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'Videogames Saved My Life':

Everyday Resistance and Ludic Recovery among US Military Veterans

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Abstract

While the explosion of videogames as a global entertainment medium has been explored in International Relations (IR) and associated fields in some detail in recent years, the proliferation of games in military settings remains under-researched. This paper examines the uses to which US military veterans put videogames following service, showing that they play an important role in healing and rehabilitation processes through community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention. Drawing in detail on interviews conducted with veterans and support workers between 2017 and 2019, the paper shows that grassroots gaming groups promote forms of communication, connectivity, and community which the military's stigmatising reintegration and mental health programmes often do not. The core argument developed is that while they do not embrace an anti-militarist ethos, through their promotion of mental and physical recovery, veterans' gaming groups can be read as important sites of everyday resistance to the violences enacted by the US military on its personnel. Unsettling critical-scholarly assumptions about what resistance looks like, and where it takes place, the paper ultimately demonstrates that it is possible to challenge the embodied alienations of militarism from within.

Key Words

Games, Videogames, Veterans, Resistance, Healing, US Military

Introduction

As scholars in International Political Sociology (IPS) and related critical fields problematise IR's conventional reification of states, elites, and institutions, and get to grips with the global political significance of everyday political actors and encounters, so too have they begun to pay attention to the subjects and subjectivities comprising militaries, militarism, and war. In recent years, the embodied experiences of service members and veterans have provided a new and powerful lens through which to

analyse armed conflict and cycles of violence at the global level. This article contributes to this burgeoning literature by examining the ways in which US military veterans use videogames as a vehicle for healing and rehabilitation following service. Drawing in detail on interviews conducted with veterans and support workers between 2017 and 2019, the article demonstrates that grassroots gaming groups promote community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention which serve to expose the limitations of official reintegration and mental health programmes. The core argument developed is that while they do not embrace an anti-militarist ethos, through their promotion of mental and physical recovery, veterans' gaming groups can be read as important sites of resistance to the violences enacted by the US military on its personnel. Unsettling critical-scholarly assumptions about what resistance looks like, and where it takes place, the paper ultimately demonstrates that it is possible to resist the embodied alienations of militarism from *within*.

The paper begins by introducing debates in Games Studies surrounding the military origins and character of videogames and the question of player agency. Against simplistic analyses which frame players as either unusually free or rigidly subjectified in line with games' rules and goals, this section shows that players can and do enact forms of 'transgressive' play (Aarseth 2007) from *within* militarised games and gaming communities. Having laid this groundwork, the paper provides an account of prevailing scholarly framings of veterans, emphasising the importance of exploring - but not reconciling - their contradictory status as simultaneously agents, instruments, and objects of US military violence (MacLeish 2013, 54). From there, it establishes that framing veterans as agents of resistance is useful in avoiding reductive representations common in both scholarly literature and the military itself (Schrader 2019, 65). The paper then outlines the enduring problems experienced by former service members and the limitations of existing support services. It finally turns to the rise of grassroots veterans' groups which use gaming for community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention. Drawing in detail on veterans' accounts, the paper shows that gaming groups promote forms of communication, connectivity, and community which the military's reintegration and mental health programmes often do not. The paper concludes that while they do not renounce military values and (simulated) practices of violence, veterans' gaming groups enact a novel form of resistance to the enduring embodied alienations the military produces in its personnel.

Games (Studies) and the Military

In its first decade as an academic field at the start of the 21st century, Games Studies witnessed a shift from a condemnatory to a celebratory orientation which emphasised videogames' rich cultural potential, aesthetic and narrative significance, and social conviviality (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xxiv-xxv). While this literature offered important correctives to the a priori distaste and moral panic of most late 20th century analyses of games and gaming culture (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xxiv), critical scholars have argued that such elated accounts overlooked several problematic issues. In particular, the endemic sexism and misogyny reflected in the events of #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw 2015; Massanari 2017; Mortensen 2018) and the racialised and colonial tropes ubiquitous in game products and culture (Chan 2005; Everett and Watkins 2008; Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Mukherjee 2017) have prompted calls in recent years for a more critical eye to be cast on the contending interests, agendas, and power relations at work in the games industry and its products (Crogan and Kennedy 2009). Such calls have yielded an empirically rich and philosophically sophisticated literature over the last decade,[1] though the problems of sexism and coloniality remain entrenched and women and people of colour continue to be significantly underrepresented in the industry.[2]

A related issue yet to be adequately reckoned with is the longstanding connection between the videogames industry and the military. This is important because, as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter have argued, virtual games 'originated in the US military-industrial complex, the nuclear-armed core of capital's global domination, to which they remain umbilically connected' (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xxix). While a handful of scholars have made the case for an urgent interrogation of the contemporary impacts of this heritage, many remain reluctant to engage. As Patrick Crogan notes, this belies an 'elective naivety of much media and games studies, which avoid a frank consideration of computer games as forms that emerge out of ongoing interchanges between war, simulation, and contemporary technoculture' (Crogan 2011, xiv). In an era characterised by recruitment gaming (Allen

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[1] Important contributions include Giddings 2007; Crogan and Kennedy 2009; Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Giddings 2009; Ash 2010; Crogan 2011; Raessens 2011; Ash 2012, 2015; Crogan 2018; Giddings 2018; Kennedy 2018.

[2] Despite the rapid growth in the number of women gamers in recent years (46% of total), only 24% of workers in the games industry identify as female (and 3% as non-binary). 10% of games industry workers identify as East, South East, or South Asian, 7% as Hispanic, 5% as indigenous, and 2% as Black/Afro-Caribbean: https://s3-us-east-2.amazonaws.com/igda-website/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/29093706/IGDA-DSS-2019_Summary-Report_Nov-20-2019.pdf

2017) and novel 'soldier-civilian' technocultural becomings (Crogan and Kennedy 2009), the impacts of this military legacy on players is of urgent import within and beyond Games Studies.

When it comes to analyses of videogame players, existing framings tend to fall on two starkly distinct poles. On the one hand, some argue that videogames offer a unique capacity to promote freedom and agency among users (Giddings 2009, 151; de Mul in Raessens and Goldstein eds. 2011, 258). As compared with other media which impose rigid narrative structures, proponents suggest, games make authors of players, and function as 'heuristic devices for thinking up, or across, economic and social systems' (Giddings 2018, 766). On the other hand, critics argue that games circumscribe players' freedom of action and promote conformist subjectivities through coded-in rules and goals. Such an 'implied' player (Aarseth 2007) is subjectified through what Seth Giddings calls 'isomorphic' processes comprising 'microcircuits of information circulation, subject construction, and virtual commodity acquisition' (Giddings 2018, 770). In a similar vein, James Ash describes the 'affective amplifications' which belie a 'politics of captivation in which the sensual and perceptual relations in the body are organized and commodified by these games in order to create attentive subjects' (Ash 2013, 28). In such analyses, players are acted upon by games at least as much as they are able to exert influence on them (Giddings 2009, 151), often entrenching prevailing gendered (Condis 2018) and colonial/imperial (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009) norms. Read in this way, games function to smooth over players' potential resistances because they make 'becoming a neoliberal subject fun' (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009, xxx).

And yet, such isomorphic pessimism (Giddings 2018) presents too totalised a picture of the interplay between game and player. As Ash argues, contingency is always at work even in the most deliberate targeting of players' affective registers because their 'analogueness' presents problems for digital apprehension. Designers, he argues, can 'only attempt to control and manipulate an analogue body-subject through the digital quantitative states of the game's programming software' (Ash 2010, 661). The best that can be done by designers and their sponsors is to manage the excesses which escape these techniques. They cannot, Ash concludes, finally master the contingencies immanent to players' engagements with games. This means, as Giddings notes, that the liminoid elements of gameplay can generate 'productive ambivalences' which are productive of new realities and can invert or destroy existing ones (Giddings 2007, 401-2).

Attempting to conceptualise the players who generate these productive ambivalences, and hence resist the conformist tendencies of videogames, Espen Aarseth notes that at least a small number

engage in 'transgressive play' (Aarseth 2007). Such play adopts a critical or subversive ethos which engages reflectively with the game in order to expose the power relations coded in. In doing so, the player enacts resistance to 'implied player', the 'tyranny of the game', and the 'prisonhouse of regulated play' (Aarseth 2007, 132). While there is no guarantee that such playful engagements will avoid a reproduction of systems of control, insofar as the 'experience of accidentality, the unforeseen eventuality' (Crogan 2011, 173) cannot be completely play-tested out, the possibility remains. Playing games can always, and without warning, become playing *with* games.

This framing is important for this paper because it shows that even within military games and gaming cultures, resistance can take place. However, this paper contests the implied condition in this account that resistance occurs only when players experience a shift in play mode and political consciousness. Against this, the paper shows that resistance can take place even in circumstances in which players do not self-consciously play transgressively. In other words, resistance is not conditional upon a prior or coterminous change in player orientation from 'conformist' to 'critical'. This point is made more generally by scholars of everyday resistance: 'Resistance is a particular kind of act, not an intent or effect, even if it will always have some kind of intent or effect. Instead of any particular consciousness (recognition or intent) we suggest that discourse and context matter' (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013, 9). By demonstrating the ways in which veterans' grassroots gaming groups promote community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention which challenge the violences enacted by the US military on its personnel, it demonstrates that it is possible to resist the embodied alienations of militarism from within.

Framing Veterans

Studying war through an engagement with the ordinary people who wage it, as opposed to adopting the sanitised vantage point of policymakers or defence departments, has led in recent years to a flurry of insightful analyses in IPS, IR, and associated fields.[3] Situated in the multi-disciplinary field of Critical Military Studies (CMS) and using approaches such as 'embodied sociology' (McSorley 2014) and 'martial

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[3] Key texts include Achter 2010; Basham 2013; MacLeish 2013, 2018, 2020; McSorley 2013, 2016, 2020; Chisholm 2014a, 2014b; Eichler 2014; Rech 2014; Baker, Basham, Bulmer, Gray, and Hyde 2016; Bulmer and Jackson 2016; Crane-Seeber 2016; Dyvik 2016; Dyvik and Greenwood 2016; Tidy 2016; Bulmer and Eichler 2017; Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017; Welland 2017, 2018; Dyvik and Welland 2018; Kitchen 2018; Eastwood 2019; Schrader 2019; Baker 2020.

empiricism' (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020), this research has broken new ground in understanding not only the projection of military violence abroad, but also, and relatedly, the violences visited on services members by their own institutions from recruitment to retirement. Following Christine Sylvester's imperative that war should be studied from the bottom up rather than from the perspective of those who 'sweep blood, tears and laughter away' (cited by Evans in Baker 2020, 34), these studies posit that in order to understand violence at the global level, it is instructive to engage with those who most directly experience it (Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017).

In order to get at the local and embodied experiences of these actors, recent studies have drawn on ethnographies and interviews conducted with veterans. This approach has allowed researchers to trace the 'distinctive extremity of veterans' experience' (MacLeish 2018, 132) and explore the 'embodied continuities' (Higate in McSorley 2013, 108) which veterans carry long after their period of service as 'living monuments to war' (Bulmer and Jackson 2016, 27). Such in-depth engagements are often intended to counteract the tendency in traditional scholarly analyses to present veterans in a generalised or objectified way. As Benjamin Schrader elaborates, '[m]any examinations of veterans fail to fully recognize the ways in which veterans are subjects (political agents fighting to reshape the lives of themselves and others) rather than objects (waiting for medical/administrative attention). While this sort of veteran advocacy is done with the best of intentions, it unwittingly renders veterans as objects/dependents (helpless and in need), robbing them of agency' (Schrader 2019, 65).

Such a process of objectification is but one of a series of violences of which veterans – normally considered to be arch perpetrators – are prime targets. In recent years, Kenneth MacLeish has explored the unsettling notion that in addition to acting as the primary agents of the global projection of US military violence, veterans are also one of its principal objects. Through the 'churn' of mobilisation and demobilisation, he argues, warfighters are produced, utilised, then unceremoniously ejected according to the logic of institutional self-perpetuation (MacLeish 2020). Seeking to expose and address such violence, he asks readers to consider 'what is involved in recognizing the harm done to those whose job it is to produce war on the nation's behalf' (MacLeish 2013, 17). In doing so, he draws into focus the stake 'we' – civilians; scholars – have in ensuring that the horrors of, and responsibility for, the violence of armed conflict rests firmly with those who physically wage it. Concurring with MacLeish, this article explores 'the violence that lies within our own relationship to those who produce violence on our behalf' (MacLeish 2013, 17).

The three million US military veterans of the post-9/11 era have come in recent years to be recognised as key protagonists in contemporary geopolitical relations between states, militaries, and societies (Bulmer and Jackson 2016, 27). Situated in an ambiguous ontological position of being neither civilian nor military, these veterans occupy an at once privileged and devalued socio-political status. On the one hand, as Joanna Tidy notes, service members and veterans enjoy a privileged subject-position as the definitive good citizen (Tidy 2016, 103). Whether acting to promote or challenge militarism, such framings imbue war-fighters with an epistemic authority and interlocutory authenticity when it comes to matters of war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011; Brighton 2013; Tidy 2016). On the other hand, however, current and former service members are just as regularly framed as debased, dangerous, and out of control (MacLeish 2013, 41). This narrative emphasises popular perceptions of the 'dysfunction' associated with being trained in the 'management and deployment of violence' (Higate 2001, 444-5). As this suggests, veterans are frequently characterised in starkly polarised and tension-ridden ways, including at once hero and victim (Crane-Seeber 2016, 50), oppressor and oppressed (Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017, 259), terrorisers and protectors (Belkin 2012, 49), model and marginalised citizen (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 162), and wholly intact and shorn of identity (Higate 2001, 445).

This paper takes seriously MacLeish's imperative – catalysed by his interviewee Dime's appeal: 'Don't Fuckin' Leave Any of This Shit Out' (MacLeish 2013, 1) – not to reconcile or present selectively the multiple and contradictory elements that comprise veterans' experience and be(com)ing. When presented with seemingly incommensurable framings of the veteran as 'the noble hero, the burned-out victim, the unrepentant killer, and the crazy, dangerous war vet who rages equally against foreign enemies, oblivious civilians, and the indifferent Army', it is important to resist the temptation to edit down to fit a narrative or purpose (MacLeish 2013, 5). While there are many who 'traffic freely in these images of soldiers as dupes and dysfunctional lumpens' (MacLeish 2013, 42), this paper seeks to 'challenge the dichotomised archetypes of veterans "as heroic, stoic, and proud, or conversely, as vulnerable, dysfunctional, and dangerous"' (Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017, 257. Citing Bulmer and Jackson 2016). Instead, it positions veterans as at once the agent, instrument, and object of US military violence; at once sovereign and *homo sacre*; as the quintessential biopolitical subject who is by degrees made to live and let die (MacLeish 2013, 12-13).

Accordingly, this paper attends to Caddick et al.'s caution that 'veterans are often talked *for* and *about* by various interested parties (e.g. charities, academics, media, policymakers) proclaiming to speak on their behalf and thus, potentially, offering up *secondhand truths* about their lives' (Caddick et al.

2019, 98). Against this danger, they recommend 'a dialogical narrative approach [which] seeks to amplify veterans' voices, placing these voices at the heart of the research' (Caddick et al. 2019, 109). In order to offer substantive firsthand accounts which centre veterans' voices, the paper quotes substantively from thirteen interviews[4] with US military veterans from the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force, and support workers at leading veterans' gaming group Stack Up. In taking such a qualitative approach, the project seeks engage with subjects, experiences, and everyday implications of military activities so as 'unpack the complexities' of our engagements in more nuanced way than quantitative data allow (Williams, Jenkings, Rech, and Woodward 2016, 29).

Veterans as agents of resistance

The above has noted that scholarly attempts to represent veterans risk compounding the objectification, generalisation, and instrumentalisation already visited upon them both by the military and the civilian world. One way to guard against this is to consider veterans as agents of resistance. As MacLeish recently claimed, the veteran is 'not just a figure of discipline but also of resistance' (MacLeish 2020, 202). Such resistance is in evidence in the grassroots initiatives veterans undertake in promotion of recovery and healing. As Schrader explains, to the degree that veterans become the 'unneeded and unwanted excess produced by the military dispositif, the act of healing, in and of itself, becomes a political act' (Schrader 2019, 74).

Variously animated by Foucauldian, (Neo)Gramscian, and De/Postcolonial inheritances, the literature on resistance in IR tends to focus on leftist, counter-hegemonic, and/or anti-imperial struggles in the global political landscape.[5] In line with these commitments, when it comes to veteran resistance movements the literature to date has focused on those campaigning against recent foreign policy misadventures (Tidy 2015, 2016) and for the demilitarisation of serving subjects, understood variously

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[4] Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty and ninety minutes, beginning with Stack Up staff and thereafter service users and members of smaller associated gaming groups. All but one interviewee identified as male. All but two identified as white. All but one had retired from service. All experienced serious physical injuries and/or mental health problems following service. The names that appear are the real first names of research participants, who gave written consent for their full names to be used. These interviews were conducted as part of a larger project titled 'Producing Soldiers in a Digital Age', funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme Trust, for which a total of 100 hours of interview data was generated with immersive technologies trainers and trainees.
[5] See, for example, Bleiker 2000; Amoore 2005; Eschle and Maiguashca 2007; Gill 2008; Coleman and Tucker 2011; Death 2011; Maiguashca 2011; Iñiguez de Heredia 2012; Jabri 2012; Amoore and Hall 2013; Shilliam 2015; Brassett 2016; Nişancıoğlu and Pal 2016; Daphna-Tekoah and Harel-Shalev 2017; Ryan 2017; Rossdale 2019.

(Bulmer and Eichler 2017; Schrader 2019). The project of 'unmaking military masculinity' associated with the latter is, as Bulmer and Eichler argue, highly complex and draws into focus the question of whether and how that which has been militarised may be demilitarised. For Schrader, anti-militarist veterans' movements can facilitate an 'ontological shift' (Schrader 2019, 73) by problematising the violence instilled during service (Schrader 2019, 64). Such movements, he explains, involve veterans 'contesting their militarism through an active de-objectification, through rehumanization, connection/relationship-building, and agency' (Schrader 2019, 65).

Other recent studies are more cautious about the extent to which demilitarisation of this kind is possible. Alison Howell suggests that we should 'forget militarisation' because it 'obscures the constitutive nature of war-like relations of force perpetrated against populations deemed to be a threat to civil order or the health of the population' (Howell 2018, 118). The problem, as Bousquet, Grove, and Shah also note, is that militarisation 'serves to reify the putatively discrete spheres of the military and the civilian' (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020, 102). Read in this way, any attempt to demilitarise is thwarted in advance by the indelibly martial character of the civilian, as much as the military, sphere. This is perceptible, as Tidy notes, in the 'reinstating rather than rupturing' of military tropes and gendered power dynamics within ostensibly anti-war and anti-militarist groups (Tidy 2015, 459). As MacLeish succinctly puts it, there is 'no outside to war' (MacLeish 2020, 205). In such accounts, the limits of resistance in anti-militarist spaces are emphasised.

Conversely, though not incompatibly, this study is interested in forms of resistance found within groups which do *not* claim to be anti-militarist. While some forms of veteran activism self-consciously position themselves against military actions or values, it is often the case that veterans' critiques of their treatment 'by society (this includes the government and the military institution) does not extend to a critique of militarism itself' (in Baker, Basham, Bulmer, Gray, and Hyde 2016, 145). This presents a potential sticking point for critical-scholarly sympathies which often, albeit implicitly, require an anti-militarist commitment as a condition of their research. As Bulmer and Jackson have documented, in the absence of a clear anti-militarist commitment, critical-scholarly interlocutors can be 'turned off' by the 'listen to my pain narrative' they associate with veterans' testimony, and voice concern that veterans' stories 'might be a dead-end for anti-militarist politics' (Bulmer and Jackson 2016, 34).

Implied here is that to qualify for a place in current debates, veterans must renounce any enduring sympathy for, or pride in, the military and their service therein. This has the effect of setting up, on the one hand, the 'good' veteran who is capable of meaning resistance-work as s/he has

renounced militarism and, on the other hand, the 'bad' veteran who is still ensnared in, and contaminated by, the stains of militarism. Moreover, this qualification serves to ring-fence an ostensibly uncontaminated civilian world to which the veteran – if they wish to become a legible subject – must beg entry through the appropriate renunciation of their military past. This reproduces the trope of a valorised critical-civilian 'us' in contradistinction to an unintelligible militarised 'them', imbuing only the former with the scope for resistance.

Against this binary, this article argues that meaningful resistance to the violences enacted by the US military on its members can be found *within* people and places explicitly codified as militarised. Just as player need not intend to play transgressively for moments of counter-ludic resistance to occur in a videogame, the remainder of this article demonstrates that despite the continued prevalence of militaristic themes and activities, veterans' gaming groups function to challenge the objectifications and instrumentalisations visited upon service members by the US military through processes of community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention. While it may well be the case, as Howell, Bousquet et al., and MacLeish argue, that there is no 'outside' to militarism, the article shows that meaningful - albeit everyday - resistance is nevertheless possible from within.

The Politics of Veteran Rehabilitation

Following service, veterans disproportionately experience a series of physical, mental, and social problems, including unemployment, homelessness, alcohol and drug use, criminal prosecutions, mental health issues, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, self-harm, and suicidality (Higate 2001; Green et al. 2010; MacLeish 2013, 2020; Crane-Seeber 2016; Bulmer and Eichler 2017; Colder Carras et al. 2018a; Colder Carras et al. 2018b; Schrader 2019). Due in part to the 2007 Walter Reed scandal, in which the military's premier medical facility was revealed to be failing in its care of wounded veterans through overpopulation, underqualified staff, and unsanitary conditions (Achter 2010; Enloe 2010; Howell 2011; MacLeish 2013; Wool 2015), there has been significant political and popular scrutiny of veterans' services in recent years. At the same moment, the number of veterans seeking assistance in the wake of the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan has increased (Caddick, Phoenix, and Smith 2015, 287), and debates surrounding problematic diagnostic categories and practices continue (Enloe 2010; Howell 2011, 2012; MacLeish 2018; Schrader 2019). Accordingly, the US Department of Veteran Affairs

has launched a series of initiatives aimed at supporting veterans' reintegration, such as the Transition Goals, Plans, Success Programme (Transition GPS) (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 165-6).

As this suggests, 'reintegration' – and its synonyms 'transition' and 'readjustment' – comprise an important element of this endeavour. Becoming a key priority among policymakers, the media, and the third sector in recent years (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 161), such programmes aim to address and ease 'tensions between tenacious military identity and postdischarge "resettlement" within the civilian environment' (Higate 2001, 443). While for some service members these programmes are relatively successful in terms of securing employment, vocational training programmes, and family/community support (MacLeish 2020, 199), others find current support services inadequate (Schrader 2019, 67) and experience persistent problems.[6]

In addition to entrenched gendered and racial differentials which result in uneven access to and utility of services, part of the reason for their limited success is their explicitly instrumental logic. Focusing on achieving 'satisfactory levels of functioning at home, at work, in relationships and in the community' (Sayer et al. 2011 in Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 166), these programmes prioritise social and economic productivity over more substantive treatment of conditions of those affected. As Bulmer and Eichler argue, such instrumentality implies 'that 'bad' or failed transition will result in veterans being a burden on society, alongside other 'non-productive' individuals' (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 166). In this formulation, veteran recovery is not so much an end in itself as it is important for promoting 'the broader legitimacy of the armed force and thus continued recruitment and retention' (Bulmer and Eichler 2017, 169).

A second problem is the persistence of uneven and opportunistic diagnostic practices in veterans' mental health programmes. Cynthia Enloe notes that as early as 2004 a mental health crisis was ensuing across the US military, with one in six service members deployed in Iraq reporting problems (Enloe 2010, 164). More recently, in addition to unclear parameters and categorisations of PTS(D), Moral Injury (MI), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Personality Disorders (PD), and depression and anxiety (Enloe 2010; Howell 2011, 2012; MacLeish 2018; Schrader 2019), it is clear that systematic mis-, over-, and under-diagnosing of veterans' conditions has been a key cost-saving tool employed by the military

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[6] In 2008, one study showed that 96% of veterans were interested in receiving reintegration support, despite already receiving VA care or mental health services (Sayer, Noorbaloochi, Frazier, Carlson, Gravely, and Murdoch 2010). In 2014 and 2016, two studies reported adjustment difficulties in between 61% and 68% of veterans (Zogas 2017, 8).

(Howell 2011). Veterans report being treated like cheats and fakers during evaluations (Enloe 2010, 161), and feel in danger of career-compromising stigmatisation for seeking help (Howell 2011; MacLeish 2013).

Belying a broader culture in of intolerance for anything that appears 'weak' or 'defective' (Green et al. 2010, 1484), and an insistence that 'real men' do not get depressed or go to therapy (Enloe 2010, 164), a reluctance to talk about mental health issues currently pervades the US military. As Chris, a medically separated former Army staff sergeant, explained, 'most people will tell you that if anyone wants to go and get therapy, most of the time their career is over. I saw it first hand. I saw it second hand... I saw it impact my career infinitely.'[7] While services are available, then, the stigma of using them often overwhelms the desire to seek help. Matt, a former enlisted Air Force member and Clinical Advisor at Stack Up,[8] elaborated:

> they have mental health services at each installation or fort but there's that stigma that's preventing you from getting to them. There's certain jobs that you can have in the military that, once they find out that you are receiving mental health help, you might face losing your qualification in that position… If we had an airman who was having readjustment issues… that airman's chain of command could access their records. If they have determined that that airman cannot safely handle a weapon, or they cannot be deployed, or they just seem like they might be a threat, they will be stripped of their position and… [assigned to] 'halls and walls'. You will be working in the back office, but you will be taking out the trash and making coffee for people and making photocopies instead of being out there on post, which is a very shaming way of how to approach it.'[9]

As this suggests, service members are often compelled to resort to coping mechanisms other than the services offered by the military and partner organisations. Self-run veterans' groups often fill this gap.

Games for Healing and Rehabilitation

While the socio-cultural impacts of civilian videogaming on the global political landscape has been well documented in IR,[10] the grassroots use of games by service members and veterans remains unexplored. Leading the field in veterans' gaming groups, Stack Up was founded in 2015 by Stephen Machuga, a former Army infantry/intelligence officer who claims that videogames saved his life (Machuga 2015).

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[7] Interview, 19th December 2018. By phone.
[8] Stack Up.org is the leading veteran's gaming charity, on which more below.
[9] Interview 3rd December 2018, By phone.
[10] Key texts include Salter 2011; Robinson 2012, 2015, 2016, 2019; Ciută 2016; de Zamaróczy 2016; Schulzke 2017a, 2017b; Brown 2017; Mukherjee 2017; Berents and Keogh 2018; Jarvis and Robinson 2021.

Experiencing debilitating mental health issues which left him able to leave his house after his return from Iraq, Steve explains that gaming helped him manage 'the anxiety that living in a combat zone for a year built up' (Machuga 2015). Run by a core team of ten ex-military and civilian staff, Stack Up aims to support services members following deployment through gaming and gaming culture. Their website explains: 'Active duty military personnel face extraordinary pressure in the line of duty. However, after their service is over, we understand another challenge begins for many. It is okay to want to be healthy and seek help, whether facing troubling times, feeling a lack of purpose, or having lost the will to persevere. At Stack Up, we aim to break down the stigmas associated with these issues through the use of gaming' (Stack-Up.org).

Stack Up's mission covers four primary programmes: 'Supply Crates', which involve providing care packages of games and consoles to deployed and discharged service members; 'Air Assaults', which focuses on funding veterans' trips to conventions and gaming events; 'The Stacks', dedicated to online and in-person community building during transition/reintegration periods; and the 'Overwatch Program' (StOP), a 24/7 crisis support network dedicated to suicide prevention. As this suggests, their activities are framed ways that explicitly mimic the language and activities of the military. Indeed the name 'Stack Up' refers to a military manoeuvre in which an assault team enters a hostile room in single file (Stack-Up.org). To date, Stack Up has run 346 community events across their twenty-nine chapters across the contiguous US, in addition to those in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, and Scotland, and provided support to 35,944 veterans. As Steve explains, their work also extends to partnering with 'organisations like Wounded Warrior and the USL who are having trouble, kind of, connecting with the post-9/11 veterans. They just don't know how to reach out to these guys and gaming is, again, one of these things that everybody is taking part in now.'[11]

Perhaps surprisingly, the games requested by Stack Up users tend to be military-style first person shooters (FPS), the same games that often attracted players to the military and which closely mimic the experiences of deployment. As Kevin, a Content Director at Stack Up, noted, 'everyone expects us to send out fluffy happy games. We honestly get shooters and horror games most commonly requested.'[12] This presents a potential sticking point: how could games which closely replicate the violences of armed conflict offer possibilities for healing or resistance? Surely these games normalise and glorify the imperialism of US foreign policy and entrench broader structures of militarism through

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[11] Interview 12th February 2017, by phone.
[12] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.

their recreationalistion. The remainder of this article draws in detail on veterans' testimony to show that gaming groups enact meaningful forms of everyday resistance from within an explicitly militarised context.

Gaming as community building

Against the functionality-focused reintegration programmes described above, veterans' gaming groups do not operate with an end in mind other than improved well-being. Key to this is facilitating connectivity and community. Perhaps counter-intuitively, among virtual and online activities, 'conflict-centred gaming worlds are… the best place to look for the characteristics and the possibilities of community' due to the 'emerging crystallisation of networked sociality' therein, which involves a 'solidarity, a being-with' (Crogan 2011, 114-121). Because the sense of brotherhood cultivated in the military can be lost following the end of service, veterans often seek out groups run by follow (ex)service members (Schrader 2019, 70). This is because, as Caddick et al. explain, the 'distress associated with PTSD [leads] to them feeling isolated – and isolating themselves – from significant others in their lives. Their social world [shrinks] leaving them enclosed and vulnerable to intensified feelings of psychological and emotional distress related to PTSD.' Building networks of this kind can be of significant benefit to veterans suffering from mental health problems, they continue, by restoring the sense of 'band of brothers' by 'pulling broken elements of a community together to form a tighter one than the community had in the first place' (Caddick et al. 2015, 291).

The veterans interviewed for this project described a profound sense of rift with the civilian world. As Joseph, a former Army communications officer, elaborated, 'one of the biggest problems we have… is that there's a big disparity or big gap between the civilian world and the military. They don't know who we are or what we are. They have so many negative connotations with some of the words they associate us with, like PTSD. They think some of us are broken. They don't want to go near us because we're dangerous because we have PTSD, and we've been trained to do whatever. But the fact of the matter is, before all of this, we were normal people just like them.'[13] Gaming with other veterans provides a judgement-free space promoting connectivity which relieves this sense of disjuncture and condemnation. As Kevin put it, 'I have never had a videogame tell me or tell someone "hey, because

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[13] Interview 12th March 2017, in person.

you're not heterosexual, you are a terrible person". I've never had a video game go "hey, you swear so you're going to hell.'[14]

Several interviewees asserted that gaming helped them manage uncertainties about appropriate behaviour in civilian contexts. Mary, a former Army sergeant, explained that gaming 'can kind of show you or teach you how to interact with people and get a good reaction, or the reaction you're looking for anyway. Especially if it's like a multi choice game where how you react it or how you act changes how the characters around you act.'[15] As Joseph similarly reflected, gaming can be a means by which reconnect with the civilian world. He commented: 'we're so much more like them than people think. We still pay taxes, we still work to make sure there's a roof over our heads and food on the table, but I think that's a perspective that people need to understand. I think gaming could also bridge that gap. I think that's something to look into – how can we fix that gap in a meaningful way.'[16]

Key to Stack Up's work is overcoming the silencing imposed on service members surrounding their experiences in the military and difficulties following service. Games can be useful, as Kevin explained, for creating space for conversations:

> I've sat at conventions and I've been playing games with a guy… and we've literally haven't talked a whole lot for almost an hour. We're playing games and the others are randomly like, "hey, this reminds me of a time I was doing this with my friend over in Kuwait". That would lead to a conversation that twenty minutes later would be him dropping some really heavy knowledge on me that I never expected. [Then I would say], "hey, I don't remember asking you, what made you bring that up"… and he's just like, "oh, I felt comfortable, we were playing games, we were having fun". He didn't feel like he was being judged.[17]

The creation of such a non-judgemental context for conversation helps, veterans claimed, transcend conventional cleavages between different social groups. When it comes to other players, as Charlie, a former Marine Corps officer, explained,

> if you're just chatting with a text chat and you [only] see their avatar, you don't know [their] race, creed, colour, religion, what country they're from. So you're able to really be open to communicating with different types of people, different demographics… You just really care if they're good at the game or not… Or, if you just enjoy being around them, I think you're able to get to that point faster in the gaming community than you are when you meet somebody in real life. You have all these implicit biases and subconscious thoughts that you don't even think you

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[14] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.
[15] Interview 31st March 2017, by phone.
[16] Interview 12th March 2017, in person.
[17] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.

have that help you define your relationships. It really lets you let your guard down and communicate with a variety of people.[18]

Other interviewees noted the levelling effect of gaming among service members often divided between 'jocks' and 'geeks'. Term 'nerd goodness' appears on Stack Up website, and in conversation with its members, regularly. Chris explained:

> we're trying to move past the negative connotations that it has been for the last three generations and force society to change that. Nerd is not a bad thing, it's a good thing. And it doesn't matter what kind of nerd you are, whether pure science, you know, sci-fi, geeky nerd, or a research scientist, because we were going to own the term and we were going to make it more awesome, more fun, something we're proud of and that you can't use to degrade us. And I think that's a lot of where the nerd goodness comes from is that empowerment of owning the word now.[19]

As Dave, a former Marine Corps staff sergeant and Director of Veteran Services at Stack Up, similarly reflected, nerd goodness is 'a very playful term… We are inclusive, we're trying to invite people into what we do with open arms. This is more than just an act of charity; this is a family that we're building… We want that warmth to come through in the way that we hold ourselves out.'[20]

This provides, as Steve noted, a sense of common ground: 'I keep going back to shared language but, again, guys who may not have anything in common, you know, back in the real world, even between veterans, not everybody gets along but if you need a second player, if you need a couple guys to jump in and raid with you, suddenly you're all speaking the same language. Jocks and geeks all now have this piece together and they are able to interact with each other.'[21] As Chris similarly noted, 'say you're traditional jock who… ends up going in infantry… and the guy who's handling his paid work, his promotion, in human resources aspects is a nerd. One thing that they both have in common is, they might go back into the barracks and play video games. So, I think it's gotten now across the army that it doesn't matter what your job is, everyone has a pseudo connection to gaming.'[22]

Thus, the capacity for games to build communities for veterans experiencing isolation and trauma following deployment is seen as key. Whether or not games themselves can be healing, as Matt notes, the connectivity it promotes is seen as invaluable: 'the game itself might not necessarily have the healing properties, but because you are gaming, and you are online,… you have the online community

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[18] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[19] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.
[20] Interview 11th March 2017, in person.
[21] Interview 12th February 2017, by phone.
[22] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.

support that comes along with it.'[23] As George, a former Marine, explained, 'I'm in several military only game groups - we have a shared experience of being in the military [and] we can talk about everything under the sun. So one day we might be joking around, the other day we might be talking about past experiences. But at the same time we also have communications outside of the game, where somebody is having a problem you have four or five, ten, fifteen, twenty people that are there for you to offer support or guidance or help in any way that they can.'[24] Such connectivity can also extend to civilian communities, including veterans' families. As Mary reflected, veterans will 'game with their kids now and that can be just so healing because a lot of the guys, especially with the emotional scars when they come back, they have a really hard time relating to their families again… They are looking for something that is out the real world or physical world whatever and they want to take the kids fishing but maybe they kids hate fishing. So we suggest try video games with them and they're like "oh, I didn't think of that, videogames are awesome!"'[25]

Gaming as Therapy

In addition to building communities, and perhaps more counterintuitively, veterans claim that games – even violent FPSs – can serve as a proxy for therapy. A handful of studies in Psychology and associated fields have recently made this case (Colder Carras et al. 2018a; Colder Carras et al. 2018b), noting that gaming can promote therapy's key criteria of 'comfort, clarification and encouragement/support' (Caddick et al. 2015, 296). Similar claims have been made in Games Studies debates; Mark Griffiths, for example, has suggested that videogames 'do seem to have great therapeutic potential in addition to their entertainment value' (in Raessens and Goldstein 2011, 168). In the context of the aforementioned silencing of conversations about mental health difficulties, such a resource is seen as invaluable among veterans. As Matt noted, 'when we came home from Iraq our fire team leader basically told us to shut up about whatever that happened to us, and when you go and do the debriefing don't talk about anything and just [carry on].'[26] In this context gaming can provide relief from mental health symptoms which is experienced as therapeutic. As Chris explained, 'I had to find my own way through life to deal with my depression or deal with whatever was going on. And so I use things like gaming as alternatives

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[23] Interview 3rd December 2018, by phone.
[24] Interview 6th January 2019, by phone.
[25] Interview 31st March 2017, by phone.
[26] Interview 3rd December 2018, by phone.

to medication, to venting, to adaptive social engineering.'[27] As Dave simply put it: 'for me, gaming is my therapy.'[28]

Veterans reported that existing mental health support was not meeting their needs. George, who has PTSD, explained: 'I tried to do therapy once and it was a very bad experience. Even though I knew I needed to do it, I stopped, and then tried it again and things happened and now I'm trying it again. But the first experience left a bad taste in my mouth, so the next time I was trying I was going in cocky. The therapy is kind of a long-term thing. You may need a short and quick term relief, and videogames can give you that.'[29] In addition to the not finding them effective, veterans noted that official services are often not accessible. As Chris relayed, 'I would have to walk five miles to go and see my VA counsellor and go to my sessions. And, sometimes, if the weather was bad, I would call [and say] I'm sorry, I'm not walking five miles in a hail drenched rainstorm. I'm just going to go and play videogames this week and I will see you the following week.'[30] As Charlie similarly explained, gaming provides relief because 'it's not time centred. It's not something you have to wait to do at 9 o'clock on a Tuesday. You can pick up a controller and do it anytime you want. So it's kind of a stress relief that's always available.'[31] In addition, as Matt noted, users of groups like Stack Up 'have the benefit of not having to report to their chain of command, which is a huge, huge difference than if they were to go and see someone through Tricare or someone through their own base. So they could have that protection while they can get the help that they need, and not have to worry about losing their job.'[32]

As mentioned above, particularly surprising is the fact that veteran gamers most frequently request highly militarised games, set in real or fictional theatres of combat, which closely mimic the activities which in many cases are the source of their post-service distress. Kevin shed some light on this problem by relaying a conversation he had with one veteran gamer:

> We finally asked one of our recipients, "hey, what made you guys choose these games?" Their response was that they had chosen a wargame specifically because it related to what they're experiencing at that time in real life and it allowed them to have control over an environment that was almost identical [but] that wasn't life-threatening. It almost helped them calm down to the extent that they said it was less stressful spending the day getting shot at if they could hear the sounds, they could do other situations later on that night in the privacy of their bunker with

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[27] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.
[28] Interview 11th March 2017, in person.
[29] Interview 6th January 2019, by phone.
[30] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.
[31] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[32] Interview 3rd December 2018, by phone.

their friends where they knew it wasn't life-threatening. To an extent almost it took the edge off for them.[33]

Steve, Dave, and Shaun, a former Air Force staff sergeant, all similarly noted that for them gaming feels like 'immersion therapy'[34] which allows them to revisit and work through traumatic experiences. Jared, an Army gunner with chronic PTSD, described it as 'exposure therapy'[35], which involves 'being in a safe and controlled environment that I know I'm playing a game but also able to have the sounds and sights [of war without] actually being there. [I]t allows me to enjoy that time without being scared out of my wits.'[36]

Accordingly, as James B., a medically discharged Marine Corps reservist suggested, for people struggling post-deployment 'playing video games is part of the answer, because it reduces pain, it reduces anxiety and depression, and it can get them through that day and onto the next day.'[37] Part of the reason for this is a sense that games provide a safe distance from which to engage with others. As Matt explained, 'I know folks who have really bad social anxiety, but however when they are playing a game and chatting in the score, they feel a lot more comfortable with approaching people and just talking in general. [It] gives you a sense of being anonymous to a certain extent. You're free to disclose as much or as little about you as you want to. [Other players] take you at face value and so that provides a security blanket for those who have social anxiety.'[38] Several veterans noted that gaming can help with experiences of agoraphobia. James B. provided a useful example: 'I actually have a Gameboy that I keep with me when I'm out in public. When you get into a large crowd and there's too many people, sometimes it's good to just find a space for yourself, take ten minutes, focus on a small screen, and give yourself that time to recompose yourself, refocus yourself. Then go back and you can deal with that situation. It's a thing about distraction, and sometimes distraction is good.'[39]

Several veterans noted that gaming helped them mange PTSD symptoms, which can include hyper-vigilance, anxiety, insomnia, anger, aggression, emotional numbness, diminished well-being, poorer mental and physical health functioning, and increased risk of suicide (Higate in McSorley 2013,

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[33] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.
[34] Interview 3rd February 2017, by phone; Interview 11th Match 2017, in person; interview 19th December 2018, by phone.
[35] 'Immersion theory' and 'exposure therapy' are clinical practices which involve bringing a patient into contact with an object of fear and gradually acclimating them to it to reduce distress.
[36] Interview 14th January 2019, by phone.
[37] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[38] Interview 3rd December 2018, by phone.
[39] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.

108; Caddick et al. 2015, 287). Games, they claimed, provide a safe exposure to triggering stimuli which helped reduce the intensity of their reactions. As Jared explained, on his return from deployment,

> certain noises would absolutely just drive me nuts. It could be as random as the alarm clock going off, or I'd lose my train of thought when it came to like a helicopter flying by... My wife would have to shake me and kind of like bring me back and say, "Hey, you know, you're here in the moment with me. You got that blank stare again." And with gaming, I noticed, there's games I play that have aircraft in it. I hear the sound [in the game], and when I hear sounds outside, like a car backfiring or honking or screeching of tyres or something, it's less off putting. It doesn't quite make me jump or anything like that like it used to. And I think it's a direct correlation to the gaming.[40]

James B., who also has PTSD, described a similar experience, noting:

> I have trouble watching a lot of TV, because I have very strong emotional responses to things, so sometimes it's easier to watch TV with my wife or my kid if I [play a game] that's just mildly distracting. I can, kind of, stick one part of my brain on and the other part be involved with other human beings… It's like when things feel uncomfortable I can take less attention from the screen and focus on something a little bit more, and once that tense moment has passed go back to it. And it's kind of like a turtle can pull themselves into a shell and pop back out, kind of the same function.'[41]

Veterans suffering from Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)[42] similarly reported that gaming relieved symptoms. As Shaun, who has TBI, relayed, 'I was told by a psychiatrist… to just do something, even if you don't want to, to try for 30 minutes. Videogames was one of those things that I stopped wanting to do, but once I got back into it, even though I didn't enjoy it at first, I realised that getting into a hobby like that actually did help. Even if it was acting as a crutch at first, it did help me eventually just move past it to where… I no longer had major depressive disorder.'[43]

Veterans also suggested that gaming can help with sleep problems. As James B. put it, when 'you wake up in the middle of the night having a nightmare, what do you do? Do you try to go back to sleep? Do you just take medication? [Do you] watch TV, which is very passive and leaves you to think about what's going on? Or do you play a videogame where your brain is engaged for a couple of hours?

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[40] Interview 14th January 2019, by phone.
[41] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[42] TBI is caused by head injuries. It can range from mild to severe and encompasses a wide variety of physical and psychological symptoms including problems with sleep, headaches, vomiting, balance, speech, sensory disturbance, memory and concentration problems, depression and anxiety, mood changes, confusion, agitation, unconsciousness, and coma.
[43] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone

Then you get tired, and you go back to bed. For me that's worked very well.'[44] Jared made a similar observation:

> I came home with a lot of horrible nightmares and I still to this day have them, but they've lessened over time, and I think it does correlate with the games that I play. Because you hear certain sounds in war that you don't hear anywhere else, but then, when you come home, you hear noises that spark that same sort of startle effect. And it's things that you don't ever think about. But when you get home you hear it and it just – it'll absolutely make your heart rate jump through the roof. You get the fight or flight syndrome... [Games] gives you some degree of control, then, because rather than just hearing something without expecting it, you've chosen to go into the game. You can shut the game off whenever you want to.

Even more remarkably, Mary set out how she has learned to turn nightmares into games while still asleep: Games 'helped with the nightmares at the beginning. I never had nightmares about war or anything - it's really weird the stuff I have nightmares about - but it is something that I learnt in therapy that if things started to go south in my dream, I would trigger myself like in my sleep and I would change it. Videogames often help with that, like I would often go into a game I was playing that day instead.'[45]

> Similarly, veterans recovering from serious physical injuries also find gaming valuable. As Dave explained:

> Bad day in the office - I lost my arm and my eye and a [got] whole bunch of other little scars and damage. I spent two years recovering… During that time… I figured out a way to adapt the controls and gaming once again played a very, very huge role in my recovery mentally… Games were that safe place. Games has always been my rock… It's kind of like home-base – [It felt as though] I can go back to that and just for a couple of hours I was happy and I felt like things hadn't changed… If this can be the same, if I can still do this, maybe I can still be happy doing these other things as well. And so mentally it was just huge. Having an escape, having something that felt comfortable and familiar and fun, was important.[46]

As Mary similarly described, having lost both her arms in an EID explosion, she learned to use her feet to play games, which provided a significant boost to her mental health:

> It took good couple of hours to get my feet positioned and figure out angles and everything that I needed but it helped so much with my self-esteem to be able to go back to my outlet. It completely turned my therapy around… It really made me feel like I was still me. And so, to be able to do that, to pull somebody back, it's something that's special, it's meaningful. Ever since then it's been RPGs galore. I will go from one game to another - the *Dragon Age* series, I have

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[44] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[45] Interview 31st March 2017, by phone.
[46] Interview 11th March 2017, in person.

played multiple thousands of hours across all of them. It's just something that it brings me back to centre and it lets me play a range of emotions.'[47]

Gaming as suicide prevention

"When the screaming in my head starts, I just pop on a game"[48]

Recent studies have estimated that twenty-two veterans commit suicide every day (Schrader 2019, 74), and between 2008 and 2010 it accounted for more deaths in the military than did combat (MacLeish 2013, 226). The situation seemed just as bleak in the mid-2010s. As Kevin explains: 'by the second time you read a suicide note that says "hey I didn't actually know how to talk to anyone about it", you start going ok, this seems to be like a priority we need to have and they need to have this option.'[49]

In line with Stack-Up's dedicated suicide prevention Overwatch Program (StOP), veterans expressed the view that gaming plays an important role in recognising and countering self-harming behaviour. Kevin recounted a moment in which gaming enabled a veteran to recognise his suicidal feelings:

> 'he like knifed somebody in *Call of Duty* and he kind of laughed and I kind of laughed. Then he was like, "man that actually probably wouldn't work out that way", and he went into a ten-minute spell about the knife handling techniques. It was a little bit graphic but at the same time he clearly felt comfortable, so I wanted to make sure to let him talk… I ended up finding out the guy had tried for special forces three times and hours later, after playing these games, we finally got down that the guy was having depressive episodes, he was suicidal, had been for the last month. He hadn't really given it much credit, his literal words I think to me were, "I had all these really bad thoughts and I just ignored them but they were still there." That allowed him to be able to hear from someone else that had talked to other people about the same experience and go hey, "you're not alone, don't feel a ashamed, don't feel bad about that". He ended up seeing a psychiatrist in the VA for the first time since he deployed and he is actually doing wonderful now. He actually helps out with a suicide prevention group.[50]

As this example explains, the communication facilitated by gaming can have a direct bearing on veterans' capacity to recognise and deal with self-harming behaviour. As Dave explained, '[I've worked with] guys who maybe thought that they weren't going to be able to get back into [gaming] because of their injuries. I've helped them do that and it's like a light switch comes on… I've seen guys go from

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[47] Interview 31st March 2017, by phone.
[48] Interview with Stephen Machuga, 12th February 2017, by phone.
[49] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.
[50] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.

probably from thinking about hurting themselves or thinking that they didn't really have any value to seeing that tonal shift in the way that they speak about things.'[51]

As this suggests, interviewees noted that gaming allows for a cathartic release of emotion which may otherwise be bottled up and exacerbate self-harming tendencies. As Chris explained, gaming is 'a great outlet for people… When I've had a bad day, coming home it's like I just need to play a video game, have a beverage, and then shoot things in a virtual environment - zombies or other players - to get that competitive edge. It's like, "oh, I'm going to beat someone finally". And at least I can feel the stress, kind of, whisked away.'[52] Dave suggested something similar in his statement: 'I don't want my family to feel what I'm internally feeling, so I internalise a lot of that, and it can come out in emotionally destructive ways. So this was my pressure valve, my release.'[53] George described a similar experience: 'I deal with issues from PTSD a lot. So if I'm having… one of those days where I just want to rage at the world, I can go into a game and rage in a game, and let all my frustration and anger out, as opposed to doing it in the real world and getting into trouble.'[54] As Kevin similarly noted, games are 'the perfect way to teach people "hey, if you have anger, don't go and punch someone in the face, going play some Madden or some FIFA".'[55] As this suggests, interviewees emphasised the ways in which the control and constraints afforded by games are experienced as therapeutic. As Charlie pointed out, in a game 'you can control a little more than you can control other people in your life, or stuff that just happens in life from day to day. A game usually has this linear flow to it that allows you to hit those steps, feel good about it and continue on.'[56]

In addition, James M., a former Marine, described how gaming can help veterans with substance misuse problems. He explained:

> A friend of mine started streaming because as long as he was on camera people could see him so he wouldn't drink. Because when he would drink, he would get into trouble, he would get arrested. I've had to bail him out of jail. And then he started streaming actively, a lot, and he was like, "I do it because I enjoy video games - it's my escape - but also because as long as I keep this schedule, people can see me and I'm not drinking at those times.[57]

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[51] Interview 11th March 2017, in person.
[52] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.
[53] Interview 11th March 2017, in person.
[54] Interview 6th January 2019, by phone.
[55] Interview 28th February 2017, in person.
[56] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.
[57] Interview 8th January 2019, by phone.

Emphasising gaming's capacity to allow players to process traumatic experiences, Mary recounted the story of a friend whose friend was killed in front of him. She reflected: 'It didn't deter him from playing [FPS] games. I think, if anything, those types of games kind of helped him get through it… I used to watch him play that mission that went south. You get angry, you know, pissed off at the world. [You ask] "why are we here? What are we doing?" You know, we lost people we love. And then you go back, and you quasi relive it through a videogame and it helps you deal with those emotions rather than bottling them up and letting them fester and poison you.'[58]

Conclusion

This paper has argued that veterans' gaming groups enact everyday forms of resistance by challenging the instrumentalising and objectifying tendencies of official reintegration and mental health programmes. Taking seriously their contradictory status as simultaneously agents, instruments, and objects of US military violence, it argued that framing veterans as agents of resistance is an important step in avoiding reductive and objectified representations common in both traditional scholarly literature and the military itself. It has shown that while they do not necessarily renounce military values and (simulated) practices of violence, veterans' gaming groups enact a novel form of everyday resistance to the embodies alienations the military produces in its personnel.

There are, of course, limits to what gaming can facilitate. As Chris noted, 'whereas they may be good for a short-term healing method, actually going to a professional to deal with life issues or incidents is still greatly need. Because the downside of the game is that it's not telling you how to deal with those types of emotions. It's like I take care of my anger because I'm playing this first person shooter game, but not dealing with why the anger always comes up is something that those individuals still have to take care of down the road.'[59] In addition, gaming can become problematic if done too much. As Charlie reflected,

> you have to moderate yourself and keep everything in some sort of balance… Some people have a hard time doing that, especially when you find something that relieves your depression, or relieves your PTSD, or relieves whatever it might relieve, your tension at work, your stress at home. You know, when you find something that gives you that feeling of, euphoria might be too

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[58] Interview 31st March 2017, by phone.
[59] Interview 19th December 2018, by phone.

strong of a word, but that feeling of happiness or just normalcy, it's hard to sit back down to go back to, you know, what you're trying to escape from.[60]

There are also reasons to be cautious about integrating gaming into official mental and physical health services as they are entirely compatible with prevailing instrumentalist rationales which seek to shape behaviour, facilitate cooperative dispositions, and encourage particular forms of 'social and moral development' (Gunter in Raessens and Goldstein eds. 2011, 152-4).

Notwithstanding these dangers, this paper has argued that despite their embeddedness in militarist tropes and (simulated) violence, videogames can be a powerful tool in exposing and resisting the instrumentalist and objectifying treatment of veterans by the US military. This shows that resistance to the enduring violences of military subjectification and intervention can occur in unlikely places. Much as the videogame player need not intend to engage in transgressive play to do so, veterans' gaming groups challenge the structures and strictures of the militarism from within through their acts of community building, therapeutic relief, and suicide prevention.

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[60] Interview 11th December 2018, by phone.

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