Games of Drones: The Uneasy Future of the Soldier-Hero in Call of Duty: Black Ops II

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the first-person shooter video game, Call of Duty: Black Ops II, reflects the U.S. military’s transition as it reimagines the soldier’s role in war. In the age of drone technology, this role shifts from a position of strength to one of relative weakness. Although video games that feature future combat often “function as virtual enactments and endorsements for developing military technologies,” Black Ops II offers a surprisingly complex vision of the future of drones and U.S. soldiers (Smicker 2009: 107). To explore how the game reflects a contemporary vision of the U.S. military, I weave together a close textual reading of two levels in Black Ops II with actual accounts from drone pilots and politicians that illuminate the nature of drone combat. Although there are moments in Black Ops II in which avatars combat enemies with first-hand firepower, the experience of heroic diegetic violence is superseded by a combat experience defined by powerlessness, boredom, and ambiguous pleasure. The shift of the soldier from imposing hero to a banal figure experiences its logical conclusion in Unmanned, an independent video game that foregrounds the mundane, nonviolent nature of drone piloting. Instead of training soldiers to withstand emotionally devastating experiences of death and violence first-hand (or to physically enact such violence), games like Black Ops II and Unmanned train actual and potential soldiers to tolerate monotony and disempowerment.
The campaign in Call of Duty: Black Ops II has some interesting ideas about the future of technology, but what about the future of this massively popular shooter series? On the one hand, Black Ops II introduces new mission types and dramatic decision points that liven up the campaign, as well as a league play option that represents a fundamental shift in the franchise’s hallowed multiplayer mode. These stages put you in a squad of soldiers and drones, and then let you choose which asset to control at any given time. Black Ops II also heralds the return of zombies mode. Now in its third incarnation, this cooperative survival mode is still frantic, challenging, and home to some weird humor.