Ludic mutation: the player’s power to change the game
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Chapter Four: City as Military Playground: Contested Urban Terrain

This chapter is a tale of contested terrain, a contrast of two approaches to repurposing the city as a playground articulated in distinct, yet at times tactically similar camps. The mid-twentieth century exploits of Situationist artists and architects in Paris, taking the form of “derives” and other exploratory games, are evidence of the emergence of playful, artistic approaches to circumventing the everyday life of the city (Debord, “Theory of the Derive”). Information Age artists later adopt similar interventionist, “hackerish” ludic tactics, creating disruptions in the operations of the Internet, in the virtual alleyways of online computer games, and again on the actual street (Schleiner 149). These so-called culture jammers and hacktivists (hacking plus activism), take on activist agendas, even though their actions are often initiated with loose “artistic” spontaneity, and lack long-term fidelity to an organized political cause.

On the other side of what I shall pose as an unbalanced contest for the urban civilian sphere waged between artist-activists and military game makers, the “big players” develop sophisticated photo-realistic, three-dimensional computer games with military and educational resources. These high-end productions are often virtual cities constructed as military playgrounds for combat training and rescue operations. A window on a high floor serves as an ideal perch for a sniper to position himself, a parked car in a shell-shocked alleyway offers an opportune hideaway to crouch behind. Although virtual, the locus of military control manoeuvres and humanitarian efforts in so-called M.O.U.T. games (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) often explicitly corresponds to military interventions in Fallujah, Mogadishu and other cities of unrest. Playing the game closely mirrors, or purports to mirror, the movements of small-scale, military units in live, contested urban zones where civilian life has been superseded to combat and control operations. Thus the virtual game city
becomes a testing ground for twentieth and twenty-first century military theories such as asymmetrical warfare, anti-terrorist control in populated areas, and the so-called “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) a recent technological upgrade of the armed forces in the United States and elsewhere.

In these diverse appropriations of the city as a playground, both those of “Situationist style” artist-activists and those of military strategists, the city’s everyday flows of traffic, civilians, commerce etc. are diverted for the sake of a game. In the militant ludic diversion, virtual and paved streets are mapped and occupied, and humanitarian operations of population management, of refugee transport and of disaster relief, of biocontrol, are conducted virtually in preparation for missions in actual cities. In response to this tightening grid of military control in former centres of civilian life, loose-knit clusters of playful, artistic resistance break out. The stakes of these games are who, what manner of players, will claim urban population centres in the imagination and on the ground in the near future.

1. MILITARY PLAYGROUNDS

Roger Stahl defines a cultural object of “militainment,” such as a game or a film, as “state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption,” and as a melding of “the mercurial and the martial” (6). He tracks a shift from passive reception of war propaganda and war “spectacle” via films, television, and radio, that is from uni-directional, top-down broadcast media, to what he refers to as “the interactive war,” whereby civilians are invited to “play at war” in a game (4). Once a limited military historical subgenre among other computer game world themes, since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, First Person Shooter (FPS) games increasingly blurred the boundary between entertaining play and contemporary military conflicts. Typically, North American “good
guy” characters combat Arabic speaking enemies in games such as the *Delta Force* series of ten games (1999-2010), *Kuma War’s* one hundred and twenty missions (2002 to the 2011 assignation of Osama Bin Laden), and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007). The player’s mission is to secure an enemies’ base, defuse a bomb, assassinate players on the opposing team, or to rescue hostages. These missions are either undertaken alone, in collaboration with artificially intelligent NPC’s (non-player characters), or with and against other human team members in so-called multi-player matches.

Fig. 1. *America’s Army*; Suburbia Map, 2007; Web; 1 August 2011.

Before attending to the military concepts embedded in games of urban conflict, lets recall in greater detail how such a game is typically played. In a 2007 map of the *America’s Army* game titled “Suburbia,” one team of players endeavour to make their way to a corner of a dusty Middle-Eastern city quadrant on a mission of obtaining an “intelligence briefcase.”3 En route to their destination, they sneak through shadowed alleyways and dart across open plazas, intent upon avoiding snipers from the other team perched on rooftops.
At the beginning of a round, the game software automatically positions the players of the other team defending the briefcase at a remote distance from the first team, affording them a few seconds to select strategic positions. The briefcase attackers flush out the defending team members from hiding, slaughtering them in close quarters with knives or pistols, or taking them down with machine guns or exploding grenades at longer-range. Experienced players keep the appropriate weapon at hand, and efficiently monitor their ammunition count, indicated via the “HUD” (Heads Up Display information) at the edge of the computer screen, all the while remaining in close, coordinated communication with their team members.

The Suburbia level described above is one of many maps of the *America’s Army* game, a game describing itself as a “recruitment game” designed to inspire volunteers to join the United States’ mercenary army. The primary thrust of the game is entertainment rather than rigorous combat training. Other militarized playgrounds that we shall come to later in this chapter make more explicit claims towards preparing the player for real life soldiering through simulated battle exercises, even as they borrow entertaining and unrealistic play routines from the First Person Shooter genre that have little to do with military actions and procedures in actual conflicts. And yet regardless of the level of fidelity to actual military deployment scenarios, in many of these games, the city is a favoured site of conflict. This preference for urban combat terrain attests to a multifaceted militarization of formerly civilian turf.

2. MILITARY THEORIES OF CIVILIAN OCCUPATION

A military theory embedded in much of post-911 militainment cinema and television series, as well as in games, is that of asymmetrical warfare. Asymmetrical warfare refers on the one hand to the ability of a relatively small number of technologically augmented soldiers to
maintain control at a populated sites of “unrest,” and on the other hand to the capability of a small number of terrorists to cause great damage at a site of population density. In a departure from his earlier Cold War theories of military logic, Paul Virilio posits that twenty-first century warfare has essentially shifted its “theatre of operations” from the battlefield to the city: “Asymmetrical war, the terrorist disequilibrium has erased the theatre of external operations (battlefields used to be called “theatres of external operations”) in favour of metropolitan concentrations” (Virilio and Lotringer 9). No longer about contests of nations against nations, nor of blocs against blocs, asymmetrical warfare is concerned with the maintenance (or imposition) of a particular global world order at key populated nodes, either in response to or waged via terrorism.

The city configured as a warzone is not only a recent phenomenon resulting from the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Some urbanists have traced the origin of the city to the defensive walls of the medieval castle, to the fortifications of Troy and further back in human history (Virilio and Lotringer 19). Yet in the era of asymmetrical warfare, the populace is no longer protected a defensive shell like the fortified exterior walls and moat of a castle. The city’s very population density makes it vulnerable to a small number of attackers who can cause a large amount of damage. For instance, during World War II, a relatively small number of enlisted aviators perished while large scale destruction and loss of civilian lives ensued when cities like Hiroshima, London, and Dresden were bombed from above.

The “Revolution in Military Affairs,” a post-cold war United States military overhaul and upgrade endorsed by former United States Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld, is intended to further minimize the “asymmetrical” mortality rate of military servicemen. Innovative gear and gadgetry protect small units of soldiers deployed in urban terrain who conduct sophisticated military operations (Hardt and Negri 42). According to Michael Hardt
and Antoni Negri, “These new strategies and new technologies are thought to make war practically risk free for U.S. soldiers, protecting them from the threats of any adversary” and elsewhere they write, “The humans on the battlefield, in the air at sea have become prostheses of the machine, or better, internal elements of the complex mechanical and electronic apparatus” (42; 44). Virilio also writes that in recent times humans “disappear” into the war apparatus as they are replaced by technological components of “the war-machine” (Virilio and Lotringer 25).

As equipment, remote controlled aircraft and communication technology increase in technological sophistication, supplemented by the three CCC’s of the modern military—command, control, and communication—the number of soldiers deployed on the ground proportionately decreases. Leveraging the capacity of remote satellite communication, a U.S. soldier’s sits behind a computer screen at a desk at a military base in the California desert and operates a remote-controlled aircraft drone over the Middle East. The operator’s body is securely distant from the site of battle, his weapons’ interface in appearance similar to the viewport of a flight simulation game. Again, in asymmetric warfare, “War no longer needs masses of soldiers who are massacred in the trenches” (Hardt and Negri 44).

Or to put the battle back into game terms, the war no longer requires a vast grid of pawns distributed equidistantly across mountains and empty fields, a mass of foot soldiers backed up by elephants, cavalry and chariots as in the ancient Sanskrit predecessor to chess played by Indian war generals. Specialized, technologically enhanced units of five to ten soldiers correspond in scale and function to the “urban ops” commando teams deployed in game cities, roughly the same amount of soldiers as on a team roving the fictional middle-eastern city of Suburbia. When the war is viewed through the optic of the most pertinent games of the moment, the regenerative re-spawning of the computer game soldier after each
deadly round of combat mirrors the alleged invulnerability of the elite, well-equipped combatant.

The post-911 expansion of the state and military apparatus is accompanied by a “full spectrum” of blurrings of civilian, entertainment, and educational spheres once considered outside the purview of the military, at least on the first world nation’s home territory. In 2009 Rita Raley writes, “The distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ may disappear. Running war games for this new battlespace requires a massive industrial investment in simulations and computer based training systems, (as of this writing the annual sim budget alone is estimated to be 4-6 billion)” (Raley 69). Describing a similar shift in military purview to civilian life, Virilio marks a turn from “exo-colonization” to “endo-colonization of one’s own population,” what he describes as “a society of national security” where the armed forces turn against their own populations (Virilio and Lotringer 107). And as living urban population centres across the globe are subjected to increased vigilance and scrutiny, these biocontrol manoeuvres and anti-terrorist operations are played out in practice runs by civilian players in virtual game cities.

According to Stahl, the confluence of entertainment and war in commodity forms such as computer games goes beyond the top-down push of the term United States President Eisenhower coined in 1961 as “the military industrial complex” (Stahl 11). In Stahl’s “interactive war,” ordinary civilians eagerly volunteer to play war, an active involvement on the part of consumers that converges with militant objectives (Stahl 4). Indeed, as noted in Chapter Two in relation to player-made game modding of commercial games, one of the most popular and longest played game mods in the military simulation genre is *Counter-Strike*, created in 1999 by a loose network across North America of volunteering college students. In Counter-Strike, the attention to fidelity in weapons and gear and urban battleground settings in the Middle East and other hot-spots, (replacing Half-life’s previous
science fiction theme), as well as its team-based play dynamics, forged the template for later multiplayer FPS games to come like Americas’ Army. Although the motives of the volunteer makers of Counter-Strike and those of the military developers of America’s Army differ significantly, ultimately such relationships and alliances between players, commercial game developers, and the military, contribute towards a militarization of formerly civilian terrain.8

3. THE LUDAFORM OF URBAN TERRAIN

“hyper-terrorism only knows one battlefield: the city. Whether Madrid, New York, or London, the battlefield is the city. Why? That’s where you find a maximum of population and a maximum of damage can be done with a minimum of weaponry” (Virilio and Lotringer 9)

As a promotion for the America’s Army game during the annual E3 Game Industry Conference in Los Angeles in 2003, the United States army catapulted soldiers from a helicopter down between the skyscrapers of downtown Hollywood, California. Passers-by on the street were confused, indifferent or frightened by the publicity stunt, oblivious to the intended entertainment effect. By the time the Kuma War franchise started releasing episodic game missions tied to military affronts in Fallujah and other cities in Iraq, other serious military games began to train officers and civilian players in the art of M.O. U. T., a military acronym for Military Operations in Urban Terrain.9 The military imagination empties the streets of the game of civilian game characters, turning over the city to the conflict between terrorists and counter-terrorists. Only an architectural shell of shop fronts remains of the former everyday activities of the city’s softer inhabitants, hinting of a happier, more peaceful time. This civilian ghost town enhances the player’s immersion in the game world, for who would deny that it is more stimulating to play in even an empty, abandoned city, perhaps set in an exotic, distant land, than in a barren, country field?10

A playground of military operations, the city contours are retrofitted as tactical terrain. According to game level designers, the underlying ludaform of a multi-player game is
a heart with looping, arterial tunnels that always return players to centralized open conflict zones (Blezinski). In a well-designed, pleasure-inducing map, the open plazas and snaking passageways of the digital game city (such as the America’s Army Suburbia map) conform to this arterial blueprint. Building dead end alleyways and streets is discouraged, for a player might hide in seclusion for the entire round. The urban plan is designed to encourage balanced confrontations between players. Level designers craft urban architecture for sniping from tall buildings, for flanking of multiple players that converge surreptitiously through dark alleyways, and to facilitate team-work operations. The occupied streets of the militarized ghost town are woven into a grid for the practice of thrilling urban combat operations.

Fig. 2. View of game terrain from above; America’s Army; Suburbia Map, 2007; Web; 1 August 2011.

4. FROM DEADLY PLAY TO ADMINISTRATORS OF LIFE

Underneath the glossy novelty of simulated online combat in digital cities, the confluence of soldiering, warfare, and play echoes Johan Huizinga’s distant historical examples of deadly serious play, such as archaic Arabic contests played for the settling of property disputes that predate the court of law (108). Huizinga also underscores the potentially fatal consequence for the player who fails to solve a Hindu or Greek riddle: “In its mythological or ritual context it is nearly always what German philologists know as the Halsraetzel or “capital riddle,” which you either solve or forfeit your head. The player’s life is at stake” (69). The
deadly contests of gladiators waged in Roman stadiums evolved from ancient Greek and Etruscan funerary games played against captured enemy warriors at the pyres of fallen comrades of war (Grant 9). On the other side of the Atlantic, ritual play might take a deadly sacrificial turn in the grand stone ball courts of the Mayans. From elevated bleachers, Mesoamerican aristocrats viewed the spectacle of “the great ball game,” a rubber ball game played in variations (deadly and non-deadly) across Mesoamerica for over three thousand years. Mesoamerican archaeologists attribute the greater number of ball courts in conflicted regions to games played as proxy warfare to resolve boundary disputes. For instance, Taladoire and Colsenet write, “We suggest that the ballgame was used as a substitute and a symbol for war,” and Susan Gillespie contends that the ballgame was “a boundary maintenance mechanism between polities” (Taladoire and Colsenet 174; Gillespie 340).

The simulation of battle in contemporary computer games of both entertainment and military training (in other words of militainment), attests to the persistence of a relationship between warfare and games in the present age, albeit undertaken with a different set of 21st century military and play preoccupations. Parcel to the asymmetrical imposition of order in urban hot spots, the military’s role has expanded from the full-scale destruction of war to global policing in so-called “peacekeeping” operations. For instance, a United States Delta Force Peacekeeping force was sent to aid United Nations forces against Islamic terrorists in Mogadishu, Somalia, and is replayable in the game Delta Force: Black Hawk Down (2003). A “biopolitical” transformation is occurring within the military itself, once considered a mere death arm of the state. Describing a modern inversion from sovereignty to “biopower,” from the king’s ancient right to demand the death of his subjects to the control of life processes, Michel Foucault writes, “This formidable power of death [...] now exerts itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize and multiply, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations”
(Foucault 259). Over the transition to modernity, life-supporting governmental institutions arise such as hospitals, prisons, and educational institutions.

Now it is not just the state, but the military that is diversifying into new spheres of “life supporting” influence. International policing, medical aid and disaster relief are presently considered within a military scope of operations, at least for the larger forces of the United States and other Northern nations. Well-funded, immersive, three-dimensional military games reflecting this diversified military scope are prominent at Serious Game conferences and competitions. For instance, at the 2008 Serious Games Showcase and Challenge, three of four winners were military games on the topics of “geo-location, military procedures of the Canadian army, and medical treatment of burn victims” (Serious Games Challenge). The following introductory text screen is a telling synopsis of some of the urban “humanitarian” peace-keeping and rescue missions entrusted to the player who takes on the role of a service member in the game of Full Spectrum Warrior (2004):

In one moment in time
our service members
will be feeding and clothing
displaced refugees-Providing
humanitarian assistance

In the next moment,
they will be holding
two warring tribes apart-
Conducting peacekeeping operations

Finally, they will be fighting
a highly lethal mid-intensity battle
All on the same day,
all in the same...three city blocks.

It will be what we call
the ‘Three Blocks War’
- General Charles Krulack

In this game of Full Spectrum Warrior, players apprehend the tactical and operational leadership skills of urban combat within a three block radius of the fictional Middle Eastern
city of “Zekistan.” Of accord with the three “moments” described in *Full Spectrum Warrior*’s poetic written introduction, game players discover an eerie mass grave, conduct peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance of refugees, and engage in “high intensity enemy combat,” both sustainers of life and administrators of death. The game was developed at the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), a United States army funded research centre of the University of Southern California. The website mission statement of the ICT research centre states “ICT’s goals are the advancement of the state-of-the-art in artificial intelligence, graphics, and immersive environment with the creative talents of Hollywood and the video game industry.” At ICT, academia, the military, and Hollywood channel their disparate resources of knowledge, talent and funding into a militainment alliance.

*Full Spectrum Warrior* players are both civilian customers who can purchase the game worldwide, and United States officers in training. Not just about mindless killing, players activate their “brain instead of brawn” while learning to operate devices like a handheld GPS (Global Positioning System) in order to trace a route for the player’s unit to “outflank the enemy.” In the role of a commanding officer, the player controls a small unit of soldiers, hiding them behind parked cars and rubbish bins as he moves them through sequential checkpoints in Zekistan. A training video for the game recorded by an army officer warns players to be wary of civilians like local children and other suspicious, automated non-player civilian characters, who are potentially terrorists in the service of the enemy. In the militarized urban playgrounds of asymmetrical warfare, civilians, including children, are suspect until proven harmless.

In a curious circuitous loop, this same game of *Full Spectrum Warrior* designed for preparing soldiers to be deployed in the Middle East is also repurposed after deployment in the so-called “Virtual Iraq Treatment.” Upon return to the United States, a traumatized war veteran overreacts to environmental noises on the streets of his hometown, plagued by
insomnia and panic attacks. Travis Boyd, a marine who witnessed the annihilation of his entire unit one day in Iraq, relates that when he returned to the United States, “I’d have my wife drive me if I had to go off the base. A few times, I thought I saw a mortar in the road and reached for the steering wheel” (Halpern). To treat Boyd’s trauma, a military therapist immersed Boyd in a simulation of combat memories in the *Full Spectrum Warrior* game, embellishing with additional sensory effects like a vibrating platform and the odour of diesel fuel (Halpern). She repeated this gamic treatment in multiple sessions until Boyd’s trauma subsided.

The din of the battle pursues a traumatized marine from a hot spot of strife to the domestic city at peace, where finally the repeated playing of the same game used in combat training exercises treats the marine’s post-traumatic stress disorder. These diverse applications of the game before and after the battle, in training simulation and later in treatment of memories of flesh-ripping mortar, are symptomatic of a militant society at war on multiple fronts at home and abroad. Like in the White House mission of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), where the player happens upon the bloody aftermath of a terrorist attack, a seemingly secure city is converted into a battle zone, far from recognized sites of war. The asymmetric war on terror potentially reaches into many population centres.

5. THE ARTIST’S INTERVENTION AS SITUATIONIST GAME

“Written descriptions can be no more than passwords to this great game” (Debord, “Theory of the Derive”).

Through urban battle games, the theories of asymmetric conflict, full spectrum dominance, and varied military operations of urban terrain infiltrate the civilian sphere. Although such games speak of a formidable militarization of everyday life, we now turn to other tactics of
ludic occupation for hope of resistance. As Laura Biagori, curator of the travelling digital art exhibit entitled “Game as Critic as Art,” once commented at a conference panel in Bilbao, if major interests are projecting serious concerns into games, why shouldn’t activists and artists as well (Juego como Estrategia)?

The “artistic” Situationist repurposing of the city preceded the military “gamification” of urban space by half a century, although its initial duration and scope was limited and seems to have found heirs in artistic approach only relatively recently. Although I will not trace direct lines of influence or mentorship between individuals, I will in this chapter attempt to link the interventionism of these early mid-twentieth century artist games to the ludic tactics of later, Information Age “hactivist” collectives (Schleiner 149). Early Situationist play provided an inspirational template for later artistic and mediatic interventionism, especially in relation to the city.

Prior to the immobilizing, alienating trance that “the spectacle” casts over passive members of capitalist society in later Situationist thought, in earlier issues of the Situationist International Journal, members like Guy Debord and the architect Gilles Evian developed a skeletal program for active, ludic interventions within the city fabric. At this youthful, more optimistic phase of their career, the Situationists proposed a joyful, transgressive ludic agenda for resisting “stale bourgeois culture” with interventionist games and spontaneous pranks. Debord writes, “The first of these means is undoubtedly the systematic provocative dissemination of a host of proposals tending to turn the whole of life into an exciting game, combined with the constant depreciation of all current diversions (to the extent, of course, that these latter cannot be detourned to serve in constructions of more interesting ambiances)” (“Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography”). Thus these games were initially conceived as a broad-scale ludic assault on everyday life, a disruption and détournement of daily tasks, as well as intervention within pre-existing diversions.
In preliminary issues of the Situationist International, Debord describes exploits like “slipping by night into houses undergoing demolition, hitchhiking nonstop and without destination through Paris during a transportation strike in the name of adding to the confusion, wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public” (“Theory of the Derive”). These brief accounts of the Situationists early urban exploits lend a more illicit, risqué tenor to the oft cited Situationist “derive” than merely drifting about city sidewalks in an atelic, directionless flâneur’s stroll.

An open-endedness to the derive is observable in that the player sets aside the will, the drive to accomplish daily necessities, and instead dedicates a portion of the day to the game, submitting to the “currents” and “vortexes” of the city. Debord writes, “from a derive point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (“The Theory of the Derive”). Yet the drifting “letting go” motion of the derive is also constrained by “calculated” possibilities: “But the derive includes both this letting-go and its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities” (Debord, “Theory of the Derive”). Indeed we might not venture to call such unpredictable activities games if they contained no parameters or constraints whatsoever. A derive’s calculated objectives include a “possible rendezvous” with an unsuspecting stranger, drawing a “psychogeographic” or emotional map of a designated region of the city, and tracing a trajectory of rapid movement through varied urban ambiences and systems, such as the proposed exploration of a closed-off subway tunnel.
Situationist players, three or four being the recommended amount for a derive, do not know when or where exactly they will conclude their game, although a game has a prearranged start time. Debord mentions an exceptional derive of two months duration, yet he advises an optimal duration of play of one day: “a derive rarely occurs in its pure form: it is difficult for the participants to avoid setting aside an hour or two at the beginning or end of the day for taking care of banal tasks; and toward the end of the day fatigue tends to encourage such an abandonment” (“Theory of the Derive”). Thus true to Huizinga’s definition of play as occurring in a “magic circle” separated from the everyday, a Situationist game separates playing time out from the time of attending to daily necessities.

On the other hand, Situationist play is not spatially relegated to the magic circle. Such games deliberately transgress the ludic border, crossing the fence from the playground or sports field into the exterior city. Like the computer games of the militarized playground, the
derive infiltrates and repurposes the space generally dedicated to everyday pursuits within the city itself, appropriating the liveliness of the urban habitat into the very experience of the game. Expressing a preference for the delights of the city over empty fields that brings to mind the favoured urban setting of the military playground, Debord recounts the errors of an earlier, derive-like, artistic walk. In Debord’s cautionary tale, four sadly misguided Surrealist artists mistakenly selected the tedious and “depressing” countryside as their game setting (“Theory of the Derive”).15 Rather than the countryside, the preferable playground of the Situationist game was the existent urban terrain of Paris, a space of others, a public and private terrain grown of ad hoc alliances of vital necessities, slums, markets, statist structures, of private properties, and segments of the map imposed upon and repatterned by urban planners.

The Situationist player adopts what can be described as a tactical approach to this richly suggestive and lively urban habitat, exploring the passageways and circuits of the city. A temporary tactical intervention in the space of others, the ephemeral passage of a Situationist game fades from the city streets and buildings once it has been played, persisting only in the memory of players and accidental spectators. Michel de Certeau contends that “a tactic insinuates itself into the other’s space, fragmentarily, without taking it over entirely” (xix). De Certeau distinguishes between a strategy’s separate “base” of its own from which to oversee and impose upon space, “whereas tactics can only use, manipulate and divert these spaces” (30). For De Certeau, a tactical position is that of the underdog, borrowing space from the other provisionally like a renter of an apartment, “whatever it wins it does not keep” (xix).
6. HACKING THE CITY

Your Intervention section borders on game breaking. Many people (myself included) paid $50 for a copy of Half-Life, Tribes 2, and Counter-Strike, and what you're telling people to do will ruin the 'experience' for all who play and pay for the game...And although Counter-Strike glorifies war, it is the time that we live in, and it is also an extremely enjoyable game (Critic of Velvet-Strike project).

Yet despite the lack of crystallized city structures resulting from such short-lived, transient games, the expressed greater aim of a Situationist game is to transform everyday life and behaviour patterns with ludic tactics.16 Thus the interventionism of Situationist style play could portend a more active threat than de Certeau’s surreptitious tactics of “making do from within” that reaps no permanent damage or change (25). For instance, city officials lament that a non-violent, city-wide transportation strike reaps fiscal damage by intervening in the flow of the city’s daily business. And given sufficient repetition over time, ephemeral passages leave their mark on space, as urban circuits of people, traffic and goods forge lanes. In the words of Manual Castells, “space is crystallized time” (441). With the advent of the digital Information Age in the 1990’s, the immaterial circulation of labour and capital comes to assume even greater relevance. The Situationist repurposing of pre-existent urban channels (subway tunnels and streets), and the uninvited transgression of players into everyday life spheres of operation (train stations and public squares), seems to anticipate the immaterial tactical interventions of hacktivism, a convergence of art, activism, and hacking undertaken by media artists and activists at the turn of the millennium.

In 1993 Critical Art Ensemble declared: “Nomadic power must be resisted in cyberspace rather than in physical space” (25). The virtual stage of the Internet is where hactivism first played out in the performative actions of groups like the Electronic Disturbance Theatre, a “hacktivist” artist collective composed of the United States citizens Brett Stalbaum, Carmen Krarasic and former Critical Art Ensemble member, Ricardo Dominguez. In June of 1998 Electronic Disturbance Theatre (E.D.T.) initiated the Floodnet
project, a series of digital hactivist actions in support of the indigenous Zapatistas of the Mexican region of Chiapas. A temporary blockage of the Mexican government’s website traffic transpired by inviting virtual protesters to click a button on the EDT website to “ping” the government website. The EDT ping attacks stalled the government server traffic, impacting accessibility to the website. Rather than irrevocably damaging the website nor penetrating its server, this action was likened by the hacktivists themselves to the way that bodies in a strike disrupt the flow of traffic on the plaza outside of a public building.

This playful, performative interventionism, activating metaphors of street protests and public political actions, also recalls the earlier disruptive and humorous pranks of the Situationists. Can we equate Situationist-style interventionism with artistic, activist hacking? Let’s take a moment to consider the “hacking” component of hactivism at greater length. Steven Levy situates the origins of hacking in the proclivities of an early generation of male geeks in the 1950’s with a predilection for tinkering with toy railroads and ham radios, a fascination with electronic gadgetry predating computers and the Internet (21). The computer hacking culture that developed among these youth later branches into both the destructiveness of “script kiddies” and virus writers, and yet also evolves into the more mature “gift culture” of free software and Linux operating system coders. Among many hackers and hacktivists, a credo of “freedom of information” takes precedence over other “activist” concerns. Paul Taylor and Tim Jordan describe such information friendly hackers as “digitally correct hacktivists” (91). Unlike the disruptive, theatrical blockages of hacktivist artists like Electronic Disturbance Theater, Taylor and Jordan’s digitally correct hacktivists write programs to support the unblocked dissemination of information in nations like China where Internet usage is constricted by government censorship.

In a chapter entitled “Hackers: Loving the Machine for Itself,” Sherry Turkle isolates prominent criteria of a purportedly male hacker culture such as agonistic striving for
technical mastery, and an aesthetic appreciation of complexity in machines, which she alleges is accompanied by a preference for simplicity in human relationships (183-218). In their chapter titled “Men in the Matrix,” Jordan and Taylor concur with Turkle’s assessment of hacking as a competitive domain of masculine technical wizardry, and furthermore contend that despite the hacker’s rebellious reputation, hacking ultimately validates the system (162). Jordan and Taylor write, “Hackers overidentification with technical means over political ends and their parasitic relationship to various technological systems means that although they are at the heart of the exercises of power, they remain in an ultimately powerless dependent relationship” (162). Jordan and Taylor posit that hactivism, on the other hand, is not prey to the same myopic, geeky focus on operationality as just plain hacking because hactivism uses technical means to service activist political ends (144).

Jordon and Taylor’s problematic relegates the means of hacking to the operational strata of computer systems, (which are identified with power), while activist ends float elsewhere as abstract, fixed social values. Yet are the powerful workings of a system and ethical ends or values so easily separated from one another? Following in the wake of Manuel Castells and others work on metropolitan centres and globalization, not to mention the dynamic, operative models put forth by many thinkers from the humanities like Foucault, Deleuze, and Virilio, a more generative understanding of the social effects of technology expands “the system” to include workings beyond the electronic, to consider the technology of cities, for instance, or the workings of biological and governmental apparatuses. As the novelty of the Information Age fades, computerized and material operations come to seem less divided from one another. Viewed with the eyes of both the hacker and the urban planner, the city shifts from an ossified, crystallized solidity, a sedentarized place, to a more fluid constellation of overlapping circulations. Virilio writes, “The city has always been a
box full of speeds, a kind of gearshift. The organization of the city is the streets. What are the streets? Rushes” (77).18

Like the hacker’s invasion of a government server, the Situationists’ explorations of urban systems and maps of urban psychogeography are an uninvited, reverse-engineering of the urban layout. Hacking the city apprehends the workings of a system that has been set in place by others, (the municipal authorities, merchants, city administrators, and public officials). Such hacks carry the threat of a power reversal should the hacker divert the system’s originally planned operations. Unlike the engineer with his strategic blueprint overview of the system, the hacker initiates her approach as a curious interloper. The identity of the system, of the city or the game, fluctuates as it is poked, prodded, tested and broken.

Thus an initial phase of the hack is exploration and discovery of a system—in a word, troublemaking. The systematic looping or nodal structure of the sites of the Situationists’ pranks, the train station, the closed off catacombs, the streets during the transportation strike, recall the circuitry and branches of a network, the miniature topography of the computer circuit board. The hacker is drawn to the alluring complexity of an electronic “city” he or she does not own. Eventually, the hacker approaches Turkle’s masterful “male” dominion of means, and might then elect for complicity with “the system,” at which point the hacker is hired as a system administrator who programs secure, protective firewalls on an Internet server, or elects to take on a public post as an official urban planner. Similarly “switching sides,” twenty years after writing “The Theory of the Derive,” Debord designed a Napoleonic board game titled “The Game of War.” But the modes of hacking and hacktivism that pertain to the ludic artistic approach to the city are neither mastery and dominion, nor “digitally correct hactivisim,” nor hacking that sacrifices means toward social ends. The hacking style
that prefigures ludic activism is uninvited exploration, play and disturbance, playful intervention within both electronic and material systems.

7. CONTESTING THE TERRAIN

A more chronological ordering of the playful urban occupations described in this chapter would begin with the Situationists’ playful interventions in the bourgeois capitalist mercantile city in the 1950’s. Then jumping forward fifty years, military entertainers detourned the civilian-commercial city both virtually in battle simulation games and at key sites of asymmetrical urban unrest. In the early twenty-first century, in response and resistance to the proliferation of militarized urban playgrounds, hacktivist game artists, (and I included myself among their number at one time), shifted their targeted nodes of intervention from websites to hacking digital game cities.

Reminding players of the potentially fatal consequences of present day military combat, even for the most well-equipped soldiers of the Revolution in Military Affairs, American artist Joseph Delappe's performative ludic intervention, *Dead in Iraq* (2007), memorialises the names of fallen United States service members in the game of *America’s Army*. Delappe diligently typed the names of the fatally wounded American soldiers in Iraq into the chat channels that overlay the player’s view of the game city, distracting players who complained that Delappe was “taking the fun out of the game” (*Returning Fire Documentary*). On the *Dead in Iraq* website Delappe writes: “As of 6/15/09, I have input 4042 names. I intend to keep doing so until the end of this war. As of this date there have been 4313 American service persons killed in Iraq” (*Dead in Iraq*).

Stahl refers to the Iraq War as a “sanitized war,” a war with restricted media coverage (25). According to Stahl, the controlled media coverage in effect since the Gulf War
eliminated the more unsightly and disturbing elements of war from public view, hiding the carnage that so disturbed American television viewers during the Vietnam War (Stahl 25). Delappe’s *Dead in Iraq* intervention works against this cleanliness, inserting the unsettling data on servicemen mortalities into the sanitized ludic battlefield. Playing at war is no longer as entertaining, nor even as easy to play, when lists of young servicemen and servicewomen fatalities clutter the game’s viewport.

In 2002, a little earlier on in the United States initiated War on Terror, I also developed a series of anti-war interventions within a game, in collaboration with two other primary collaborators, and including the contributed actions and “digital graffiti” of many other participants. On the same day that the United States began dropping bombs in Afghanistan, I began to conduct a game modification workshop in Barcelona, Spain. The echoing gunshots from multiple installations of a WWII themed game within the cement chamber of the workshop cement chamber took on alarming contemporary overtones, and inspired a conversation about making an anti-war game with Joan Leandre, another artist presenting at the workshop. A few months later in San Diego, California, I met the artist Brody Condon who suggested intervening in the game *Counter-Strike*. We decided to make anti-military “digital graffiti” to spray on the walls, floors and building surfaces of *Counter-Strike* maps. Condon contributed a homo-erotic image series titled “Love-In” depicting embracing terrorist and soldier combatants. We launched a farcical mirror website mimicking the graphical design of the official *Counter-Strike* website and posted an open call for protesters of war and of the militarization of computer game culture to contribute anti-war digital graffiti to the Velvet-Strike initiative. I also posted “intervention recipes,” formulas for players to intervene in “game play as usual,” such as a list of instructions for befriending an enemy in an open game server.
Soon after the inception of Velvet-Strike, angry emails arrived, accusing us of misunderstanding that “the game is a merely game.” Other players demanded that we return to the kitchen and go back to playing with dolls, claiming such games as exclusively male turf. Joan (John in the Catalan language of the Cataluña region of Spain), was the target of hate mails addressed to Miss Joan Leandre from players worldwide regarding his “feminist nonsense.” American players accused us of unpatriotism and a New York based player pleaded with us not to obstruct Counter-Strike matches: “CS was my way out after 9/11. I played a lot of CS after that, in order to take out my anger against those nineteen bastards who caused the destruction of the WTC. Please, do not ruin my game” (Velvet-Strike).

Other players welcomed the intrusion into their game as an entertaining diversion from the existing game, “more entertaining than the original gameplay itself” in the words of activist Pierre Rahola, who, along with his French cohorts, was simultaneously conducting similar anti-war digital graffiti activities inside a different First Person Shooter game modification, Team Fortress (1996) (“Personal Interview Pierre Rahola”). Portland, Oregon based Chris Birke, who bears the distinctive credential of being one of the texture makers of the original Counter-Strike mod, contributed anti-war sprays to the Velvet-Strike initiative aimed at hardcore game geeks, such as a graffiti displaying a script to reprogram the left
mouse button, customarily used for shooting, to instead drop the player’s weapon. British
player “Ian” shared an extensive list of his own *Counter-strike* exploits:

I've actually already cooked up most of the intervention recipes on your *Velvet-Strike* site [...] One can at least minimise the killing by finding obscure hiding places on
maps and then sitting very still for the entire round where nobody can find one. This
generally means each round is three minutes of bloodshed and twelve minutes of
trying to find the last bloody player who's crawled into a lift shaft and refuses to
move. Hiding is also an excellent time to be very chatty and tell everyone you're
scared and you've become a pacifist and beg them to leave you alone. Hopefully you'll
shame them into peace! (*Velvet-Strike*)

The trickster, the creative prankster behind the screen, the spoilsport provocateur,
cultivates creative frictions and deliberate misunderstandings, playing with the border region
between the game and the war, further enhancing the realism of the virtual city with activist
graffiti and the insertion of passively resistant, virtual non-combatant “civilian” bodies. These
ludic hacks inject life’s noise into the ghost town previously overrun with militant play
operations, impeding the smooth operation of the game. As stated in one flaming critique of
*Velvet-Strike*, the intervention actions bordered on “game breaking,” a Dadaist dose of
negativity that Debord projects as a necessary component of future political movements: “any
future constructive position must include a Dadaist-type negative aspect, as long as the social
conditions that impose the repetition of rotten superstructures [...] have not been wiped out by
force” (“Report”). The critical “negative” unmaking of one game makes another game, as the
ludic border between game and world becomes poetic and humorous play material for artists
and ludic mutators to manipulate. Hacking the virtual city became artists’ play.
8. FUNNY RESISTANCE

Ludic anti-war hactivism, more entertaining than the game itself, playing another game within the game while sowing controversy and dissent, seems to mock the seriousness of war, undermining the gravity of death and destruction, its entertainment effect bordering on complicity with the militainment apparatus it purports to resist. Should game players dare to grapple with activist concerns, or would it be wiser to leave such occupations to experienced activists and revolutionaries, as advised by one of the few flaming emails our Velvet-Strike initiative received from the left: “I know real revolutionaries and your video game is a joke. No offence, but civil war and freedom fighting is not some little game in your precious little suburban world. It's a pity that people like you are so uninformed about politics, agit prop art, propaganda, etc.” (Velvet-Strike).

Yet resistant actions were never consistently so serious. The American anarchist Hakim Bey underscores the festive atmosphere of the uprising before it settles into a more ordinary state: “Like festivals, uprisings cannot happen every day—otherwise they would not be "nonordinary" (“The Temporary Autonomous Zone”). Bey’s “TAZ” is a temporary autonomous zone free of state control, an uprising at variable scales, from a dinner party to “a pirate utopia” of eighteenth century escaped slaves, prostitutes, and corsairs, “remote hideouts where ships could be watered and provisioned, booty traded for luxuries and necessities […] whole mini-societies living consciously outside the law and determined to keep it up, even if only for a short but merry life” (“Temporary Autonomous Zone”).

Brian Holmes takes note of a performative, artistic turn within late twentieth and early twenty-first century protest movements, commenting on the playful practices of puppetry and conceptual performance art in anti-globalization street demonstrations leading up to the WTO (World Trade Organization) protests in Seattle in 1999. Holmes reflects that “these kinds of actions are about as far as one could imagine from a museum, yet when you
approach them, you feel something distinctly artistic” (347). Jordon and Taylor, while tracing the evolution of the anti-globalization movement, describe an action in London with similar patently artistic, theatrical and playful overtones:

On June 18 1999 a global carnival against capital was held. [...] The demonstration in London involved four gigantic puppet heads each of which played music. Masks were handed out in four colours, that matched colours associated with each head and on which were quoted reasons for the demonstration and a quote from an unnamed guerrilla (who was in fact Subcommandante Marcos). The playing of the theme from Mission Impossible signalled those of each mask colour to follow their head. Eluding and confusing police, they met up again at the London Financial Futures and Options Exchange (59).

Thus while hactivist artists are infiltrating digital game cities with graffiti and performative actions, activists orchestrate playful “artistic” interventions and events on hard pavement. Resistance goes ludic on both digital and material streets.

9. POINTS OF DETOURNEMENT

Whether the militarized city is a return to an originary military urban function (no longer the protective garrison of the castle-fort but a co-extensive military playground), or whether the primary function of the city as a sedentary “crystallization” of merchant exchanges is being diverted to militarization, we leave as a matter of debate to schools of urbanists (Virilio 19). What seems evident is that as the military operations of play run through the city, a playful assault is being waged upon the city as a site of commercial exchange and a global metropolitan node, the city as refuge from the poverty or the conservatism of the countryside, the city as artistic or cultural haven, or any number of other more “civilian” possible configurations of city.
The military, in alliance with education, the game industry, and players themselves, is the prime developmental motor of militainment games of serious soldier play. Games train for “urban operations” not only of death but for life’s upkeep and administration in the militarized civilian sphere. The virtual game city becomes a testing ground for play tactics that are later transposed to military manoeuvres in live, conflicted urban zones. Enforcers rove the increasingly ludic terrain of the city, practicing anti-terrorist teamwork formations of biocontrol in former civilian turf. This militarized reterritorialization of city can lead to a pathological confusion of place. A traumatized Iraqi war veteran goes into alert mode in the wrong city long after he was expected to have put aside the battle operations of the urban playground.

I turned to the twentieth century’s transgressive games of the Situationists for antecedents for an alternate approach to the city as playground. A Situationist play tactic repurposes urban space, the space of others, for the game of derive. Drawing on the illicit, interventionist character of early Situationist exploits, the derive’s appropriation of existing channels and urban networks, tunnels, streets, and transportation systems, become the play material of “seriously seductive” games (Debord, “Critique of Urban Cartography”). While leaving negligible marks on the physical terrain, Situationist play prefigures the immaterial interventionism of hacking. Systems are explored, diverted and potentially disrupted at a certain key juncture, a vulnerable point within a web of relations that Eugene Thacker and Alexander Galloway refer as the “Schwerpunkt” (14). Both 21st century activist art affronts and military entertainment cultivate a sensitivity to these key nodes in the game/city system that are ripe for playful intervention and occupation. A prominently placed wall provides a canvas for protest graffiti; a rooftop serves as a convenient sniper perch. The playground of the activist play artist, like that of the military entertainer, is the hackable city.
Notes

1 In this chapter I will limit my interest in “biocontrol” of the city to its military applications—in the following chapter I will discuss more civilian types of digitally augmented urban biocontrol.

2 Drawing on Benjamin, Arendt and Habermas, Stahl describes a depoliticization of “the imperial subject” who is distracted by playing war games from engaging in a public, democratic debate on war (12). He suggests that at the same time as this withdrawal from public decision-making occurs, the invitation to take up virtual arms, (and here Stahl seems to assume a North American player), ironically exhibits the nostalgic appeal of the citizen-soldier’s right to bear arms written into the United States constitution. Implicit in his argument is that the appeal of taking up arms as a constitutional right is a nostalgic rebellious gesture since guns no longer exert a significant power check on a military-state apparatus containing arsenals of nuclear weapons. (12).

3 An isolated urban locale for play combat in a computer game, like a town, neighbourhood or a bridge, is referred to as a “map.” The title of the Suburbia map oddly conjures American suburbia, quite a far cry from the Middle-Eastern city quadrant represented in the game.

4 In Chapter Two I described the beginnings of the FPS, First Person Shooter Game genre, games where the player runs through dark, maze-like passageways concealing demons and aliens.

5 While other urbanists, in an ongoing debate referred to by Virilio, hold that the ancient city was largely founded on commerce and Mesopotamian agriculture. Illustrative of this more agricultural, commercial camp, Lewis Mumford proposes that a Neolithic “women’s village” of pottery, grain containers, and sacred womb-like “enclosures” preceded the man’s city of more sophisticated tools and aggressive male war gods (15-17, 27). Virilio on the other hand sides with those maintaining that the city has military, rather than agricultural or commercial beginnings.

6 The 20th century military theory of “Full-Spectrum Dominance” refers to a “gray strategy” merging civilian and military components, supposedly successfully implemented by the U.S. in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and a failure in Vietnam (Hardt and Negri 53).

7 Stahl argument contends that consumers are also democratic citizens with potential influence on the conduction of United States backed war efforts. Thus their choice to engage with military entertainment is parcel to a political stance.

8 The makers of America’s Army happened upon a convenient pre-existing game form in Counter-Strike for generating recruits to the post-911 military build-up in the States, yet Counter-Strike is not identical to America’s Army. For instance, one obvious distinction is that in Counter-Strike, the player can select to play on the side of the terrorists’ team, to set the bomb, to take hostages etc, whereas in America’s Army, no matter which of the two teams the player selects, the player takes on the role of an American “imperial” counter-terrorist
enforcer. While I agree with Stahl that “the interactive war” can “hardwire an imperial subject” into a battle-ready and pro-war configuration, we still need to take care to be attuned to the differences between civilian and military gamemakers of battle games (Stahl 4).

9 More recently the military has shortened the term to just “Urban Operations.”

10 These digital civilian ghost towns also curiously recall Mumford’s contention that prior to the human city, the first cities were constructed as memorials to the dead (7).

11 This is the same university with a respected game design program where Darfur is Dying, the serious game discussed in the previous chapter, was designed by students in the School of Cinema.

12 Such alliances are not unique to the United States—serious military games have been developed in research collaborations between educational institutions and military and government agencies in Europe and Asia as well.

13 Gamification refers to the making into a game of any area of life previously considered not a game, from a gamified shopping list that rewards the player each time they check off an item, to gamified medical training software in conducting surgery.

14 The passive consumer of Debord’s Society of the Spectacle is entranced with diversions of the escapist commodity “spectacle.” A combination of advertising, entertainment, and consumerism purportedly diverts the inhabitant of a capitalist system from taking on a more active role in society and culture. Individuals are alienated from each other by such media, through social relations “mediated by image” (2).

15 The Situationists often differentiated themselves against the much larger art movement of Surrealism preceding Situationism.

16 Attesting to the transformative potential of such games, with youthful fervor Debord writes, “Our action on behaviour, linked with other desirable aspects of a revolution in mores, can be briefly defined as the invention of games of an essentially new type” (“Report”).

17 To ping is a common preliminary to a hacker attack but the ping itself does not penetrate the server—the ping is comparable to a “knock on the door” of the server’s ports.

18 To consider another instance of the city as fluid system, as the computer system administrator implements firewalls and virus protection software to protect from hackers, the urban planner designs the layout of city streets to protect against corporal threats to security, such as the renovations on the medieval street layout of Paris following the French Revolution to control and impede the formation of street mobs. This example of authoritarian urban planning is mentioned in Parisian tourist manuals.

19 America’s Army is the same urban operations game I discussed earlier while describing how to play a typical round of the “Suburbia” map.
Delappe’s sustained and tragic memorial garnered vicious emails from both players and indignant American family members of soldiers who understood the project as disrespectful of their loved ones’ sacrifices. Even so, “Dead in Iraq” is a war memorial that “asymmetrically” valorises the lives of certain war casualties over others, those of U.S. combatants, while excluding the names of deceased Iraqi civilian casualties and enemy combatants. Delappe also organized a project titled “The Iraq Memorial” where he invited artists to design proposals for memorials for the uncounted Iraqi civilian fatalities.