulty of fighting against the artificial intelligence of NPCs, so Sulic suggests,

makes the fictionalized North Korean military a legitimate challenge for the player to

overcome. This implies a connection between an ideological discourse embedded in

gameplay – the US against a well-trained and accurate North Korean military - and how these

procedures were interpreted by reviewers at the time. It also chimes with Debrix's (2008: 14)

argument that 'the discourse of tabloid geopolitics [is] to generate some meanings and truths

in (inter)national politics by sensationalizing and spectacularizing world politics at all costs'

as in this games review, North Korea is a threat because of the precision of their soldiers.

This can also be seen in how reviews of the game also focus on the use of actual

military hardware. The M29 rifle from the game, which includes a mounted camera, enables

the player to 'systematically work through a map taking down enemies while avoiding being

overwhelmed' (Butts, 2004), as well as allowing you to look around corners without

exposing your cover to the North Koreans. This piece of hardware is described in reviews of

the game as 'easily the coolest real world gun ever featured in a videogame' (ibid). What this

demonstrates is how reviewers understand the relationship between player and enemy, but

also how gameplay procedures suggest that obstacles – in this case artificial intelligence of enemy combatants – can only be overcome with military force (Robinson 2012).

In addition, although each Ghost has specialized weaponry, the firearm players routinely use is the XM8 assault rifle, which, in a nifty piece of timing, was the rifle that was due to replace the US Army's M4 around the same time the game was released. This weapon is favoured in the game because of its modular structure – so specialized add-ons can be applied depending on the procedural parameters of the mission – and again, reviews at the time directly connected this flexibility to the fact the rifle was 'developed in concert with the OICW' (Butts, 2004). In the non-virtual world, the US Army's OICW project was mothballed in 2005, so the fact it features prominently in games reviews at the time implies a clear connection the reviewers are making between the realism of the game – enacted through the procedural rhetoric of military objects and interactions in the game world – and actual real world military developments. Not only does this further strengthen Debrix's contention that the press reinforce military ideology through their discussions of popular culture (2008) but as Robinson (2012: 510-11) suggests, using this type of technology furthers the notion that force rather than negotiation is the solution, a position analogous to real-world rhetoric during the height of the WoT particularly 'exceptionalism' as foreign policy.

There are numerous definitions of exceptionalism ranging from its construction as a political myth (Esch 2010), through to its legacy with regards to the Vietnam War and beyond (McCrisken 2003). For the purposes of this article, exceptionalism as a bedrock to the Bush Administration's War on Terror against the Axis of Evil seems pertinent, and Rojecki (2008; see also Restad 2014) offers a useful contextualization that situates exceptionalism as stemming from religious and moral views with their 'origins in Puritan piety'. Post 9/11, he argues, this has resulted in a shift in foreign policy towards a with-us-or-against-us 'moral dimension [that] fuels religious movements that seek restoration of purity to the social order'

(pg. 69). Essentially, the militaristic approach of the US was internally justified because of the exceptional threat to individual freedom the US faced from the Axis. Similarly, Patman argues that following 9/11, the Bush Administration sought to position itself as having 'a unique historic responsibility in the post-cold war era to maintain unrivalled power and use it to spread freedom and democracy' (2007, p.972). Robinson (2015) points out how this can be seen in games produced at the time. He focuses on fictionalized depictions of the Middle East, as Šisler (2008) does, where combatants are essentialized as 'backward, violent and resistant to civil order' (2015: 452). Countries forming the Axis are effectively the antithesis of the values ideologically framed by foreign policy rhetoric at the time. As previously demonstrated, in these games 'there is no space for dialogue or negotiation', just brute force (p.460). This ties in with Robinson and Schulzke's arguments around 'militarism', something which can be seen both in the structural power of the military but also in the ideological bleed-through of military logic and 'militaristic solutions to political problems' (2016: 997). In *Ghost Recon 2*, as in Robinson and Šisler's Middle Eastern examples, the implication is that there is only one solution to the exceptional threat posed by a well-trained North Korean military.

However, this position is somewhat destabilized through the complexity of the overarching narratives of both *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2*. Although at first it appears these titles operate in a similar way to the broader functionality Robinson identifies in his titles (*America's Army* and *Army of Two*) where the combination of procedural mechanics of the game and the narrative offer 'an uncomplicated view of war and militarisation' (2012, p.512), the narrative features of *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2* are sufficiently complicated so as to suggest alternative readings beyond a reductive 'North Korea-as-threat'.

In the case of *Splinter Cell*, the culpability of North Korea is questioned following the Battery mission, as rogue elements of Japan's 'Information Self Defence Force' and a private

defence firm run by Fisher's former colleague Douglas Shetland are revealed to have planted evidence to blame North Korea. This demonstrates the central paradox once again: whilst the threat of North Korea comes from the missiles they possess, they are simultaneously humiliated through the gameplay of the mission outlined above as well as the wider implication that they are the fall guys in a more complicated conspiracy.

In *Ghost Recon 2*, whilst the gameplay dynamic is set exclusively in North Korea and involves the player exclusively killing North Korean forces, this is embedded within a broader narrative that is again complex. Building on the *Splinter Cell* narrative device of the missile launch, *Ghost Recon 2* features a plot where the North Korean military – under the instruction of General Jung Chong-Sun – mobilize against the North Korean government. Rather than a straightforward binary standoff of the US versus North Korea, the player is instead situated in a story of internal conflict between institutional power bases, the result of which sees the Chong-Sun's forces attacking the North Korean cities of Sinp'o and Hyesan. Whilst it is true that the gameplay mechanics operate in the same way as Šisler and Robinson outline, the overarching structure of the events the player is taking part in are more nuanced and harder to disentangle, leading to confusion as to who is actually at fault, and who is the real threat.

Situating games in the military-entertainment complex

In closing, it is important to situate these paradoxical portrayals of North Korea in video games as part of a wider continuum of popular culture in the military-entertainment complex during the WoT. As Shepherd argues (2008: 213), the WoT was routinely communicated using visual signifiers, and in tandem with Grayson, Davies and Philpott's (2009) discussion of the interconnection between popular culture and politics, the overlaps between gaming and

other forms of representation can offer a more rounded understanding of the ways in which North Korea is represented in a paradoxical way.

Kim (2015; 127-8) suggests that during the WoT established film franchises - where Western dominance is increasingly destabilized - required a new enemy and, as part of the Axis of Evil, North Korea might replace the earlier threat posed by the USSR. This is exemplified in two films released around the same time as *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2,* namely *Die Another Day* (Eon Productions 2002) and *Team America: World Police* (Paramount Pictures 2004). The depiction of North Korea in these titles demonstrates how popular cultural forms in other media operate in a similar way to the video games unpacked here.

As a franchise, Kim argues (2015) Bond has routinely Othered Asian characters, from *Dr. No* (Eon Productions 1962) as a 'tragic mulatto figure' (p. 127), through to the demonization of Oddjob, the unfeeling Korean henchmen par excellence in *Goldfinger* (Eon Productions 1964). In *Die Another Day*, the villains deliberately destabilize a straightforward reading of their Otherness by problematizing race as a threat: the chief antagonist in the film is Gustav Graves, a British billionaire who is also the gene-edited North Korean General who imprisons Bond at the start of the film. The effect of this, Metz argues, is a 'post-colonial parody of the racial politics of these films' (2004: 66) where whiteness is purposefully forwarded as the real threat. The question then becomes whether the threat is from the militaristic regime of North Korea or the tycoon diamond trader 'Westernized' through gene therapy?

A seemingly obvious parody of the North Korean regime is *Team America: World Police*, a marionette-based action-comedy in which Kim Jong-Il plans to assassinate world leaders during a peace conference (until his plans are undone by Team America and their newest recruit, Broadway actor Gary Johnston). It is, however, not as clear cut as the

ideological West emerging victorious against a dictatorship. The film opens with Team America destroying tourist sites in Paris such as the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower whilst in pursuit of a gang of terrorists - 'collateral damage' is explained away by one character as 'bon' because the threat was eliminated - much to the palpable horror of the assembled Parisian crowd. Here the problems of extra-military intervention are writ large.

In *Team America World Police*, while the routine parodying of Kim Jon-Il mirrors aspects of the flatulent soldiers in *Splinter Cell,* other key facets of the military-entertainment complex are given similar treatment, including the nature of the threat posed by North Korea and the film industry itself. With regards to the latter, the stirring motivational speech by Team America agent Gary Johnston, in which he attempts to convince world leaders to unite against the common threat of Kim Jong-Il, involves describing the US as 'reckless, arrogant, stupid…'. Whilst Gow (2006) has suggested that this sort of parody reinforces American exceptionalism by showing the reflexive nature, and therefore moral superiority, of contemporary military intervention it can also be argued that the film prods at US self-righteousness. The conclusion of the film fundamentally undermines North Korea as a threat, when the ultimate enemy is revealed not to be a stereotypical dictator, but a gigantic cockroach that escapes in a spaceship.

The point is, in both instances, as with *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2*, North Korea is shown as strong – a nuclear power, run by a 'uber terrorist leader' (Kim 2015: 134) hell-bent on destruction – and weak, when undermined by the extra-military intervention of specialist personnel who can, for example, infiltrate a missile battery single-handedly. This article has sought to demonstrate, using selective examples of video games that were developed and played at the height of the WoT, the ways in which North Korea has been constructed paradoxically. Šisler's work on 'digital Arabs' (2008) shows representative processes typifying Middle Eastern countries through particular visual signifiers, but in the

case of North Korea representations are less clear cut, framed through the rubric of assumed threats that are subsequently undermined by narrative choices in the games. Whilst the procedural rhetoric of military solutions is potentially reinforced through killing generic enemy combatants (Robinson 2012) the contradictions of a ruthless regime juxtaposed with differing forms of comedic belittling leaves the player ultimately confused as to what these representations of North Korea mean. As Bogost (2008: 125) highlights, procedural rhetoric in games involves *processes that persuade*, combining the classical model of rhetoric that changes opinion or action, with a contemporary model for the effective conveyance of ideas (p. 125), but with North Korea the understanding of what us conveyed is unclear, perhaps reflecting a lack of real-world comprehension of the contradictions of the country.

The unstable position shown in these titles not only draws parallels with other forms of popular cultural produced at the time but is presently reflected in the changing nature of international relations, particularly with regards to the apparent détente between the US and the DPRK. In the twelve months following the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States, the approach towards North Korea shifted from the Obama administration's 'strategic patience' (see Choi, 2015) to extreme posturing – for example, at the end of April 2017, during a phone call to Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, Trump reportedly stated that 'we can't let a madman with nuclear weapons let on the loose like that' (Nakamura and Gellman, 2017) – and back again, with the President meeting Kim Jong Un – a 'pretty smart cookie' whom he would be honoured to meet (Parker and Gearan, 2017) – in Singapore in June 2018. Mirroring this shift, North Korea's Foreign Ministry initially described the US as 'gangsters' against whom 'a series of actions tougher than they have ever envisaged' will be wrought (Nichols, 2017), that the Korean People's Army would 'reduce the US mainland into ashes and darkness' (McCurry, 2017) but then entered into an 'era of no war' with the US-allied South Korea following the inter-Korea summit in April 2018.

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What we see then, at this latest stage of the War on Terror, are the challenges associated with unpicking popular cultural representations of a country, presently intertwining culture – in the form of procedural rhetoric in video games about North Korea – competing ideologies and an adapted approach to diplomacy in the Trump era. The outcome of this is multifaceted, and something which will require further examination as real world and virtual conflicts potentially overlap and become less clear-cut.

This paper has argued for a nuanced conceptualizing of the representational North Korea, where the paradoxes of narrative and gameplay in titles produced during the WoT differs from analysis of other games set in Axis of Evil countries (Šisler, 2008; Robinson 2012; 2015). One reading of the procedural rhetoric of *Splinter Cell* and *Ghost Recon 2* relates back to the effective functioning of the military-entertainment complex in reinforcing and disseminating ideological standpoints such as intervention based on exceptional circumstance, articulated through multiple cultural artefacts such as film and video games. Another could suggest the opposite, that games developers, to return to McAllister's (2004) notion of the co-production of meaning, are actually presenting a tongue-in-cheek caricaturing of these positions, that the communicating of military ideology is too simplistic an interpretation and can be routinely undermined, as demonstrated here, through paradoxical procedural functions. What these differing interpretations show, in terms of what procedural rhetoric communicates, is the sort of reconfigured and contested understanding that is a necessary feature of ideology more broadly, and something that future work can explore with regards to challenging ontological assumptions contained within this medium (Schulzke 2017), or how the process of Othering is resisted by those typified in these types of video game (Saber and Webber 2017). Ultimately, depictions of North Korea featured in games produced at the height of the War on Terror present the country as a contradictory and paradoxical unknown, rather than a simplistic portrait of threat or vulnerability. At a time

when North Korea is once again framed in the news as both a potential nuclear scourge or a regime seeking détente with South Korea, it is important to identify that, within the military-entertainment complex, the country has routinely been portrayed in complex and contradictory ways, and that this has its origins in, amongst other things, post-9/11 foreign policy.

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