

# War by other means: Mobile gaming and the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict

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**Abstract.** The 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict inspired the creation of over a dozen games for mobile phones and tablets. These games, which allowed players to Bomb Gaza City, operate the Iron Dome missile defence system, and direct rockets into Israeli settlements, marked an important shift in the mediatisation of war in three ways. First, whereas propaganda is frequently described as a top-down process by which elites influence mass audiences, the mobile war games about Gaza were created by non-elite indie game developers, thereby illustrating these games' capacities for allowing new actors to participate in ideological contestation. Second, the games were not simply reflections on the conflict, but part of it. They were released while the fighting was in progress and helped to constitute the ideological battleground. Finally, the games reproduced established propaganda techniques in distinctive ways that were shaped by the mobile gaming medium.

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## Introduction

The 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict, which lasted from 8 July to 26 August 2014, was part of a long series of conflicts between Israeli security forces and Palestinian militants. These conflicts follow a familiar pattern of escalation through killings and reprisals, then progress into the equally familiar pattern of Palestinian rocket attacks against Israel and Israeli bombings and ground attacks against Gaza. Nevertheless, even as the fighting in Gaza seems to follow a routine, its character is continually altered by new technologies that extend and reshape the battlefield. New military technologies, and Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system in particular, have been the most heavily publicised innovations. Yet the war is not waged using weapons alone. It is also profoundly affected by new communications technologies, as those on both sides utilise the latest social media in an effort to influence audiences around the world.<sup>1</sup>

During the seven weeks of fighting in the summer of 2014, another technological innovation was on display – one that extended the fighting geographically and opened

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Zeitzoff, 'Using social media to measure conflict dynamics: an application to the 2008–2009 Gaza Conflict', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55:6 (2011), pp. 938–69; David Archibald and Mitchell Miller, 'Full-spectacle dominance? An analysis of the Israeli State's attempts to control media images of the 2010 Gaza Flotilla', *Journal of War & Cultural Studies*, 5:2 (2012), pp. 189–201; Eugenia Siapera, 'Tweeting #Palestine: Twitter and the mediation of Palestine', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17:6 (2014), pp. 539–55.

a new domain of war. While Iron Dome missiles were intercepting Hamas' rockets and IDF bombers were carrying out air strikes against Gaza City, mobile games were uploaded to the Google Play application programme (app) store, allowing anyone with an Android smartphone or tablet to become a virtual participant in the fighting. Despite their apparent simplicity, these games were significant political artefacts, which marked important shifts in the mediatisation of war and popular engagement in politics. The games' simple graphics and short production times allowed them to be released while the fighting was still in progress, thereby making it possible for these games to be closely linked to real events and to be framed as opportunities to participate in the fighting. Simulations that allowed players to defend Gaza City, operate the Iron Dome missile defence system, or navigate rockets past the Iron Dome took on the poignancy of representing real acts of violence for players who were not directly involved in the fighting. Moreover, the games and the websites hosting them became forums for players with opposing views to express their opinions on the conflict and efforts to simulate it.

My goal in this article is to explore the political significance of mobile games that simulate ongoing conflicts, using the games about the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict as a case study. Although mobile war games have also been produced about other conflicts, such as those in Syria, Ukraine, and Iraq, I focus on the games about Gaza because of the number that were produced, their diversity, the public attention they attracted, and the way their role in an ongoing struggle highlights the emergence of a new domain of ideological warfare. Limiting my analysis to a single conflict also makes it possible to describe in more detail the various forms these games took, how they framed the conflict, and how players responded to them.

I begin with an overview of previous research on the political dimensions of video games, focusing on the pervasive claim that military video games are sites of propaganda that permit political and military elites to influence civilian players.<sup>2</sup> I build on this literature throughout the article and borrow some of its theoretical insights, though I challenge existing characterisations of the relationship between video games and their players. In the second section I introduce some of the most noteworthy games that simulated the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict while it was in progress. These games captured various aspects of the fighting – from the Iron Dome, to the IDF's search for tunnels, to Hamas' rockets – and displayed a clear effort to shape the way players perceive these activities and the conflict as a whole. After introducing these games, I devote the remaining sections of the article to advancing three interrelated arguments about mobile war games' political significance.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Stahl, 'Have you played the War on Terror?', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23:2 (2006), pp. 112–30; Marcus Power, 'Digitized virtuosity: Video war games and post-9/11 cyber-deterrence', *Security Dialogue*, 38:2 (2007), pp. 271–88; Johan Höglund, 'Electronic empire: Orientalism revisited in the military shooter', *Game Studies*, 8:1 (2008), available at: {<http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>}; Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Tanner Mirrlees, 'Digital militainment by design: Producing and playing Socom: U.S. Navy Seals', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 5:3 (2009), pp. 161–81; Ian Graham Ronald Shaw, 'Playing war', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11:8 (2010), pp. 789–803; Robertson Allen, 'The unreal enemy of America's army', *Games and Culture*, 6:1 (2011), pp. 38–60; Mark B. Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games: Diplomacy, civilization, America's Army and Grand Theft Auto IV', *Geopolitics*, 16:2 (2011), pp. 359–88; Peter Mantello, 'Playing discreet war in the US: Negotiating subjecthood and sovereignty through Special Forces video games', *Media, War, & Conflict*, 5:3 (2012), pp. 269–83; Nick Robinson, 'Videogames, persuasion and the War on Terror: Escaping or embedding the military-entertainment complex?', *Political Studies*, 6:3 (2012), pp. 504–22; Marcus Schulzke, 'The virtual War on Terror: Counterterrorism narratives in video games', *New Political Science*, 35:4 (2013), pp. 586–603.

First, mobile war games raise new possibilities for non-elite efforts to produce and distribute propaganda. They can be made relatively cheaply and quickly compared to console and computer war games, allowing a much broader range of actors to engage in ideological contestation. The heavily politicised and ideologically charged mobile games released during the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict were not produced by the actors typically described as sources of propaganda – the belligerents involved in the conflict and major media companies – but by relatively small indie developers. Few developers had created war games previously and none appear to have been directly supported by states or militant organisations. This marks a shift in the character of video game propaganda, which previous research has generally linked to elites participating in the military-industrial complex.<sup>3</sup>

Second, mobile games that simulate real wars display efforts to discover new modes of political engagement. The games were marketed as empowering players to become more than just passive spectators, so much so that their descriptions read like exhortations for players to become personally involved in the fighting. Releasing the games in the midst of the conflict facilitated this framing by promoting a sense of player involvement in current events. Players' responses to the games reveal another participatory dimension, as they wrote game reviews that were commentaries on the conflict and attempted to reframe the games to support their own perspectives. These responses demonstrate that video games are not merely sources of unidirectional propaganda. Rather, the games and their associated media provide spaces in which players can enact their existing identities and ideologies.

Third, mobile games about Gaza demonstrate how familiar propaganda techniques, such as demonising enemies, claiming moral justifications, and rationalising uses of force, were enacted through a medium that facilitates the construction of evil enemies, a just cause, and necessary uses of force. The medium makes it easier to capture these themes by not only allowing them to be presented but by actually making them difficult to avoid. The games' simplistic graphics and narratives make it necessary to rely on caricatures that assist in efforts at demonisation. Their limited narrative capacities make it difficult to acknowledge conflicts' nuances or the multiple perspectives on them. And their repetitive gameplay helps to create a sense that enemies are virtually omnipotent, thereby tacitly legitimising any means of resistance that is used to counter what is portrayed as an existential threat.

### The role of video games in international politics

Over the past decade there has been growing interest in how popular culture and entertainment media construct war and conceptions of security.<sup>4</sup> Much of this

<sup>3</sup> Stahl, 'Have you played the War on Terror?'; Power, 'Digitized virtuosity'; Höglund, 'Electronic empire'; Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*; Mirrlees, 'Digital militainment by design'; Shaw, 'Playing war'; Allen, 'The unreal enemy of America's army'; Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games'; Mantello, 'Playing discreet war in the US'; Robinson, 'Videogames, persuasion and the War on Terror'; Schulzke, 'The virtual War on Terror'.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus Dodds, 'Popular geopolitics and audience dispositions: James Bond and the Internet Movie Database (IMDB)', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 31:2 (2006), pp. 116–30; Klaus Dodds, 'Hollywood and the popular geopolitics of the War on Terror', *Third World Quarterly*, 29:8 (2008), pp. 1621–37; Michael Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Elspeth Van Veen, 'Interrogating 24: Making sense of US Counter-terrorism in the Global War on Terrorism', *New Political Science*, 31:3 (2009), pp. 361–84; Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, 'Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture-world politics continuum', *Politics*, 29:3 (2009), pp. 155–63;

research is driven by concerns that entertainment media can function as propaganda by glorifying war, presenting biased information, and contributing to militarisation. Studies focused on military video games explore the ways in which games are used to promote certain images of what war is like, what its effects are, and what potential security threats may exist in the future.<sup>5</sup> Although this previous research on military gaming has not addressed the political significance of mobile war games, it provides a helpful starting place for thinking about why video games matter to international security, what distinguishes them from other media, and how they may function as sources of propaganda. An overview of this literature also helps to highlight the distinctive characteristics that set mobile war games apart from the console and computer games addressed in previous research.

Commentators generally agree that military video games constitute a form of propaganda because they glorify war while also downplaying the effectiveness of, or completely neglecting, peaceful strategies of conflict resolution. Aaron Delwiche goes so far as to say that ‘video-games have the potential to shape attitudes and behavior in ways that Goebbels could never have dreamed’.<sup>6</sup> The centrality of the concept of ‘propaganda’ in studies of military games, as well as related concepts, such as ‘soft power’ and ‘strategic communication’, makes it essential to be clear about what these concepts mean and what mechanisms of influence they refer to. I will rely on Philip M. Taylor’s definition, according to which something qualifies as propaganda if it displays ‘methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve specific goals that are *intended to benefit those organizing the process*’.<sup>7</sup> By this standard the console/computer games I discuss in this section and the mobile games that I discuss throughout the rest of the article qualify as propaganda because they show strong evidence of persuasive framing.

Military video games are most likely to function as propaganda when they mediate real conflicts, combining fact and fiction while still purporting to accurately simulate real events. Many games attempt to recreate historical wars or engage in speculative history by developing counterfactual scenarios that are set in past wars. These games tend to blur simulation and reality in ways that make the two difficult to extricate – often with the result that the unpleasant realities of war are neglected or overshadowed. As Aaron Hess points out, video games based on historical conflicts construct ‘public memory’.<sup>8</sup> He substantiates this with a case study of *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, which mixes historical details with a heroic fictional narrative to

Jack Holland, ‘When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis’: Teaching Americans “9/11” in NBC’s “The West Wing”, *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, 42:2 (2011); Christina Rowley and Jutta Weldes, ‘The evolution of international security studies and the everyday’, *Security Dialogue*, 43:6 (2012), pp. 513–30; Matt Davies and Simon Philpott, ‘Militarization and popular culture’, in Kostas Gouliamos and Christos Kassimeris (eds), *The Marketing of War in the Age of Neo-Militarism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 42–59.

<sup>5</sup> Stahl, ‘Have you played the War on Terror?’, Power, ‘Digitized virtuosity’; Höglund, ‘Electronic empire’; Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*; Mirrlees, ‘Digital militainment by design’; Shaw, ‘Playing war’; Allen, ‘The unreal enemy of America’s army’; Salter, ‘The geographical imaginations of video games’; Mantello, ‘Playing discreet war in the US’; Robinson, ‘Videogames, persuasion and the War on Terror’; Schulzke, ‘The virtual War on Terror’.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Delwiche, ‘From the Green Berets to America’s army: Video games as a vehicle for political propaganda’, in Patrick J. Williams and Jonas Heide Smith (eds), *The Players’ Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 6, emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Hess, ‘“You don’t play, you volunteer”: Narrative public memory construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 24:4 (2007), pp. 339–56.

tell the story of the Pacific Theatre of the Second World War. The game intersperses interviews with veterans, information about their weapons and vehicles, and newsreel footage with simulations of combat that glorify the American war effort. This style of presentation advances the game's propaganda function by making the game feel historically accurate, even as uncomfortable facts about the war, like the Japanese internment camps and the use of atomic bombs, are omitted to create a sanitised view of American conduct.

The selective reconstruction of real events is also evident in games about more recent conflicts, and here it is even more important because simulations that reimagine recent events may have more immediate relevance to ongoing and future policy decisions. Marcus Power argues that '[s]ince 9/11, a critical analysis of virtual war has become increasingly important given that many video war-game releases have exhibited a growing desire to mirror "real" world conflict scenarios, particularly the recent US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.'<sup>9</sup> Like Hess, Power finds that efforts to simulate real events allow video games to not only construct the activity of war but to also present alternative versions of real events that may become embedded in players' memories.

Much of the research on games set in the War on Terror supports this conclusion by providing examples of video games being used to celebrate the efforts of Western counterterrorism forces. Ian G. R. Shaw comments on how the game *Call of Duty* normalises and promotes the use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) by allowing players to take control of UAVs that inflict overwhelming and precise destruction. He highlights the games' capacity for simulation as a means of dissimulation, saying that '[i]mages from the video game are eerily similar to those broadcast by the military from the UAVs in the Middle East.'<sup>10</sup> Roger Stahl argues that 'terrorist hunting games' reproduce the rhetoric of the War on Terror, thereby legitimising the actions taken by the American and British military forces waging it.<sup>11</sup> Nick Dyer-Witherford and Greig de Peuter contend that games have become part of the military industrial complex that is sustained by the War on Terror.<sup>12</sup> They show that games attract recruits to the military, operate as training simulations for soldiers, and demonstrate the efficacy of high-tech weapons.

The political implications of video games that simulate recent events are potentially serious. If games are able to shape players' attitudes about real conflicts, then games could affect players' willingness to use force, their support for the military, or their choice of candidates in an upcoming election. The extent to which video games affect players is fiercely debated, and it is impossible to draw any conclusions about this without more empirical research on players. Even with further empirical study, it would be challenging to determine whether video games actually increase militarism or whether they attract those who are already militaristic. However, I contend that framing the issue of video game propaganda as one about how video games influence players is misguided and should be reconsidered when analysing mobile war games.

First, efforts to influence players are politically significant in themselves, regardless of whether they succeed. Such efforts demonstrate that video games can be used to convey complex messages about current security threats, foreign policy decisions, and

<sup>9</sup> Power, 'Digitized virtuosity', p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw, 'Playing war', p. 790.

<sup>11</sup> Stahl, 'Have you played the War on Terror?'

<sup>12</sup> Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*.

the efficacy of military force. In some instances the development of video game propaganda even reflects decisions made by political actors, as games are used extensively by state military forces and violent non-state actors to attract recruits, generate public support, and demonise enemies.<sup>13</sup>

Second, players are not simply blank slates to be affected by propaganda but actors with complex identities and preferences. The diversity of player identities and the self-selection that is at work when players choose a particular game among the thousands that are available make it difficult, if not impossible, to make clear causal claims about how players are influenced. Rather than treating games as media that affect players, I will describe them as media that frame conflicts in ideologically-charged ways but that are open to many different interpretations and gameplay styles.

Finally, video games are interactive media that require player participation, which means that 'they exist when enacted'.<sup>14</sup> Player involvement in shaping the course of simulated events means that games cannot be properly understood as being merely a stimulus that acts on players. Furthermore, as McKenzie Wark points out,<sup>15</sup> it is impossible to get outside of games to see what their effects may be, as games are reflexive media that help to constitute our world and our perceptions of it. Wark suggests that the more valuable approach to theorising games' significance comes from seeing how developers and players use these open spaces to imaginatively transform or reproduce the 'real world' – a process that is particularly important when the real and simulated events happen concurrently.

### Simulating an active war

The 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict inspired more than a dozen mobile games that were released during the fighting, as well as many others that were released afterwards.<sup>16</sup> In this section I discuss nine games that demonstrate the range of different forms these games took. Research on video games tends to focus either on the effects games may have on players or on the games themselves.<sup>17</sup> I engage with both of these perspectives by providing textual analyses of the games about Gaza and discussing players' responses as evidenced by game reviews. I also devote considerable attention to the game developers in an effort to show the importance of new kinds of actors in the ideological battleground. Although other games about fighting between Israel and

<sup>13</sup> Vit Šisler, 'Digital Arabs: Representation in video games', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11:2 (2008), pp. 203–20; Vit Šisler, 'Palestine in pixels: the Holy Land, Arab-Israeli Conflict, and reality construction in video games', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 2:2 (2009), pp. 275–92; Salter, 'The geographical imaginations of video games'; Marcus Schulzke, 'Rethinking military gaming: America's army and its critics', *Games and Culture*, 8:2 (2013), pp. 59–76.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> It is difficult to say exactly how many mobile games were produced about this or other conflicts for four reasons: (1) the games may be hosted on a range of different websites; (2) they may be removed from the host websites without leaving any record of this; (3) multiple games may be produced with the same name; and (4) different versions of a game may appear to be different games. Based on my searches of Google Play, it appears that 13 games about the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict were uploaded to that host between 8 July 2014 and 26 August 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton, 'Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games', *Game Studies*, 6:1 (2006), available at: {[http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo\\_dutton](http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton)}; Steven Malliet, 'Adapting the principles of ludology to the method of video game content analysis', *Game Studies*, 7:1 (2007), available at: {<http://www.gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet>}.

Gaza have been released since the ceasefire on 26 August 2014, I only discuss games that were released during the conflict because these reveal a particularly interesting effort to engage with the fighting as it developed.

My analysis of these games proceeded in four stages. First, I used Google Play to identify all of the mobile games that were specifically framed as being about the fighting in Gaza and that were released during the conflict. My search for these games began on 5 August 2014 and continued until the end of the war. Although other games may have been released via other hosts, the Google Play store is the Android operating system's official app store and is therefore likely to be the most influential host of mobile games about real conflicts. Second, I downloaded and played each of the games using an Android smartphone. The games that were removed from Google Play were obtained through other mobile game hosting sites where they were reposted. The exact playtime varied depending on the game, but was generally between one and two hours. This was sufficient time to identify the most important themes in these games, especially given their limited narratives and repetitive gameplay mechanics, as well as to experiment with different gameplay strategies, which is important for understanding how these might affect players' experiences and their understanding of games' ideological significance.<sup>18</sup> I was particularly attentive to the way game interfaces, mechanics, and narratives framed the fighting in Gaza.<sup>19</sup> Some other elements that appear in mainstream video games, such as object inventories and character creation did not appear in the games and could therefore not be analysed.<sup>20</sup>

Third, to gauge how the games were marketed I analysed the game descriptions as they appeared on Google Play, as well as any additional information that was provided on the developers' social media platforms (if any could be located using Google searches). By looking beyond the games themselves, and in particular analysing other media produced about the games, it is possible to understand the context in which games are produced, how they fit into intertextual strategies for conducting ideological warfare, and how other media producers react to them. Fourth, I collected and read all user comments that were posted to Google Play starting on 5 August 2014 and extending until the ceasefire. These comments do not come from a representative sample of the player, yet the subset of players who commented are particularly important from a theoretical perspective because these players had particularly strong reactions to the games and who wanted to use the games as an opportunity to make their own contribution.

Two of the games I discuss are about the IDF's bombing campaign, one is about its efforts to destroy the tunnels connecting Gaza to the outside world, four are simulations of Israel's Iron Dome defence system, one is about Palestinians defending themselves against Israeli aircraft, and one is about Hamas' rocket attacks on Israel. All except the last two of these games are presented from a distinctly pro-Israel perspective, which is evident from the game descriptions and the perspective they give players. The inclusion of a disproportionate number of pro-Israel games in my analysis reflects the much greater availability of those games during the conflict. By contrast, I omitted at least four Iron Dome simulations because the many games in this subgenre show little variation in their narratives or gameplay mechanics.

<sup>18</sup> Espen Aarseth, 'Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis', Melbourne: Proceedings of the 5th Digital Arts & Culture Conference (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Consalvo and Dutton, 'Game analysis'.

<sup>20</sup> Aarseth, 'Playing Research'.

*Bomb Gaza* was perhaps the most controversial of the games produced about the conflict. Images of it featured prominently in articles and television news reports about the mobile war games, making it a target for outrage directed at the genre as a whole. It was uploaded to Google Play on 29 July 2014 by PlayFTW and was one of the first three games to be removed by Google on 4 August 2014.<sup>21</sup> *Bomb Gaza* puts players in control of an Israeli F-16 that flies from left to right across the screen over endless rows of nearly-identical buildings. The objective is to drop bombs on the Hamas fighters below, who can be seen firing at the plane and launching rockets. Each bomb dropped destroys a building, killing between three and six avatars standing on it in the process. The game awards a point for killing militants and subtracts a point for killing civilians, though avoiding civilian casualties entirely is impossible because combatants and civilians are interspersed.

*Gaza Assault: Code Red* was uploaded by NothingIsReal on 17 July 2014 and removed along with *Bomb Gaza* on 4 August.<sup>22</sup> It presents players with an overhead view of an animated Gaza City through the black and white video screen of a UAV. As the player-controlled UAV moves across the city, small figures below shoot at it and launch rockets. The objective is to shoot Hamas' rockets before they are launched and to kill as many militants as possible. Players accumulate points for successful kills, which are tallied along the top of the drone's view screen. This game is among the most disconcerting of all those produced about the conflict because it comes the closest to producing a visually realistic view of combat. Although the game is animated, the black and white colouring and the overhead view evoke the low-resolution videos of real UAV and cruise missile strikes that are shown on news reports.

*Whack the Hamas*, which was initially uploaded on 26 July 2014, was the third game to be removed from Google Play on 4 August.<sup>23</sup> It is based on the game Whack-a-Mole, though with the critical difference that the moles are Hamas fighters. Cartoon militants, whose faces are covered by masks, but who are adorned with green headbands and suicide vests, pop up and down from ten holes that are spread across a field. The figures are supposed to represent fighters tunnelling out of Gaza City, which can be seen in the background, behind a barbed wire fence. Although *Whack the Hamas* does not involve the simulated use of any real weapons or even closely resemble real combat activities, as the other games I discuss do, it is explicitly based on the search for tunnels that was one of the IDF's primary objectives during Operation Protective Edge.

By far the most popular subject for mobile games about the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict was the Iron Dome. At least eight Iron Dome simulators were uploaded to Google Play during the conflict, each similar in their gameplay mechanics, narrative, and representational style. These games were based around one or more player-controlled Iron Dome rocket batteries that are tasked with destroying incoming rockets before they manage to reach an Israeli city. Each game featured a seemingly endless barrage of Hamas' rockets that indicate the presence of a powerful and relentless enemy off-screen. The games celebrate the power of the Iron Dome by suggesting that, in the hands of a skilled operator, it can provide total protection for Israeli civilians.

<sup>21</sup> Google's reasons for removing *Bomb Gaza* and three other games about the conflict were never clearly stated, but it seems that they were too openly hateful. See Matt Peckham, 'Google removes 'Bomb Gaza' game from Play store', *Time*, available at: {<http://time.com/3082253/google-bomb-gaza-game/>} accessed 5 August 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



*Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy* was released on 28 July 2014 by Shap Games. It features a simple interface, with a player-controlled missile launcher positioned on the left side of the screen and a large animated city in the background. The missile launcher is clearly modelled on those used in the Iron Dome system, a fact that the game emphasises with a photo of the launcher on its start page. Players must fire their missiles against rockets that fly in from the right side of the screen. They lose some health each time a rocket reaches the city they are defending, and the game becomes increasingly difficult as the barrage intensifies. GamyTech's *Iron Dome*, released on 30 July 2014, is almost identical to *Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy* in its presentation and gameplay mechanics. However, *Iron Dome* is distinctive in its effort to be more visually realistic. In the background players see a photograph of Tel Aviv, rather than an animated urban landscape, which helps to link the game to the real conflict and invokes a more concrete sense of threat.

*Defending Israel: Southern Escalation*, released by Defense Gamings on 2 August 2014, shows another slight variation on the Iron Dome subgenre by transforming the animated city that players have to protect into a major part of gameplay. As rockets rain down from the sky, they blast small holes in the buildings, demolishing them bit by bit as players struggle to minimise the extent of the damage. The destruction helps to create a sense of intense threat, as it suggests that entire cities and their civilian inhabitants could be effaced under a barrage of Hamas rockets. Finally, *Iron Dome – The Game* was released on 22 July 2014 by BiGapps Interactive. It features a mobile Iron Dome missile launcher protecting an animated city. The gameplay mirrors the classic arcade game *Space Invaders*, as players drive the missile launcher from side to side shooting upwards at rockets and suicide bombers falling from the sky. The inclusion of parachuting suicide bombers sets this game apart from the Iron Dome simulations that show a stronger desire for realism while also demonstrating the same effort to call attention to Hamas' use of suicide bombers that is evident in *Whack the Hamas*.

*Gaza Defender*, which was released on 1 August 2014, was one of the few games to take a pro-Palestinian viewpoint, though it is much further removed from the real events of the conflict than any of the others I found. Players can take control of a Palestinian tank, characters from the film *The Expendables*, or the Incredible Hulk and use these to shoot Israeli helicopters and airplanes that pass overhead. The animated city in the background looks surprisingly similar to a Midwestern American city, with small office buildings and colourful suburban houses. As in simulations of the Iron Dome, the game is an effort to prevent missiles from reaching the peaceful city by shooting them before they land. However, the use of imagined heroes highlights the fact that there is no Palestinian equivalent to the Iron Dome and that any mechanism of intercepting IDF bombs must be fictional.

Finally, *Rocket Pride* by Best Arabic Games was released on 16 July 2014 and removed from Google Play on 5 August. It was the only pro-Palestinian game removed by Google and was taken down later than the pro-Israel games, which could indicate that the decision was motivated by a desire to give equal treatment to games supporting both sides of the conflict. In this game, players must direct a rocket launched from Gaza as it passes through an Israeli city. Players dodge gunfire from Israeli soldiers and steer the rocket past tall buildings until the rocket reaches its target and explodes. The game is presented as a series of missions that are selected from a city landscape. Upon successfully reaching the end of a map, players see the corresponding target explode and are free to select another. The imagery therefore

suggests the same kind of total threat to Israeli cities that is a fixture of Iron Dome games, albeit from the opposing perspective.

### **Militarised popular culture as propaganda**

The production and distribution of propaganda during war is often characterised as a top-down process by which political, military, and media elites attempt to influence audiences.<sup>24</sup> Douglas Kellner describes American propaganda during the first decade of the War on Terror as a product of the Bush administration, earning it the label ‘Bushspeak’ and making it analysable in terms of deliberate manipulation.<sup>25</sup> Susan Brewer says that ‘[t]o explain to Americans why they fight, government leaders translate war aims into propaganda – the deliberate manipulations of facts, ideas, and lies.’<sup>26</sup> Finally, Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard say that films manifest the militaristic visions of the producers and financiers that constitute the ‘Hollywood war machine’.<sup>27</sup>

Military video games are typically described in terms of a similar top-down elite influence. *America’s Army*, which was initially released by the US Army in 2002 and has been continually updated since then, is one of the best examples of video game propaganda because it was explicitly designed as a recruitment and public diplomacy tool. *America’s Army’s* stylised violence, powerful pro-Army and pro-American imagery, and inclusion of recruiting advertisements, highlight the game’s persuasive purpose.<sup>28</sup> Ed Halter describes it as the ‘next generation of wartime propaganda’.<sup>29</sup> Peter Mantello argues that the game goes beyond promoting military service and that it also ‘advocates a form of global humanitarian interventionism that justifies any breach of another country’s sovereignty, the legal justification to conduct extrajudicial killing and a narrative which brutalizes and demoralizes its faceless victims.’<sup>30</sup> Shaw uses *America’s Army* as one of his case studies to demonstrate that ‘video games are vital in linking a brutal colonial present with the intimate spaces of the home computer, thus facilitating mass cultural participation’.<sup>31</sup>

Console and computer games designed by major civilian entertainment companies generally lack the clear strategic interests underlying *America’s Army*, yet they are often produced with military assistance. Studies of the industry have documented extensive connections between the military and video game producers, often with

<sup>24</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); David Willcox, *Propaganda, the Press and Conflict: The Gulf War and Kosovo* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Nicholas J. O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda: Weapons of Mass Seduction* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Kellner, ‘The Persian Gulf TV war revisited’, in Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (eds), *Reporting War: Journalism in Wartime* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 136–54; Douglas Kellner, ‘Bushspeak and the politics of lying: Presidential rhetoric in the “War on Terror”’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 37:4 (2007), pp. 622–45.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, ‘Hollywood and the spectacle of terrorism’, *New Political Science*, 28:3 (2006), pp. 335–51; Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2006); Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, ‘The imperial warrior in Hollywood: Rambo and beyond’, *New Political Science* 30:4 (2008), pp. 565–78.

<sup>28</sup> Delwiche, ‘From the Green Berets to America’s army’; Salter, ‘The geographical imaginations of video games’; Schulzke, ‘The virtual War on Terror’; Höglund, ‘Electronic empire’.

<sup>29</sup> Ed Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox: War and Video Games* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Mantello, ‘Playing discreet war in the US’, p. 272.

<sup>31</sup> Shaw, ‘Playing war’, p. 798.

the military providing technical advisers and military equipment in exchange for the game developers' assistance creating military simulations or pro-military games.<sup>32</sup> Civil-military collaboration has even resulted in several games, including *Doom*, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, and *Close Combat*, having civilian and military variants.

Evidence of persuasive intent and biased portrayals of real political actors within the war game narratives adds further evidence that many console and computer games can be accurately described as propaganda. War games typically feature small groups of American or British soldiers that battle terrorists, insurgents, and other enemies in covert special operations missions.<sup>33</sup> These games emphasise their protagonists' heroism and often explicitly praise real veterans of recent combat operations. For example, the game *Medal of Honor*,<sup>34</sup> which is loosely based on operation Anaconda in Afghanistan and received assistance from military advisors, includes tributes to American special operations forces, such as this message from the closing credits: 'This is a dedication to America's servicemen. A dedication to the debt we owe to Warriors lost and to all our military forces who continue to defend freedom around the world.' The credits continue with a laudatory description of the soldiers, whom it calls 'beacons for our heroic ideals'.

Military video games are not exclusively pro-war or pro-military in their orientation. Some present insightful critical perspectives on ongoing conflicts and militarism in general. However, the games that are most forceful in their anti-war messages tend to be produced by indie developers that are comparatively small, lack the major developers' links with the military, and have a smaller share of the market. As Nick Robinson correctly notes, '[w]hile of more limited impact in terms of sales and distribution, the indie games scene has been much more successful in developing games that provide a coherent critique of society's values in general, and the War on Terror in particular.'<sup>35</sup> The only noteworthy critical war game produced by a major developer over the past decade was *Spec Ops: The Line*, and even this game was overshadowed by more popular franchises.<sup>36</sup> This seems to indicate that there is a correspondence between the kind of developer creating the games and the games' attitudes toward war, with violent actors and major media companies producing pro-war games and independent developers presenting more critical perspectives.

### Non-elite propaganda

Mobile games about the Israel-Gaza Conflict reveal that the use of video games to produce propaganda is not restricted to elite media outlets, also that games from small developers or developers that lack direct connections with the military do not consistently provide a critical perspective. The games I discussed were produced by small teams of developers who had no clear backing from the belligerents involved in the conflict and little or no prior experience developing military games. Non-elite actors have used mass media, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio, as well

<sup>32</sup> Halter, *From Sun Tzu to Xbox*; Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*; James Der Derian, "'Now we are all avatars'", *Millennium: A Journal of International Studies*, 39:1 (2010), pp. 181–6.

<sup>33</sup> Stahl, 'Have you played the War on Terror?'; Roger Stahl, 'Why we "support the troops": Rhetorical evolutions', *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 12:4 (2009), pp. 533–70; Schulzke, 'The virtual War on Terror'.

<sup>34</sup> *Medal of Honor* (2010) Electronic Arts.

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, 'Videogames, persuasion and the War on Terror', p. 516.

<sup>36</sup> Matthew Thomas Payne, 'War bytes: the critique of militainment in *Spec Ops: the line*', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2014).

as older visual media like poems and paintings, with persuasive intent in the past.<sup>37</sup> However, as Sebastian Kaempf points out, there is something special about new media that transgress ‘the age-old division between sender and receiver’ to create a ‘heteropolar media landscape’.<sup>38</sup> ‘In this brave new media world, the latest technological quantum leap has empowered non-state actors and individuals alike to be able to contest state-policed war narratives, thereby creating the conditions for today’s wars to be waged – by both sides – in and through media platforms’.<sup>39</sup> Some research on international politics has called attention to new medias’ capacities for empowering non-elite actors, but this research has been fairly restricted in scope and has not been addressed in studies of military video games, despite the growing use of these games to simulate real conflicts.<sup>40</sup>

Each of the three pro-Israel games that were removed by Google came from indie developers that had shown little prior interest in producing persuasive games. PlayFTW, which created *Bomb Gaza*, only had two other games hosted on Google Play at the time: a science fiction shooter called *Space War-New Era* and *Piano*, a digital playable piano. The removal of *Bomb Gaza* from Google Play led commenters defending or criticising the game to do so in reviews for these other two games – with the strange result that reviews of a piano simulator became the site of a vitriolic debate over the fighting in Gaza. *Gaza Assault*’s developer NothingIsReal had no other games in the app store and no company website. *Whack the Hamas*’ developer HitsNapp also had no other games and no company presence online aside from a recently created Facebook page devoted to defending the game against critics. The many games about the Iron Dome reveal the same evidence of small indie developers producing propaganda games. For example, BiGapps, the creator of *Iron Dome – The Game*, had developed several other mobile apps prior to the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict. However, the games were distinctly apolitical. One was a social networking app that allowed users to send virtual whistles and kisses to friends. Another was a choice engine modeled on a slot machine. *Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy* was produced by Shap Games, which only had one other game posted: *Crazy Basketball Saga*.

*Gaza Defender* was the first military game created by the Pakistani company AX Gears, which describes itself as making games that ‘are full of fun and humor’.<sup>41</sup> The company’s games have become more political since August 2014, with several that criticise Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and a game simulating Pakistani military attacks on the Taliban. However, it remains small, with five members, and only produces mobile games. Best Arabic Games, the creator of *Rocket Pride*, was the only developer that had an extensive history of war gaming, having produced several earlier pro-Palestinian mobile games about conflicts in the Middle East. However, even with this experience, the company’s exclusive interest in the Android market and lack of online presence aside from its Facebook page leave it securely within the indie game market.

<sup>37</sup> Serena Carpenter, ‘U.S. elite and non-elite newspapers’ portrayal of the Iraq War: a comparison of frames and source use’, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84:4 (2007), pp. 761–76; Barbara S. Hugenberg Paul M. Haridakis, and Stanley T. Wearden (eds), *War and the Media: Essays on News Reporting, Propaganda and Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009); Sebastian Kaempf, ‘The mediatisation of war in a transforming global media landscape’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 67:5 (2013), pp. 586–604.

<sup>38</sup> Kaempf, ‘The mediatisation of war in a transforming global media landscape’, pp. 598–9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> R. Charli Carpenter and Daniel W. Drezner, ‘International Relations 2.0: the implications of new media for an old profession’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 11 (2010), pp. 255–72.

<sup>41</sup> AX Gears, *Facebook*, available at: {[https://www.facebook.com/axgears/info?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/axgears/info?tab=page_info)} accessed 5 October 2014.

The size, background, and online presence of the companies that created mobile war games in the midst of the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict is evidence of a non-elite character that is significant for three reasons. First, this shows that when a medium has fairly low entry costs, as mobile gaming does, it may permit new actors to become involved in ideological warfare. Second, it suggests that research on propaganda, especially video game propaganda, needs to give greater attention to the ways in which non-elites are involved in producing persuasive media that are marketed as efforts to influence ongoing conflicts. Finally, the developers' backgrounds suggest that the conflict was a catalyst that drove them into the war game genre.

One may question whether the mobile games truly came from non-elite sources, as there is a long history of elites disseminating propaganda that is disguised as coming from non-elite sources, which goes back at least as far as the Reformation.<sup>42</sup> Policymakers and members of the military may also pressure independent media outlets in subtle ways that are difficult to detect. Israel has made some efforts to do this previously and has strong incentives to increase its public diplomacy given concerns that it is losing the ideological war.<sup>43</sup> Based on the publicly available information, there is no indication that any of the developers responsible for creating mobile games about the Gaza-Israel War have direct links with states, military forces, or major media organisations. The developers could be responding to indirect pressures from elite actors, yet it seems likely that some, if not all, of these games reflect the developers' own sentiments or at least some mixture of those sentiments and indirect influences. Thus, it appears that the games have lowered the costs of producing and distributing propaganda in a way that has opened up the ideological battleground to a more diverse range of actors.

### Gaming and political engagement

Video games are defined, at least in part, by their participatory character. They are interactive media that require players to provide inputs that affect the course of simulated events. To make players' participation meaningful, games frequently attempt to immerse players in fictional identities.<sup>44</sup> As Bob Rehak points out, '[t]he video game avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities.'<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer argue that 'games can teach a mindset, a way of approaching problems through a set of rules, values, and practices'.<sup>46</sup> Games based on real wars embed players in the identities of real combatants, thereby privileging those combatants' points of view and identities. For example, players of a mainstream war game may become American soldiers fighting the Taliban or British special operatives hunting terrorists – usually with no opportunity to adopt an

<sup>42</sup> Mark Edwards, *Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Ron Schleifer, 'Jewish and contemporary histories of Israeli Hasbara', *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 15:1–2 (2003), pp. 123–53; Ben D. Mor, 'Public diplomacy in grand strategy', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 2:2 (2006), pp. 157–76; Eytan Gilboa, 'Public diplomacy: the missing component in Israel's foreign policy', *Israel Affairs*, 12:4 (2006), pp. 715–47.

<sup>44</sup> Delwiche, 'From the Green Berets to America's army'.

<sup>45</sup> Bob Rehak, 'Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the avatar', in Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (eds), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 103–27.

<sup>46</sup> Ian Bogost, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer, *Newsgames: Journalism at Play* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2010), p. 108.

alternative perspective. Winning ‘requires the player to perfect his or her role in the game’, while those who fail to take on their assigned role are punished by losing.<sup>47</sup>

Although console and computer games privilege certain perspectives and cast gameplay as a participatory activity, their capacities to embed players in current events are severely constrained. Most games are set in fictional wars, wars that have already ended, or much earlier events in protracted wars. The choice of what kind of conflict to simulate is probably influenced by many considerations, yet some of the most important and insurmountable are structural constraints. Long development times, high budgets, and the demand of producing sophisticated games that will make a return on large investments prevent developers from making games that engage players as participants in events that are still in the news.<sup>48</sup>

Mobile games are able to circumvent or minimise many of the practical challenges that prolong the development process. They can be created fairly cheaply (for as little as \$5,000 to \$20,000)<sup>49</sup> and in a matter of weeks by small teams of developers relying on simple graphics and repetitive gameplay mechanics. Moreover, mobile game developers are under much less pressure to earn large profits – and therefore under less pressure to avoid taking political positions that could alienate large consumer audiences – than console and computer war game developers that may spend hundreds of millions of dollars on a game. The speed of production and comparatively low costs make it possible for mobile war games to engage players in current events as they unfold and to privilege a certain point of view at a time when opposing belligerents are actively competing for public support. Thus, while none of the mobile games are very graphically realistic, aside from those that show photographs of the Iron Dome missiles, they display ‘social realism’<sup>50</sup> in the sense that they are artefacts in the conflicts that they simulate. They are part of the ideological battleground on which opposing sites compete to promote their own narratives.

The mobile war games released during the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict were framed as giving players opportunities to become virtual combatants. The descriptions of each game characterise play as a political act, and each game embeds players in a perspective that strongly favours one side. For example, *Gaza Assault*’s description urges players to: ‘Take control of an Israeli UAV equipped with powerful weapons in an attempt to secure the region!’<sup>51</sup> It goes on to explain the importance of the war effort, and, by extension, the importance of playing the game: ‘Terrorist cells are launching rockets into your country, Do you have what it takes to protect your citizens?’<sup>52</sup> *Whack the Hamas* is likewise marketed as an opportunity to intercede in the conflict. Its description exhorts players to ‘Help Israel defend itself against Hamas!’ and says that ‘The Hamasites are coming out of their tunnels! Don’t let them

<sup>47</sup> Ken McAllister, *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> Casey O’Donnell, ‘The North American game industry’, in Peter Zackariasson and Timothy L. Wilson, *The Video Game Industry: Formation, Present State, and Future* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 99–115.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Whitton, ‘Multiple media: a picture is worth a thousand words’, in Nicola Whitton and Alex Moseley (eds), *Using Games to Enhance Learning and Teaching: A Beginner’s Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 69.

<sup>50</sup> Galloway, *Gaming*, p. 76.

<sup>51</sup> Timothy McGrath, ‘“Bomb Gaza” and other Gaza-themed video games that will depress you to no end’, *Salon*, available at: {[http://www.salon.com/2014/08/05/bomb\\_gaza\\_and\\_other\\_gaza\\_themed\\_videogames\\_that\\_will\\_depress\\_you\\_to\\_no\\_end\\_partner/](http://www.salon.com/2014/08/05/bomb_gaza_and_other_gaza_themed_videogames_that_will_depress_you_to_no_end_partner/)} accessed 19 August 2014.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

escape, otherwise they will hurt innocent civilians!’<sup>53</sup> These descriptions sound like real calls to arms, and in a sense they are. They urge players to show solidarity with the people of Israel and to support their struggle by identifying with them and understanding the conflict from their perspective.

Iron Dome simulations employ the same kind of rhetoric, though with the interesting addition that some attempt to link players’ virtual identities to a real weapon system, which is legitimated in the process. The description of *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* asks players to ‘Help to protect Israel using ingenious Iron Dome system!’<sup>54</sup> *Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy* calls on players to ‘Protect your country by destroying as many enemy missiles as you can with IRON DOME.’<sup>55</sup> *Iron Dome*’s description and the story that introduces the game present the following scenario: ‘Israel is under attack! Your country needs you!’ The game goes on to issue a call to arms: ‘Rocket fire from Gaza is a constant threat facing Israel’s civilians. YOU MUST DEFEND ISRAEL!’<sup>56</sup> Finally, *Iron Dome – The Game*’s description states ‘Our people is in danger, trapped in their own home with wives and kids. Terrorists are infiltrating the city and exploding their-selves. You are our last hope.’<sup>57</sup>

The games do not propose to offer players a chance to simulate or reflect on the conflict. Rather, they describe playing as a way of participating in the war. The games call on players to take part in the defence of Israel and they hold players personally responsible for the conflict’s outcome. They cast players in the role of the lone saviour who is the only one capable of winning the war, though this requires some assistance from the featured weaponry. The games therefore embed players in the identity of an Israeli soldier who sees Israel as a peaceful country that must be protected against hostile Palestinian fighters. This is made particularly clear from the way the games presume that Israel is ‘Your country’.

*Gaza Defender* and *Rocket Pride* likewise present gameplay as a participatory act. *Gaza Defender*’s description affirms that: ‘No one is willing to stand up for those poor Palestinians’ then asks players: ‘Are you willing to be their hero? Will you be their savior? Do you wish you could shoot down those Israeli bastards?’ Players are again offered a heroic status that is defined in opposition to real people. The description goes on to explain that playing the game is a statement of ideological support: ‘Here is your chance to prove how much you hate the Israelis. Download Gaza Defender right now and become the hero.’<sup>58</sup> *Rocket Pride* likewise tells players that they are ‘supporting heroes besieged in the Gaza Strip from an oppressive occupier’ by downloading the game.<sup>59</sup>

The messages used to advertise the games and frame their narratives do not necessarily reflect the game developers’ motives. However, several developers issued public statements in which they openly stated their desire to contribute to the war effort and shape players’ attitudes. Avishay Segal said of the motives behind

<sup>53</sup> *Whack the Hamas, Facebook*, available at: {<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Whack-the-Hamas/1510347195847855>} accessed 8 September 2014.

<sup>54</sup> *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* (Removed from Google Play) accessed 2 August 2014.

<sup>55</sup> *Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy*, Shap Games, Google Play, available at: {<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.shapgames.irondome&hl=en>} accessed 11 August 2014.

<sup>56</sup> *Iron Dome*, GamyTech, Google Play, available at: {<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.GamyTech.IronDome>} accessed 13 August 2014.

<sup>57</sup> *Iron Dome – The Game*, BiGapps, Google Play, available at: {<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.BiGapps.IronDome&hl=en>} accessed 20 August 2014.

<sup>58</sup> AX Gears (2014).

<sup>59</sup> ‘Gaza-Israel video games cause controversy’, *BBC News*, available at: {<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-28657324>} accessed 28 August 2014.

*Whack the Hamas* that ‘We wanted to show that Jews are not going to sit idly while they are being attacked.’<sup>60</sup> *Gaza Assault* creator Nir Yomotov attempted to downplay the game’s offensiveness while still expressing a desire to use it as a way of expressing his views on the conflict. ‘Games are just another medium, like video. You can use it to make your voice heard.’<sup>61</sup> Finally, Ashar Jamil, one of the creators of *Gaza Defender*, said that his goal was to ‘give the perfect reality of the Gaza situation’ and to find a way of capturing the plight of Palestinian civilians.<sup>62</sup>

### Player engagement in mobile war games

Reviews of the mobile war games showed another participatory dimension of gaming, as they became a forum for debating the conflict. Players posting comments that supported Israel generally affirmed the defensive character of the war and criticised the Palestinians for being terrorists and Islamicists. One review for *Iron Dome – The Game* said ‘[g]ood job Nice work friend. I #SupportIsrael. Everybody have the right to save him/herself from islami [*sic*] terror attack.’<sup>63</sup> Another for *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* stated: ‘Exelent [*sic*] Very encouraging work. I #SupportIsrael. #SaveHumanity from the attack of Islamic [*sic*] terrorist aka uncivilized dogma.’<sup>64</sup> The inclusion of hashtags in these comments reveals the effort some users made to establish links with Twitter to take the ideological conflict beyond the game reviews. The pro-Palestinian commenters condemned the pro-Israel games for supporting violence and often attempted to link the simulated violence in the games to real attacks on civilians, especially women and children. For example, one comment on PlayFTW’s game *Piano* said ‘[b]oycott Developers think it’s funny that innocent woman and children are being killed, they developed a game called bomb Gaza.’<sup>65</sup>

Even more interesting was the effort some commenters made to challenge the meaning of games by either reframing them or by imagining alternative ways of playing them. An example of the former strategy comes from a comment on *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation*: ‘Horrible Israel is killing poor innocent people. The title of this game should read “Protecting Palestine from Israeli [*sic*] lunatics.”’<sup>66</sup> Here the commenter attempts to give the game new meaning with a title that more accurately captures his perception of the IDF war effort. A prime example of the strategy of renegotiating the meaning of the war games was a review posted for *Iron Dome* that suggested playing the game by refusing to take any action at all, thereby transforming the game into a simulated Palestinian victory. ‘You can play the game without doing anything . Just watch the missiles [*sic*] bombing Tel Aviv :) just watch and i am sure you like the game . It should be named Gaza destroying Tel Aviv :)’<sup>67</sup>

<sup>60</sup> David Shamah, ‘“Whack Hamas” app developer: Google gave me a raw deal’, *The Times of Israel*, available at: {<http://www.timesofisrael.com/whack-hamas-app-developer-google-gave-me-a-raw-deal/>} accessed 7 August 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Elena Cresci, ‘Should we make games about Israel/Palestine?’, *The Guardian*, available at: {<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/08/gaza-israel-palestine-bomb-gaza-news-game-google>} accessed 8 August 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Gideon Resnick, ‘“Bomb Gaza” game maker: “F\*\*k them all”’, *The Daily Beast*, available at: {<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/05/bomb-gaza-game-maker-f-k-them-all.html>} accessed 5 August 2014.

<sup>63</sup> *Iron Dome – The Game* (2014).

<sup>64</sup> *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* (2014).

<sup>65</sup> *Piano*, PlayFTW, accessed 29 August 2014 (Removed from Google Play).

<sup>66</sup> *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* (2014).

<sup>67</sup> *Iron Dome* (2014).



This interest in remaking a game by playing it in a particular way, which was echoed by other comments, shows that players do not simply receive the content of persuasive games as passive spectators but help to construct the meaning of the games they play.

The players' comments demonstrate that mobile games not only disrupt the conventional top-down propaganda model but also create sites of horizontal ideological contestation between players. It seems likely that many players are attracted to mobile war games because they already held strong beliefs about it. Reviews show players with different nationalities, cultures, and languages, expressing those views to the games' developers, other players, and the dozens of journalists who wrote articles about the games. They are evidence that the players use the games as sites for enacting their own perspectives and attempting to make their own voices heard. This supports Steven E. Jones's observation that the meaning of video games depends heavily on how players, who begin the games with fully-formed identities, experience them. 'Players *make* games meaningful, make their meanings, as they play them, talk about them, reconfigure them, and play them again. They inevitably do so as members of various overlapping communities.'<sup>68</sup>

The reviews reflect the games' participatory character and highlight the difficulties associated with neatly distinguishing between 'real world' politics and simulations. Many of the players seem to be using the games as a forum for commenting on the conflict itself – even giving it a rating out of five stars. It is frequently difficult to determine when players are reviewing a game and when they are reviewing the conflict itself. These attitudes overlap and become nearly indistinguishable, especially when they are distilled into the games' numerical popularity scores. This supports Wark's observation that '[g]ames are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself.'<sup>69</sup> By playing the games and responding to them, players became actual participants in the persistent ideological conflict between two belligerents struggling for international support.<sup>70</sup>

The number of players involved in mobile war gaming is difficult to determine, as user data is proprietary and games may be hosted in multiple places. Google Play gave approximate download figures of between 500 and 1,000 for each of the games while the conflict was in progress. However, when other hosts are included the download numbers may be much higher. For example, one host estimated *Whack the Hamas*' downloads at 10,000–50,000<sup>71</sup> – an increase in popularity that was probably triggered by the news stories that were written about the game following its removal from Google Play. Other mobile war games produced following the ceasefire have attracted larger audiences on Google Play, which indicate the growing importance of the medium. *Israel Under Fire*, *Gaza Hero*, and *Gaza Resist* each have player estimates ranging between 10,000 and 50,000. Some mobile war games about conflicts that have lasted longer have received even more attention. *Lovers of Freedom*, which is set in the Syrian Civil War, is estimated to have been downloaded between 100,000 and 500,000 times.

Although I have emphasised the importance of mobile games as artefacts that appear while a conflict is in progress, it is important to note the extent to which they may live on after the fighting has stopped. The games' continued popularity may

<sup>68</sup> Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 9–10.

<sup>69</sup> Wark, *Gamer Theory*.

<sup>70</sup> Schleifer, 'Jewish and contemporary histories of Israeli Hasbara'; Mor, 'Public diplomacy in grand strategy'; Gilboa, 'Public diplomacy'.

<sup>71</sup> {<http://www.whackthehamas.com/index.aspx>}.

indicate a sense that the ideological war is continuing and that hostilities may recommence in the future. It is likewise important to note that the news coverage the games about Gaza received appears to have generated increased interest in this style of gaming, and a sharp increase in the numbers of downloads. This demonstrates that mass media still have an important role to play in ideological warfare, even when it is waged using new media. In particular, mass media can direct people toward social media phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed amid the large volume of content being produced.

Data about players' geographical locations is likewise proprietary, though some users who post comments about the games include this information. The variety of players' locations indicates the degree of international attention focused on the continual fighting in Gaza. For example, comments on *Iron Dome: Gaza Rocket Destroy* were posted by players in the US, UK, South Africa, Jordan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Australia, with the US and Jordan being the most common. Comments on *Iron Dome* came from players in the US, UK, Israel, Canada, Sweden, Syria, India, Taiwan, and the United Arab Emirates with most of the commenters coming from the US, UK, and Israel. The games, host websites, and associated social media therefore facilitate ideological contestation between players who are geographically far removed from the fighting but who share a desire to affect it by voicing their opinions.

### **Propaganda techniques**

Games about the Israel-Gaza Conflict relied on many of the persuasive techniques that are ubiquitous in propaganda. Each game constructed the conflict in a way that supported a particular side by demonising the opponent, affirming the favoured side's justness, and excusing that side's actions. These techniques can be found in console and computer war games as well, but they take on a special character when framed as interventions in an ongoing conflict. Moreover, these persuasive techniques were aided by the medium in interesting ways. The mobile games' poor graphics, limited narrative capacities, and simple gameplay mechanics facilitated simplistic representations of the war and the belligerents waging it. The persuasive struggle was even extended beyond the games themselves through comments posted on Google Play and Twitter hashtags. These comments transformed the games into transmedial ideological battlegrounds that echoed many of the persuasive techniques that were present in the game narratives.

### **Demonising enemies**

Demonising enemies is a common propaganda technique that persists across media platforms.<sup>72</sup> As Sam Keen points out, '[i]n all propaganda, the face of the enemy is designed to provide a focus of our hatred. He is the other. The outsider. The alien. He is not human.'<sup>73</sup> Military video games regularly construct damaging images

<sup>72</sup> James Combs and Sara T. Combs, *Film Propaganda and American Politics: An Analysis and Filmography* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Debra Merskin, 'The construction of Arabs as enemies: Post-September 11 discourse of George W. Bush', *Mass Communication and Society*, 7:2 (2004), pp. 157–75; Erin Steuter and Deborah Wills, *At War with Metaphor: Media, Propaganda, and Racism in the War on Terror* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>73</sup> Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 16.

of opponents<sup>74</sup> or refuse to show them at all.<sup>75</sup> However, demonisation takes a distinctive character in the mobile games. Because these games' graphics are relatively simplistic compared to those of console and computer games, they facilitate the construction of caricatures and allowed this style of representation to appear natural.

The demonisation of enemies is evident from how the mobile games about Gaza present or omit their antagonists. Each of the pro-Israel games removed by Google on 4 August 2014 constructs caricatures of the Palestinians. *Bomb Gaza* and *Whack the Hamas* are particularly noteworthy in this respect, as they include Hamas fighters who wear masks and have cartoonish bodies that make them appear nonhuman. Simplistic characters are the norm in mobile games, yet the avatars' symbolisation of real people gives this stylistic convention a much different meaning than it might have in games about historical or fictional wars. The avatars represent real people who are struggling to be recognised as combatants fighting for a legitimate cause and who are symbolically denied that recognition.

The games' construction of caricatures was raised in defence of *Whack the Hamas* by one of its creators, Avishay Segal. 'They don't look like terrorists, and they don't even look like people.'<sup>76</sup> He went on to argue that the game was not hate speech by denying that the game was discriminatory and calling members of Hamas 'terrorists'. 'Our app doesn't advocate for any type of violence against groups of people based on anything ... We developed the app only for fun and relaxation, for the people who are being killed every day by a terrorist group.'<sup>77</sup> Although these comments were meant to rationalise the game's depiction of the Hamas fighters, it perfectly captures what seems to be problematic about denying the humanity of real people in media that are presented as being merely a source of entertainment.

The pro-Israel games simulating the Iron Dome, as well as *Gaza Defender*, do not show the enemy at all. Instead, players contend with a faceless adversary that exists off screen or, in the case of *Gaza Defender*, that is concealed inside the cockpit of IDF bombers. Here the caricature of the threat is not constructed through the visual representation of the enemy but rather through the violence the enemy employs. The Palestinian rockets and IDF aircraft in these games engage in relentless attacks that inflict indiscriminate destruction. The invisible opponents do not appear to have any interests or goals aside from completely annihilating the Israeli or Palestinian populations. As with games that show caricatures, those that simulate fighting against a faceless enemy make claims about the enemy through their visualities. In this case, the enemy is not only a faceless Other but one that only exists as a threat.

### Establishing just cause

The extreme enemy threat leads to the second propaganda strategy that is a persistent feature of mobile war games: an effort to claim a just cause. As Taylor points out, establishing just cause is one of the central goals of propaganda because it is vital to claim moral superiority over enemies.<sup>78</sup> And the most effective way of claiming just cause is by demonstrating that a war is being waged defensively against an enemy that is acting aggressively and that refuses to abide by moral and legal restrictions on the

<sup>74</sup> Schulzke, 'The virtual War on Terror'.

<sup>75</sup> Allen, 'The unreal enemy of America's army'.

<sup>76</sup> Shamah, "'Whack Hamas'".

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind*, p. 13.

conduct of war.<sup>79</sup> This invokes the right of individual and national self-defence against aggression that is affirmed by just war theory and international humanitarian law.<sup>80</sup>

The mobile games about Gaza establish their protagonist's justness and antagonist's evilness via references to the antagonist's aggression and strategies of civilian victimisation. The games show the opposing side attacking civilians and urge players to join a defensive war aimed at restoring security. For example, the description of *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* says that 'The southern front of Israel is HOT again, with rockets being fired at Israeli civilian targets.'<sup>81</sup> *Iron Dome* says that 'Hundreds of rockets have fallen on its cities and towns. Millions of Israelis run, and must pull their children, into shelters each day.'<sup>82</sup> The same sentiment can be seen in games that support the Palestinians. *Gaza Defender* claims that 'It has been far too long since the Israelis have had Palestinian blood on their hands. Their atrocities are immeasurable and their murders are countless. They are a blot to mankind.'<sup>83</sup>

These descriptions are borne out in each of the games, as they simulate an endless series of enemy attacks directed at civilian targets and enlist players as defenders of the innocent. The mobile games' limited narrative capacities encourage this kind of simplistic representation of war. Within games that simulate the repetitive acts of bombing cities or defending cities against bombardment, there is little opportunity to reflect on reasons for fighting or for thinking about the potential consequences of the acts being simulated.

Attempts to claim just cause for one side or the other were a persistent theme in the comments players posted, thus showing a continuum between players' advocacy strategies and those that appear in the games. One review for *Iron Dome* praised the developers for showing what it was like to live in fear of being attacked. 'Iron dome Good game, it shows how terrifying it must be to live in Israel when its constantly under Islamic attack . good for you Israel for protecting your people.'<sup>84</sup> Another said of the game that 'This game is fun, slightly addicting and best of all it shows what the people over there in Israel have to put up with every day because of the fanatic uneducated neighbours they have.'<sup>85</sup> These comments, and others like them, are evidence that the effort to define the war as a defensive struggle persists beyond the games themselves, to include players' own understandings of the games and their rhetorical strategies. The second comment also demonstrates how this defensive orientation is substantiated with further efforts to demonise enemies.

### Excusing 'necessary' violence

A much different attitude toward civilians and justifiable uses of force is evident when games are framed in ways that excuse deviations from moral and legal restrictions on fighting. By some accounts, an enemy that poses an existential threat may provide grounds for declaring that there is a 'supreme emergency' that authorises any actions

<sup>79</sup> Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Scott A. Bonn, *Mass Deception: Moral Panic and the U.S. War on Iraq* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>80</sup> Yoram Dinstein, *War, Aggression and Self-Defence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>81</sup> *Defending Israel: Southern Escalation* (2014).

<sup>82</sup> *Iron Dome* (2014).

<sup>83</sup> AX Gears (2014).

<sup>84</sup> *Iron Dome* (2014).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

that are ostensibly taken in self-defence.<sup>86</sup> Media about war frequently echo this view by magnifying enemy threats and presenting the actions taken to counter those threats, including violence against civilians, as being necessary.<sup>87</sup> This transfers the responsibility for norm violations to the aggressive enemy that is blamed for leaving no alternative course of action, and it does so to the detriment of the civilians who are classified as acceptable ‘collateral damage’.

Games supporting both sides presented the conflict as a struggle against an existential threat that had to be defeated at all costs, even at the expense of civilian casualties. The defensively oriented games, like *Defend Gaza* and the Iron Dome simulations provide the most direct expression of existential threat with their endless waves of enemy attacks. Although players do not take offensive actions in these games, the endless bombardment suggests the necessity of an aggressive response against a powerful enemy that has no regard for civilian lives. The games also indicate the futility of a purely defensive strategy, since the enemy attacks gradually intensify until the defences are ultimately overwhelmed.

The games removed from Google Play provide stronger intimations of the inevitability of violence against civilians, which may be one of the considerations that led to their removal. In *Bomb Gaza*, players cannot avoid incidentally killing civilians as they drop bombs on Hamas fighters. They lose points for each civilian death, yet they are allowed to continue playing as long as they maintain a rough equilibrium between civilian and combatant casualties. If the number of civilian casualties becomes larger than the number of combatant casualties a ‘rage’ meter steadily grows and may become full, ending the game. Thus, playing the game well is a matter of managing the simulated public reaction to violence against civilians. This suggests that civilian casualties inflicted by air strikes on Gaza are justifiable and that the real reason to avoid harming civilians is the need to manage public opinion. In *Gaza Assault*, the civilians are invisible from the distance afforded by the UAV players’ control, yet they are certain to be inside of the countless buildings being attacked. Both games place the blame on the Palestinians for interspersing combatants and noncombatants and for positioning rockets inside or on top of civilian structures. The decision to attack targets when civilians are nearby seems to be morally unproblematic.

*Rocket Pride* refrains from showing violence against civilians, but suggests it by allowing players to guide Hamas rockets over cities while small unarmed stick figures occasionally run past with their arms flailing. The animation that plays at the end of each mission – an exploding target hovering over an office building or apartment complex – leaves little doubt about the human costs the weapons are meant to inflict. However, as with the pro-Israel games, *Rocket Pride* tacitly condones civilian victimisation by refusing to problematise it. The casualties are the inevitable outcome of the destruction that players are supposed to cause – the destruction that constitutes victory in the game world – and the realities of human suffering in real war can remain invisible in the game’s visually simplistic world without giving any clear indication that this vital information is being omitted.

### Conclusion: the future of mobile war games

As I have argued, mobile games released during the conflict in Gaza function as propaganda in the sense that they present the conflict in ways that strongly support

<sup>86</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>87</sup> Brewer, *Why America Fights*; O’Shaughnessy, *Politics and Propaganda*, pp. 123–37.

one side and frame play as a way of helping that side achieve victory. More importantly, the games demonstrate the emergence of a distinctive type of propaganda that functions in unique ways and raises new opportunities for player engagement in ideological contestation. Although I have focused on demonstrating these characteristics with reference to mobile games produced during the 2014 Israel-Gaza Conflict, it is important to reiterate that many other Android games about real conflicts have been produced and that the games about Gaza therefore represent a larger trend in mobile gaming. Since the conclusion of the Israel-Gaza Conflict, at least a dozen additional games recreating certain aspects of it have been posted to Google Play while other games simulate the fighting in Syria, Ukraine, and Iraq.

Mobile games not only display the emergence of a new form of propaganda but also point to the demand of reconsidering our understanding of propaganda when studying the political functions of new media. As Henry Jenkins argues, new media problematise traditional distinctions between media producers and consumers by bringing both roles closer together and creating new opportunities for audience communities to respond to or reinterpret the media they consume. 'Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands.'<sup>88</sup> Mobile gaming demonstrates one important instance of this, as the interplay between non-elite propaganda producers and players who are more empowered to respond to the games and contest their meaning come together to create a transmedial ideological battleground. Further research is needed to explore how new media, and video games in particular do not simply reproduce propaganda in new contexts but change its character through the inclusion of new actors.

<sup>88</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 3.