ECHOES OF INVASION: CULTURAL ANXIETIES AND VIDEO GAMES

Brian Keilen

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Committee:

Dr. Jeremy Wallach, Advisor
Dr. Jeffrey Brown
Dr. Esther Clinton
ABSTRACT

Jeremy Wallach, Advisor

Invasion is ubiquitous in popular culture, and while they may be fictional, marauding hordes play on very real human fears. Invaders evoke deep cultural anxieties and challenge our identities on both a personal and national level. This theme has been readily adopted by shooter video games, where players gleefully blast through hordes of foreign invaders, human or otherwise. Most of the scholarly attention given to video games has focused on attempting to find a correlation between video game violence and real world violence, while little attention has been given to the forms this violence takes. This thesis attempts to correct this deficiency by analyzing the theme of invasion in video games. Linking these games to earlier invasion narratives, such as George Tomkyns Chesney’s The Battle of Dorking (1871) and H.G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds (1898), I argue that the aliens in these narratives are linked to cultural anxieties concerning Otherness. Brought into a contemporary, post 9/11 setting, I argue that video games in series such as Halo and Call of Duty portray Muslim and Arab peoples as invading Others and play into conservative political rhetoric concerning the “War on Terror” that renders Otherness inhuman and an object of fear. The games thus attempt to validate American foreign policy since September 11 by guiding players toward specific subjectivities. I ultimately explore the medium and genre as tools for maintaining imperialist power while also exploring methods of resistance to that power.
To Mike and Cindy Keilen, for putting up with all this video game nonsense for so long.
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“…People everywhere and at all times have been haunted by ogres, cannibal giants, metamorphs, werewolves vampires and so on. In Africa people believe in were-lions, and in the South Seas there are man-eating were-sharks, not to mention cannibal ogres among the American Indians and the bellowing ape-men of the Far East! Since these nightmares are universal, they must reveal something about the human mind.”

-David D. Gilmore, Preface to *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mystical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*
INTRODUCTION

In 1871, hot on the heels of the Franco-Prussian war, a story appeared in the British periodical *Blackwood’s Magazine* titled *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*. Telling the straightforward tale of an invasion of England by German forces, the story created a sensation, selling more than 80,000 copies after being reprinted as a sixpenny pamphlet and was subsequently printed in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States (Clarke 1966).

Following the defeat of the French Army – one of the largest regular armies in the world at the time – at the hands of the Prussians, the story’s author, a Royal Engineer named George Tomkyns Chesney was concerned about the taciturn state of the British military. The shocking nature of the Prussian victory was enough to make Chesney believe the British army needed to be modernized (Clarke 29). When more straightforward attempts to relay his fears failed to get the point across, Chesney turned to fiction. The story of the destruction of the Royal Navy (the country’s first and best line of defense at the time) at the hands of the enemy’s “fatal engines” and the quick fall of the rest of England had an immediate impact on the population and sparked a new trend in the popular literature of the time. Tales of invasion filled newsstands and took hold within the public imagination. While *The Battle of Dorking* is now mostly forgotten, some of the subsequent stories—dubbed “invasion literature” by scholars and critics—including H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, have become classics and have entered the popular cultural canon.

Despite their often fantastic content, these stories tap into deep cultural anxieties regarding invasion. Almost universally, they deal with invasions from technologically (or supernaturally) superior enemies who are Others in some way, be that nationally, racially or ideologically. In the case of *The War of the Worlds* and *Dracula*, the enemies are completely
foreign to the human species. Furthermore, many of these stories came at a watershed moment in British history. Nearing the end of the Victorian period, the Empire was already beginning to decay and its eventual decline was visible in the near future. Coupled with the lurking threat of attack from the European continent, these stories played upon anxieties that would come to a head not even 20 years later. It is no surprise, then, that I.F. Clarke declared in his *Voices Prophesying War, 1763-1984* “The First World War, it would seem, had been desired and described long before it took place” (44). It is quite clear that Chesney intended to tap into these cultural anxieties in order to effect a direct change. The fact that his story was wildly popular and sparked a new genre is equally telling; both producers and consumers of popular culture are involved in perpetuating these cultural anxieties.

But invasion stories did not die out when World War I made these anxieties real. Tales of invasion not only persisted, they also switched mediums and adapted to the current perceived cultural threat. After World War II, invasion films began to personify the Cold War threats of communism and nuclear war, often with aliens taking the place of the Russians (this film genre found perhaps its purest expression in 1984’s *Red Dawn* which depicts the surprise invasion of the U.S. by communist forces. A remake featuring North Korean invaders, set for a November 2012 release, revisits these fears). The dawn of the 21st century saw two significant changes to the invasion genre. First, after a decade of searching for new antagonists following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the attacks of September 11, 2001 gave invasion stories a new source of anxiety. Secondly, after nearly four decades of existence, the late 20th and early 21st centuries saw the rise of the video game as a dominant medium in the popular culture landscape.

In addition to the death and destruction wrought, the 9/11 attacks had a significant impact on the American (and, to an extent, the global) psyche. In addition to waking America from the
dream of invulnerability, the attacks also shifted the basic conception of invasion. Invading forces were no longer connected to a particular nation and the reasons for the invasion were less clear, tied more to abstract ideology than politics. Reverberations of this impact are still being seen and felt in popular culture. It would seem as if no movie, TV show or comic book is immune from dealing with the implications of September 11 and America’s subsequent wars and foreign policy. Fox’s television series 24 (2001-10), for example, dealt with the difficulties of stopping a terrorist attack and seems to advocate torture (and other questionable interrogation techniques) as an effective way of doing so. However, most of these post-9/11 texts do not depict invasion in the traditional sense in that terrorists are not usually depicted as a marauding army attempting to conquer the United States. More typically, film and television tend to directly deal with the smaller-scale, guerilla nature of terrorism. These texts tend to probe questions raised by terrorism and the response to it, such as the use of torture to extract information from suspects or the legality of warrantless wiretaps.

Video games, on the other hand, are an ideal medium for the sorts of invasions typical to the genre. Because of video games’ strong focus on action, invasion—extraterrestrial and otherwise—has become a common theme. While video games are commonly perceived as trivial diversions for children, they can, and do, reflect the culture that produces them. Invasion narratives in video games, then, carry much of the symbolic weight of their predecessors in film and literature. These games undoubtedly focus on the violence of invasion and while much scholarly attention has been paid to the violence depicted in video games, little effort has been given to more deeply examining and analyzing the forms this violence takes. The loss of context that results from simply examining video game violence for its own sake is a major oversight that neglects what lies at the very heart of these games.
Video game violence comes in many varieties that can reveal much about the culture that produces the games. If the medium (and the scholarship concerned with it) is to evolve, this violence needs to be approached in a way that takes more into account than the violence itself. A comprehensive look at the cultural meanings behind video game violence, while necessary, may be outside the scope of any single academic project. Instead, this study seeks to tackle one facet of violence and war present within modern video games: invasion.

Whatever the case, like their siblings in the film industry, video games are carrying on the tradition set for them by their forebears in the invasion literature genre. In the novels that I will examine, English society is always under attack by a clear racial or national other (in this case they are typically German, Romanian or extraterrestrial). No matter how insular, literature is never independent of the society that creates it. But the appearance of *The Battle of Dorking* in the late 19th century marked a significant moment for invasion in popular culture. The numerous accounts of invasion published after *Dorking* not only captured the public’s imagination, but it also highlighted the very real threat of an actual invasion from Germany. The resulting tumult caused by the story regarding the state of the English army was so great that the Prime Minister himself saw fit to comment on the concerns raised by Chesney’s story (Clarke 39).

The first part of this study, then, will examine the history of the invasion literature genre. Beginning with *The Battle of Dorking* and moving onto the novels such as *The War of the Worlds* and *Dracula*, I will establish the common aspects of the stories and situate them in the context of late Victorian England. Most important among these is the threat from a foreign Other that threatens the national identity. Another novel, Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903), was particularly effective at contributing to the paranoia of a German invasion. In it, two Englishmen on a sailing holiday along the German coast uncover a covert plot to invade
England. Despite the best efforts of their German antagonists (including a traitorous Englishman), the duo manage to successfully thwart the invasion. I argue that these stories represent the popular culture of their time, and will begin to establish links between the popular stories of the written word with subsequent stories of different media that echo the theme of invasion. It is my contention that the popular culture of each time period reflects the invasion anxieties of the day, be it the uncertainties leading up to the beginning of World War I in the literature of turn of the century England or fears of terrorism in post-9/11 America.

While exploring the history of invasion in popular culture it is also necessary to deconstruct the ways in which these works are used as propaganda. As discussed above, the invasion literature genre was triggered by George Tomkyns Chesney’s desire to improve the British army in order to stave off a hypothetical (German) invasion. Not much has changed in the ensuing years. Despite changing media, popular texts are still used to warn the public of perceived threats to society, be they Nazis, Communists or terrorists. Scholars such as Aaron Delwiche have noted how video games such as *Special Force* and *America’s Army* are used as tools to attract new recruits to Hezbollah and the U.S. Army, respectively. But Delwiche ignores larger and more commercially successful games altogether. While both *America’s Army* and *Special Force* were freely available for download on the Internet and proudly wear their propagandist hearts on their sleeves, video games such as those in the *Halo* series require closer examination. These games are capable – sometimes in very powerful and significant ways – of supporting the hegemony of the day.

Therefore, the second – and central – part of this thesis will focus on video games. As a sub-genre of sorts to fictional accounts of war, invasion includes its own sets of themes and motifs. So while the basic elements of invasion stories transcend various media, it is necessary to
examine what makes video games unique. Indeed, one of my central arguments is that video
games are fundamentally different from other forms of visual storytelling and that the
fundamental design of the invasion games I discuss promotes hegemonic Western views of the
post-9/11 world. In this way, these games play into conservative rhetoric of the “War on Terror”
that renders Otherness inhuman and something to be feared. The true power of these games,
then, is in their form as well as their content. Not only do they reflect cultural anxieties about
terrorism, they also provide the player a safe platform to confront and manage these anxieties.
Unfortunately, this does not extend beyond the video game world. Instead, the player’s fears and
anxieties are only exacerbated.

The games examined in this study use a variety of methods to deal with cultural anxieties
surrounding terrorism. With its emphasis on armed conflict, the shooter genre will be a specific
focus of this study. In these games, presented in both first and third person, players usually take
the role of a soldier in a variety of combat scenarios. As the genres name suggests, the primary
task is to shoot through enemies to reach the end of the level. The games examined in depth will
include those in the Halo, Gears of War and Resistance series, which deal with alien invasions,
while games such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 and Homefront more clearly articulate
invasion anxieties by simulating real invasions of the United States. These games are typically
“played” from either the first or third person perspective (all but one of the games discussed in-
depth in this thesis are first-person shooter games, with Gears of War and its third person, over-
the-shoulder view being the lone exception), with the player taking control of a character or
characters doing battle with various alien races. These aliens are loaded with meaning beyond
the simple “invaders from outer space” motif. When fused with the identity politics inherent in
the “play” aspect of video games, they create a complex semiotic web that can have profound consequences.

Since the inception of video game studies as a viable field of academic inquiry, scholars have debated how to approach video games: Are they to be treated as games on their own terms or should they be examined as narratives and studied as such? Prominent scholars such as Ian Bogost, Janet Murray, Jesper Juul and Espen Aarseth have all written extensively on this “ludology vs. narratology” debate and it is not my intention to expand on their work. Instead, I plan to straddle the line between both worlds. For the sake of my analysis, I will treat video games as games that attempt to tell stories. Unlike most board games, which typically emphasize competition among players over a coherent story (this can perhaps be likened to the multiplayer modes of many of the shooter video games I will be discussing), or roleplaying games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, where the fictional world exists in each player’s imagination, video games offer a visual representation of the fictional world with which the player can interact.

This dual nature of video games again highlights the need to describe the differences between video games and older media. Technology becomes a central question here. The development and spread of both print and film brought about significant cultural changes in addition to radically altering the way humans conceptualize the world and interact with one another. With the development of digital technologies, including video games, we are experiencing another radical shift. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins have explored the possibilities of this new “Convergence Culture,” where users tap into different media sources to obtain information. Video games are certainly one of those mediums and it is necessary to explore how video games fit into the greater discussion of media convergence. I hope to do this in part by situating video games in the greater discussion of the invasion genre as a whole.
Instead of examining video games as similar to literature or film, then, it is necessary to treat each as a unique storytelling medium with invasion as a central connecting theme. Here we reach the heart of the matter: It is the expectations of invasion and the cultural anxieties that it reflects that have changed. Therefore, invasion will be the common thread that connects video games to their literary past. In order to accomplish this it is necessary to examine video games as a storytelling medium and to differentiate them from literature, particularly the novel. At the root of understanding video games is the concept of play\(^1\). Long before video games appeared on the popular culture radar, theorists Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois pioneered the study of play. Central to their work is the idea that play, while seemingly frivolous and non-serious, is in reality deeply serious. By interacting with the virtual worlds of video games, players are engaged in serious activity, activity that has a high potential to spill over into their real lives.

This interaction is key to understanding my argument. Video games may be in their infancy in terms of storytelling, but combining a narrative – a narrative created by a team of game designers and writers independent of the player – with a game can create a powerful web of images and experiences. Unlike novels, movies or television, where the reader/observer is inevitably separated from the action on the page or screen, video game players are always-already direct participants in the action of the story\(^2\). This turn from idle spectator to active participant is not insignificant. Implicating the player through the choices that he or she makes in a video game can raise serious moral questions. On that same note, the story and plot points of a video game can be seen as directing a player to certain ways of thinking about and viewing the world.

\(^1\) After all, one “plays” a video game, as opposed to “reading” a book or “watching” a film or television show.

\(^2\) The closest analogue to other media would be a novel written entirely in the second-person, but this would still eliminate the element of player choice present in video games.
My discussion of video games will be broken into three major sections. First, I will discuss how video games, like their literary forebears, articulate invasion anxieties by Othering the enemies that the player faces. Games in the shooter genre commonly cast the player as the savior of humanity. Often superhuman, sometimes scientifically enhanced, these player-characters are the only ones who can thwart the invasion. These games strongly encourage the player to identify with these main characters, most commonly through the use of first-person perspective. While these characters are obvious power fantasies that allow the player to have a profound impact on the game world, the strong connection they foster with the player is the wedge that divides the player from the attacking enemies on screen. While in most cases these enemies seem to be literal aliens with no connection to the real world (like the Martian invaders in *The War of the Worlds*), we shall see that is not always the case.

Commonly, the conflicts in video games are retaliatory; they are fights for survival from an invading force. More to the point, the player is always on the victimized side, conveniently dispelling any concerns he or she may have about imperialism. The enemies are always wholly evil and therefore the players actions are always righteous and can go unquestioned. While invasion has remained a constant theme in popular culture, the depictions of the invaders has changed. In video games, these invaders echo contemporary fears of terrorism and new communist threats. Games that are set in the real-world, such as Infinity Ward’s *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series and Kaos Studios’ *Homefront* clearly articulate these anxieties. The antagonists in these games (Islamic militants and Russian ultranationalists in *Call of Duty* and North Korean communists in *Homefront*) are Others, both ethnically and ideologically. The fact that they are grounded in the current political climate and have real life analogues makes them an excellent starting point for a discussion on the ways in which video games depict the Other.
The examination of invasion games focusing on real world scenarios will set the stage for discussion of the aliens and monsters present in other shooter games. The fact that they are coded as “alien” and “enemy” already sets them apart from the player, but their monstrousness serves two important functions. First, having been created by human developers and programmers, they are never fully alien. They retain human characteristics and it is in how these human characteristics manifest themselves that their Otherness begins to be realized. Secondly, their very monstrosity links them with cultural fears and anxieties. David D. Gilmore has noted that the monsters represent the fears of the cultures that dream them up and scholars such as Jeffrey Cohen emphasize that these monsters can be politically charged. Such is the case with video games. Closely examining the monstrous enemies found in shooter video games will not only reveal Western, particularly American, cultural anxieties, it will also give us a greater understanding of the influential power of these games.

Finally, when discussing science fiction invasion stories, it is necessary to direct our attention away from the external threat of invasion and look inward. In games such as *Halo* and *Resistance* the body itself becomes a site of contention and potential invasion. Not only do enemies invade the protagonist’s physical space, they also threaten to consume – and control – their bodies. These parasitic enemies cause their victims to become horribly deformed and to turn against their allies. The new beings that result from this bodily invasion are so irredeemable that the hero’s only recourse is to kill them. I argue that this automatic coding as enemy after becoming a human/alien hybrid reflects anxieties over miscegenation and racial purity in these games. The Chimera in the *Resistance* series, who paralyze enemy soldiers before transforming them into Chimeran foot soldiers, and the Flood from the *Halo* universe are excellent examples of this phenomenon. These bodily invaders extend the threat posed by other invaders and reveal
even deeper anxieties. Instead of simply fearing invasion and eventual takeover by Others, the Western audience truly fears becoming the dark, primitive Other, or at least being connected with them.

As a medium, video games may have a long way to go before they match the storytelling capabilities of film or novels. But as we witness the medium’s growing pains, it is important to recognize the power that video games hold. Not simply children’s toys, games are able to express meaning in ways former mediums could only dream of. With their ability to destabilize player identity and fragment narrative, video games are a unique storytelling medium. With the advent of game systems and interfaces such as Nintendo’s Wii and Microsoft’s Kinect, video games are slowly creeping out of their niche and entering the mainstream. This hopefully marks a shift away from narratives that act as adolescent male power fantasies and promote fear of the Other. As they become a larger and larger part of the popular culture puzzle, video games deserve more thorough examination.

In turn, then, it is important to recognize that video games have positioned themselves within the greater tradition of popular media that stretches back 150 years or more. They echo the past by reflecting cultural concerns regarding invasion that have been present for more than a century. Therefore, the ultimate aim of my project is twofold. First, I seek to expand the reach of video game studies by situating them within the genealogy of invasion texts. By connecting video games with other more established media and genres, I hope to prove that video games are capable of carrying cultural meaning in their own way. And secondly, by situating video games within the larger chronology of invasion texts, my aim is to firmly ground this theme in the past. Fears of invasion and miscegenation are not isolated to the current cultural zeitgeist. Instead,
invasion as a theme transcends the media that convey it, evolving and adapting to each new set of cultural concerns. It is a theme that has echoed across history, echoes that we still hear today.
 CHAPTER 1
THE OPENING VOLLEY: THE BATTLE OF DORKING AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF INVASION TALES

To some, the prospect of comparing video games to late 19th century literature would seem a needless task. The differences in time, space, and technology initially seem too great to extract any meaning from a comparative study. However, by examining the history of invasion narratives, it is possible to bridge the gap between the printed stories of the late 1800s and the video games that are played today. Despite the temporal and cultural differences, invasion narratives bear remarkable similarities in both form and content. These similarities suggest common elements in the ways in which these tales affect their audiences. By examining the similarities between the tales, whether they be told on the page, on the movie screen or even acted out by someone playing a video game, perhaps we can come to a greater understanding of invasion stories and what they tell us about culture.

When discussing the popular impact of invasion narratives, one must invariably begin with *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer* by Sir George Tomkyns Chesney. While it is certainly not the first story of invasion (they date back at least to Homer’s *Iliad*), it is significant because of the tremendous impact it had on the cultural landscape surrounding its publication. Published immediately following the end of the Franco-Prussian war, in which France—possessor of the largest and most formidable army of the day—was soundly defeated by Prussian forces in less than a year, I.F. Chesney’s story tells the story of a single volunteer and his experiences in the eponymous battle. After the Royal Navy (England’s best line of defense at the time) is wiped out by a superweapon, the British Army—spread too thinly across the globe with too few troops at home—must call upon inexperienced volunteers to defend the nation. The
unpreparedness and disorganization of the military is evident as the narrator participates in several unnecessary troop movements and is furthered by the army’s lack of supplies. Finally, as the battle commences, the volunteers believe their position to be impregnable. However, when under the pressure of enemy fire, the inexperienced and disorganized soldiers quickly break and the battle becomes a rout. The story wraps up with the German-speaking invaders commandeering the Englishmen’s homes and subjugating their women.

After the shocking French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, *The Battle of Dorking* heightened British anxieties even further. Clarke notes Chesney’s fortuitous timing in his *Voices Prophesying War 1763-1984*. Capitalizing on the unease in Britain caused by that conflict, *The Battle of Dorking* became a national sensation while almost singlehandedly creating a new literary genre. In its wake, stories began to appear both in support of and opposed to Chesney’s views. And the stories were not limited to England, either; France, Italy, Germany and others all had their own tales of the invasion and conquest of their homelands. The only qualifications, Clarke notes, were “that a nation should be actively concerned in the international maneuvering of the time. Big power—or nearly big power—status alone qualified for entry into the new club” and “that a nation should be troubled by naval or military problems; and that that nation should permit a free Press to operate” (44). The fact that invasion tales appear in cultures that meet these criteria, in addition to the fact that they adapt themselves to each culture, will be a focal point of this study.

But before moving into an analysis of invasion stories, it is necessary to determine what made *The Battle of Dorking* so effective. In addition to Chesney’s good timing, the reasons his story made such an impact are numerous but its success is largely due to his style. It must not be forgotten that Chesney intended his story as a call to improve the national defenses. He was also
unoriginal in this regard. Clarke explains that pamphlets and other propaganda warning of the horrors that would befall England if the state of the military was not improved had appeared throughout the 19th century. Until The Battle of Dorking was published, however, these calls were largely ignored by the general public. As Clarke explains, “The fact is that before Chesney the tale of the war-to-come was generally presented in political rather than in military terms…Before the Battle of Dorking no author of an imaginary war of the future ever suggested that the deliberate use of new weapons could have a decisive effect on the outcome of a battle” (2). Chesney’s story vividly presented its audience with the results of a successful German invasion of English soil. By eschewing the traditional propaganda format, Chesney shocked the English people with a vision of themselves subjugated and heavily taxed by a foreign power.

**INVASION NARRATIVES & NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS**

The long lasting ramifications of The Battle of Dorking are still being felt. The invasion tale as invented by Chesney has persisted into film and video games and can be seen as a genre unto itself. Chesney’s work prefigures modern science fiction and the countless alien invasions of Earth that have come with it. But Chesney himself was not wholly responsible for the success of the new genre. Clarke notes two extenuating circumstances that contributed to the success of The Battle of Dorking: widespread literacy and the rise of the popular press. He remarks:

> with the coming of universal literacy and the emergence of the popular Press toward the end of the century, it became a general practice in the major European countries for writers to appeal directly to the mass of the people in order to win support for the military or naval measures they advocated. (46-47)

These ideas align with those of Benedict Anderson, who argues that ideas of “nation” arise concurrently with the emergence of print capitalism. In Anderson’s conception, “the
members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). But this does not fully explain the connection between nationalism and the popular press. After all, as Anderson points out, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (6). Anderson is more concerned with what gives these communities the spark of nationalism; what makes people “willingly die” for them. “Communities are to be distinguished,” he writes, “not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6).

This form of nationalism needed two ingredients to be combined: the printing press and capitalism. Capitalism’s never ending quest for markets and profits, mixed with the ability of the printing press to reproduce language, precipitated the rise of what Anderson terms “print-languages” (44). It was the development of these print-languages, he argues, that allowed speakers of different vernaculars and dialects to understand each other. This made them aware of the connection they had with their fellow language speakers, thus providing the first spark of nationalist consciousness (44). The press is certainly one of the media through which the idea of the nation expresses itself. Not only does it make us aware of our fellow countrymen, but popular literature is the source of many narratives surrounding the nation. This has only increased with the development of new technology. Radio, film, television and various new media formats have all brought the imagined community into greater focus.

Expressed in these terms, invasion stories present a threat to the imagined community that is the nation. Invasion stories are built upon the premise of offering a glimpse of the nation that is fundamentally and unalterably changed. In the end, these stories are frightening because they alter the imagined community in such a way that makes it unimaginable. The successful
invasion by enemy forces leaves the once-proud nation an unrecognizable shell of its former self. The places and people remain the same, but the nation itself is irrevocably changed. In its function as propaganda, it is this change—this unimaginable community—that Chesney and *The Battle of Dorking* were trying to warn the public about and ultimately prevent. Intended as overt propaganda or not, invasion stories feed off these frightening visions. It is almost inevitable, then, that these visions take on a political dimension rooted in real-world anxieties.

Echoing the link to nationalism, Clarke places the nation at the center of invasion stories. He argues that the unnamed Volunteer is not the true hero, writing “the tragic hero is the nation itself, and in the manner of high tragedy the nation brings on its own doom; for, being neither completely good nor totally evil, it provokes the final disaster by an error of collective folly” (34). Like all tragic heroes, the nation brings about its own demise through its character flaws.

One of the most important political aspects of any invasion tale is, of course, the enemy. It is here that the anxieties surrounding invasion are most clearly presented. The enemies of invasion stories—the actual invaders—and their inevitable takeover embody the anxieties of the culture that produces the story. Be it simply the loss of autonomy or political, racial and ideological differences, enemies of invasion stories are the threat that brings about the catastrophic change to the nation. This story structure naturally sets up the binary opposition of us, the members of the nation, versus them, the invading hordes. In doing so, the stories create a hierarchical relationship with the members of the author’s own nation positioned above those of the other nations in the story, regardless of their role as invader or invaded. Discussing this, Clarke writes, “These sentiments have nothing to do with the fantastic technology of the invasion rafts and the projects for invading Britain by balloon. They spring from the universal desire to see the enemy as contemptible, inferior, and already defeated” (10).
The changes brought about by invasion are never for the better, the enemies never benevolent. Instead, they are always Othered in some fundamental way. This study, in fact, is organized around how these invasion texts—video games and otherwise—depict the Other. Some enemies, like the German-speaking people in *The Battle of Dorking* retain their humanity, while others are depicted as inhuman monsters. With this in mind, it is important to note that these texts do not simply create this fear, nor are they merely stoking the fires of difference and hate. The fears that these novels and games tap into are deeply ingrained; Not only do they threaten the nation itself, they threaten the foundational beliefs of the nation. Therefore, the enemies found in these texts are distillations of these fears, providing a concrete image of what we are most afraid of. After all, it is much easier to dispel a fear that is tangible (and can be shot and killed). In this way, invasion texts both create and reinforce the cultural anxieties they describe. They play off of deep national insecurities and provide the audience a way to cope with these insecurities3.

**FROM THE BATTLE OF DORKING TO THE WAR TO END ALL WARS**

Invasion tales certainly aren’t universal, but they have appeared in many different cultures. The influence of *The Battle of Dorking* and the rise in their popularity in countries across Europe after its publication attest to the idea that invasion narratives are not limited to one nation or one set of specific anxieties. For this study, though, I have chosen to focus on a specific set of invasion texts. I limit my analysis to novels, stories and video games that were originally written or produced in English. Unsurprisingly, these texts were all produced or written in either the United States or the United Kingdom. This obviously presents only one side of these cultural conflicts. In many cases, both cultures in a conflict have their own invasion stories depicting

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3 I assume here that the main, or “target,” audience of these texts is the members of the nation or culture that produces them. I thoroughly acknowledge the fact that members of other nations/cultures can and do consume and study these texts, but it is my assertion that they are best understood in the context of their home culture.
their respective anxieties. In order to maintain a tight focus, I have chosen to examine familiar texts (that are printed in my native language). Furthermore, my goal is less to provide a complete account of all of the invasion tales produced than to examine how these tales inform and reflect culture. These invasions stories, while presenting enemies that were fashionable to their respective time periods, also reveal underlying insecurities concerning the nation. In other words, these enemies do not just represent the Other, they also represent ideologies and ontologies that threaten the foundational beliefs of that nation.

That being said, the early invasion stories examined here, beginning with The Battle of Dorking, represent anxieties in Europe—especially Britain—that foresaw the beginning of the First World War. The stunning Prussian victory of 1871 solidified the tensions that would exist for more than 40 years and would culminate in “the war to end all wars.” Clarke notes the role this new invasion literature played in ramping up these tensions:

…many others played their part in helping to sustain and foment the self-deception, misunderstanding, and downright ill will that often infected relations between the peoples of Europe. During the forty-three years from 1871 to the outbreak of the First World War the device of the imaginary war had become an established means of teaching every kind of aggressive doctrine from the duty of revenge to the need for a bigger fleet. (135)

Although the unnamed invaders in The Battle of Dorking are clearly meant to be German (they speak that language), the identity of the invaders in British invasion literature did not become solidly German until the early 20th century. Before this, several other nations—France in particular—were objects of British anxiety. But regardless of the marauding nation, the fears focused on industrialized European nations.
Russia was another one of those nations. In his *Bram Stoker and Russophobia*, Jimmie E. Cain, Jr. argues that in *Dracula*, Bram Stoker was drawing on negative sentiment toward a different enemy stemming from a different war. He writes that the lasting enmity toward Russia and other Slavic states after the Crimean War of 1854-1856 is a central focus of the novel. According to Cain, these rivals “posed political, social, military, economic, and racial threats to Victorian middle class stability” (119). Cain identifies several links between the novel and Russia, including comparing *Dracula*’s quest to that of Peter the Great. Furthermore, he notes that the failures of the Crimean War called into question many aspects of British society and “the Crimean War also fixed in the English conscience the idea of the Balkans as a location of disease, pestilence, and brutal death” (125-6). Being aware of these fears, Cain concludes that “Count *Dracula* should be seen to represent a multiplicity of social and political dangers to Stoker and his ilk” (127).

Indeed, *Dracula* strikes at the heart of the British middle class during his brief sojourn in London. By targeting Lucy and especially Mina, the vampire threatens Victorian domesticity. Preying on Coventry Patmore’s “Angel in the House” represents not just a defeat at the hands of the enemy, but a corruption of Victorian ideals. As the Count’s first victim, Lucy’s purity is lost when she returns from the dead as a vampire and begins feeding on small children. The heart of the home, symbolized here by the female characters, must be preserved at any cost. It is no surprise, then, that the last third of the novel focuses on the group attempting to free Mina from *Dracula*’s influence.

H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1898) has much in common with *The Battle of Dorking*: The Martians’ path to London is roughly the same as Chesney’s invaders and much of the main action in the novel takes place in the areas southwest of London. The story separates
itself from other invasion tales in that the enemies do not possess any traits that associate them with any particular nation. Instead, Wells uses the structure of the invasion tale to demonstrate the horrors of invasion by an unknown force with far superior technology. Critics have interpreted this as a critique of British imperialism with specific references to the colonization of Tasmania (Zebrowski, Renfroe Jr.). What is important to note here is that *The War of the Worlds* presents an enemy that totally outmatches the human forces. Where previous invasion stories were cautionary tales about the unprepared state of the British military, no amount of preparation could have helped against Wells’ Martian threat.

It was not until the publication of Erskine Childers’ *The Riddle of the Sands* in 1903 that the threat of invasion wore an explicitly German face in English invasion literature. Practically the entire plot of the novel is built upon the character Davies’ suspicion that something isn’t quite right along the German coast. While sailing along the German coast, he and the novel’s narrator Carruthers slowly unravel the German plot. In addition to focusing British anxieties on a German threat, through the character of Dollmann, an Englishman aiding the Germans in their preparations, the novel also ramped up suspicions that fellow citizens could be aiding the enemy.

Probably the most important feature of *The Riddle of the Sands*, though, is that the actual invasion does not take place. Even though it is thwarted by the main characters, Childers emphasizes the unconventional nature of the German plot and how it would have completely taken the British by surprise. In fact, for much of the novel Davies and Carruthers think they are scouting some form of German coastal defense, not an elaborate plan of invasion. When the realization finally dawns on him, Carruthers remarks “a complete mental somersault was required, and, as an amateur, I found it difficult; the more so that the method of invasion, as I darkly comprehended it now, was of such a strange and unprecedented character” (263).
Perhaps more than any other invasion narrative, *The Riddle of the Sands* emphasizes the surprise nature of the attack. Where in stories like *The Battle of Dorking* or *War of the Worlds* the surprise is taken for granted, here it is the focus of the entire plot. In Childers’ mind, this only highlighted the need for preparation. In the novel’s epilogue, ostensibly written by the book’s editor, Childers attempts to dispel the British illusions of safety. Attempting to ramp up the anxiety of his audience, he describes how Germany is everything Britain is not: Organized and economically independent with a large army at home (277). He even attempts to dispel the idea that Britain is protected by the English Channel, writing:

> There is an axiom, much in fashion now, that there is no fear of invasion of the British Isles, because if we lose command of the sea, we can be starved – a cheaper and surer way of reducing us to submission. It is a loose, valueless axiom, but by sheer repetition it is becoming an article of faith…No, the better axiom is that nothing short of a successful invasion could finally compel us to make peace. (283)

Childers’ purpose becomes clear here: All illusions of safety must be abandoned before it is too late.

*After The Riddle of the Sands*, England was invaded countless times by fictional German armies. Prominent novels of the time period include William Le Queux’s *The Invasion of 1910* (1906) and John Buchan’s *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). Even H.G. Wells himself went so far as to identify the Germans as a threat (also predicting the rise of Japan and World War II) in his serialized novel *The War in the Air* (1908), which features German airships bombing several prominent targets in both Britain and the United States. The plots of these narratives range from the more traditional depiction of invasion found in *The Battle of Dorking* to espionage-heavy
plots like those in *The Riddle of the Sands*. Whatever the case, Germany was seen as the most likely source of the trouble.

**AMERICAN ANXIETIES**

As America grew into a world power during the early part of the 20th century, invasion literature began to spread across the Atlantic. Like its European counterpart, invasion literature in the United States focused on several different targets until near the beginning of the First World War. Hugh Grattan Donnelly’s 1890 story “The Stricken Nation,” for example, puts the British in the role of the invaders. American fears of a German invasion ramped up at the outset of World War I. H. Irving Hancock, for example, foretold a German invasion of the eastern United States in his four part book series *Uncle Sam’s Boys at the Invasion of the United States* (1916). Playing on the success of *The Battle of Dorking* as well as ruminating on the current conflict, J. Bernard Walker, an editor of *Scientific American*, published *America Fallen! The Sequel to the European War* (1915) in which Germany invades after hostilities have ended in Europe (Van Schaak 286). Like their predecessors, these accounts feature an America unprepared for an attack and the nation is subsequently humbled for its ineptitude.

The many American stories warning of German invasion—both in print and on the screen—highlight several recurring themes of invasion tales that will become important to the later discussion of video games. For example, Eric Van Schaak describes how films such as *The Fall of a Nation* (1916) stoked fears that German-born American citizens living in the United States would aide in the invasion (288-9). Not only does this predict future xenophobia such as the placement of Japanese-Americans in internment camps during World War II, it also serves to increase the paranoia of an internal threat that would be echoed in the monsters in *Halo*, *Resistance* and *Gears of War*, as well as the traitorous General Shepard in *Call of Duty Modern*...
Additionally, Van Schaak also points out that the film industry was critical in drumming up support for World War I (289). Van Scenes from these movies depicting a New York in flames underline one of the most terrifying aspects of invasion narrative: A domestic impact. Instead of battles taking place on a foreign field on the other side of the world, invasion represents the destruction of the home. This destruction—focusing, as Van Schaak points out, on the threat invaders pose to the nuclear family, especially women—is intended to sway the viewer’s sympathy to preserving the nation and supporting the war effort.

**THE FALLEN NATION**

Given invasion literature’s early concern with modernizing military forces, it is no surprise that it focused on threats from industrialized nations in (somewhat) close proximity to the author’s home nation. Naturally, the countries with the most powerful weapons are the ones that should be feared the most. The fact that the Kingdom of Prussia, given little hope to win the Franco-Prussian War, was able to handle the mighty French army so easily and quickly with its superior artillery and mobilization along railways was one of Chesney’s main concerns when writing *The Battle of Dorking*. It was through these wildly popular stories that threats to the nation were made concrete. In his essay “Future War Fiction: The First Main Phase, 1871-1900,” Clarke notes how invasion authors often framed their stories as part of national history. He writes:

> The time-frame recorded events as a chapter, often the last chapter, in the national history: victory happily and gloriously confirmed the national destiny; and defeat allowed for telling contrasts between the final disaster and the better days gone by recall…Since most of these authors were responding to some danger or menace represented by the
enemy of the day, they were careful to present their accounts of the war-to-come as the next stage in the nation’s history. (392-3)

This framing mechanism speaks to the connection between print and the rise of a national consciousness. By depicting their stories as fateful chapters in national history, authors of invasion narratives fictionalize the downfall of the nation as they and their audiences know it. As a literary device, this framing is intended to shock the audience into supporting the national cause. Furthermore, many of these stories of the fictional final chapters of a nation’s history are told from the point of view of a single participant in these events. Grounding the story in the experience of a single character, as evidenced in The Battle of Dorking and The War of the Worlds and many other invasion narratives, allows the reader an entry point into the events and provides an important precursor to invasion video games.

**YELLOW PERIL**

Industrialized Western nations are not the only objects of invasion anxiety, of course. Waves of Asian immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century produced other anxieties and gave rise to much anti-Asian propaganda. Among this propaganda were invasion novels and films dramatizing the threat Asians posed to white Western sovereignty. The so-called “Yellow Peril” saw the creation of characters such as Fu Manchu, the villainous Asian mastermind, who invaded pulp novels of the day. Novels such as Emile Driant’s The Yellow Invasion (1905), J. Allan Dunn’s The Peril of the Pacific (1916), Philip Francis Nowlan’s Armageddon 2419 A.D. (the first appearance of Buck Rogers) (1928), Robert A. Heinlein’s Sixth Column (1949) and many others feature Asians, usually Japanese or Chinese and sometimes a combination of both, invading (or attempting to invade) and subjecting the West to their rule. Clarke sees the trend of depicting racial Others as the invading forces as stemming from Western colonial practices:
“That uneasiness with European colonialism was the trigger for an imaginary eruption of overwhelming forces—Chinese, Japanese, Africans—who play their own imperial power-games with the Western world” (388).

The rise of Asian powers was a constant source of both fear and awe in Western popular culture throughout the 20th century and into the 21st. From the initial Yellow Peril to Japanese aggression during World War II and finally to a resurgent Asia as evidenced by the emergence of Japan as a leading economic power and the threat posed by Communist China and North Korea, fear of invasion from Asia has been a regular occurrence in literature, television and film. Michael Crichton’s 1992 novel *Rising Sun*, for example, displays a distrust of Japan and prefigures invasion video games such as *Homefront*, which deals with a fictional Korean invasion of the United States (this game is central to my argument in Chapter 2). The contemporary Asian threat, therefore, is threefold: It not only represents the takeover by racial Others, but also an economic takeover by those Others. Finally, the threat from China and North Korea is ideological, representing Communism, the political system against which the Western world has, at least rhetorically, diametrically opposed itself to throughout the 20th century.

**THE RED SCARE**

The Communist threat, of course, also featured prominently in invasion literature following World War II. As the Cold War dragged on, countless stories told of the dangers posed by communists. Some, such as the films *Invasion U.S.A.* (1952) and, perhaps most famously, *Red Dawn* (1984), depicted the result and subsequent American resistance to actual communist invasions. Others, such as Ian Fleming’s James Bond constantly battled both Russian and Chinese communists in his exploits, both on the page and on the screen. Still others dramatized what they believed to be the dangers of communism. All versions of the *Invasion of the Body*
Snatchers, from the 1954 novel to the 1956 film and its remakes in 1978, 1993 and 2007, illustrate the dangers of mindless conformity that the authors see as being inherent to Communism. In the Body Snatchers films, people are produced from pods in an industrialized manner, further implying that communism eliminates the spontaneity from life, transforming it into an impersonal world where people are reduced to cogs in a machine.

A significant change was made to the 2007 version. In this iteration, simply titled The Invasion, humans are not replaced by duplicates grown in pods. Instead, their bodies are overtaken by alien spores, eventually transforming the hosts into seemingly emotionless automatons. The shift from replacement to bodily invasion marks a trend in invasion stories that began in the latter part of the 20th century, where human bodies have replaced nations as the site of invasion. The new threat of biological invasion can be seen as a response to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and other outbreaks that garnered significant media attention, such as the SARS outbreak of 2002-3 and the more recent swine flu pandemic in 2009. Films such as Outbreak (1995) dramatize the government response to similar outbreaks while Contagion (2011) adds to the post-9/11 paranoia by positing the idea that the virus could be the work of a bioterrorist.

BODY SNATCHERS AND BODILY INVASIONS

Furthermore, bodily invasion and takeover have also become a prominent theme in horror films. John Carpenter’s The Thing (1982), for example, features an alien creature that can consume and replicate any organism it comes in contact with. Even zombies are now being attributed to the outbreak of deadly diseases. Where George Romero’s series of Dead films of the 60s and 70s leaves the cause of the zombie plague ambiguous, Danny Boyle’s 2002 film 28 Days Later explicitly attributes it to the man-made “Rage” virus. Like earlier invasion literature
that depicted the decline of the nation, bodily invasion literature plays upon fears of bodily decline. Not only do the various viruses and diseases in these stories lead to death, they also lead to a loss of bodily control. Victim’s bodies are no longer theirs to control. Almost inevitably their bodies transition from healthy and contained to grotesque and monstrous. Infection leads to an eruption of the skin and the combination of disparate anatomical parts. What’s more, infected people lose their higher cognitive powers, becoming beasts that turn on their friends.

Invasion can come in many forms. As this chapter demonstrated, these invasions often articulate cultural concerns about personal or national identity. Many video games also fit into the greater tradition of invasion literature, but it is important to differentiate between video games and previous media. Furthermore, the overall goal should be to gauge the cultural impact these video games are having on attitudes and opinions. Far too often video games are written off as juvenile trash of little value. This view ignores the awesome power of video games as a persuasive medium. Like *The Battle of Dorking*, many video games attempt to persuade the consumer to support a certain worldview. Invasion video games play off the same old cultural anxieties in new ways, often following hegemonic viewpoints. Unfortunately, these views go largely unnoticed and uncriticized. In order to better understand what is happening in these games, it necessary to examine them more closely alongside some earlier examples of invasion literature.
CHAPTER 2
THE DIGITAL SUBALTERN, OR, CONSTRUCTING THE “OTHER” IN VIDEO GAMES

The year is 2011. As the video game *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* opens, players assume the point-of-view of the democratically-elected president of an unnamed Middle Eastern country, who is dragged into an awaiting car. As the car makes its way through what is ostensibly the country’s capital city, the player/president witnesses the beginning stages of a military coup: Soldiers repel from helicopters, military vehicles roll through the streets and firing squads execute civilians. Finally, the president is dragged back out of the car into a public square. Broadcasting on national television, one of the country’s military commanders who is brandishing a large pistol accuses the president of “colluding with the West” before proceeding to put a bullet in the player/president’s brain. The military commander, who, with his beret and sunglasses, looks strikingly similar to a young Saddam Hussein, is supported by a former arms dealer who is now leader of a Russian ultranationalist group.

This dramatic opening establishes many of the motivations and power dynamics that continue throughout the game and its two sequels (released in 2009 and 2011, respectively). The games in the Modern Warfare series depict a world rife with international conflict, beginning in the Middle East and culminating in World War III, a conflict that includes invasions of both the United States and Europe and a chemical weapon of mass destruction being detonated in London (killing an American family in the process). During the course of the games, the player – taking on the role of both American and British soldiers – will come face-to-face with enemies that should look familiar to late twentieth or early twenty-first century Americans: Arabs (and other vaguely Middle Eastern peoples) and Russians.
This combination of America’s two most recent major national adversaries marks the next step in the depiction of racial and political Others as enemies. Echoing the anxieties produced by Victorian novels *The Battle of Dorking* and *The Riddle of the Sands*, these games evoke a fear of the Other, an Other anchored in each contemporary cultural situation. Despite depicting different enemies, the invasion themes grounded in real world events shared by the novels and the video games to be discussed here point to shared cultural experiences.

In addition to the Modern Warfare series, games such as *Homefront*, which depicts an invasion of the U.S. by Korean communists (with a story written by the screenwriter of *Red Dawn*) will be used as examples that tap directly into these cultural anxieties. By evoking situations that at least seem to be possible, these games set up a complex web of interactivity and player identification. This web constructs Others in a way that enforces culturally hegemonic ideas. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that these constructions aid in constructing an enemy that puts a face on contemporary cultural anxieties, thereby marginalizing and silencing the people who wear that face.

Invasion texts that present human enemies directly address the cultural anxieties by presenting the audience with the Other as enemies. So, in *The Battle of Dorking* and *The Riddle of the Sands*, the enemies are German. In the video games that comprise the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series, the enemies are a mixture of Arabs and Muslims (the two are often conflated into a single group) along with Russian Ultranationalists and a spattering of other people of color. Because the antagonists are human, in these texts race, ethnicity, national identity, religion and political ideology all mark Otherness. While this certainly problematizes the relationship these texts have with audiences outside of the groups they were intended for,
video games add an extra layer of complexity to the equation. Before moving further, it is necessary to examine how video games have entered into the tradition of invasion narratives.

**VIDEO GAME INVASIONS**

Invasion has become a central theme in many video games. Some of the most successful early video games feature invasion narratives, exemplified most clearly by 1978’s *Space Invaders*. The game may be simplistic both narratively and in terms of gameplay, but it presents a prime example of how video games differentiate themselves from other media. Tension slowly mounts as the rows of alien invaders inch their way to the bottom of the screen as the player attempts to stop them. Similarly, in *Missile Command* (1980), the player is tasked with saving six cities from a hail of incoming ballistic missiles with missiles of their own. Tellingly, instead of receiving the standard “Game Over” screen upon failing their mission, players were presented with a screen that read “The End,” perhaps implying the onset of a nuclear holocaust. But what is important about *Space Invaders* and *Missile Command* is that they allow players to enter the game world and participate in the invasion narrative. The frantic effort of blasting aliens or destroying enemy missiles emulates the stress of fending off an invasion.

But another game serves as the best example of a precursor to the games that I will focus on in subsequent chapters: id Software’s *Doom* (1993). The company’s earlier *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) was perhaps the first major first person shooter video game. Significantly, *Wolfenstein 3D* casts Nazis as its villains, even going so far as to pit the player against a Hitler equipped with a mechanized battlesuit. In addition to continuing to depict a German threat, the game also entered a larger trend that was emerging at the end of the 20th century: Nazis would join monsters and terrorists as acceptable enemies in shooter video games. But the Nazis of *Wolfenstein 3D* were
not an invading force; they simply inhabited the castle where the player-character was held captive.

*Doom*, on the other hand, featured an all-out onslaught from the forces of hell. The player takes control of a space marine who finds himself the last line of defense against an army of demons after an experiment with teleportation technology goes horribly wrong. The player must battle across both of Mars’ moons and through hell itself in an attempt to stop the invasion. Unfortunately, the demon threat becomes so great that it eventually makes its way to Earth; the game’s sequel (subtitled *Hell on Earth*) finds the space marine attempting to save humanity from the demon army. Here, invasion not only threatens the existence of nation, but the existence of the human species. Fitting with the idea that invasion threatens a person’s national or personal identity, the demon invasion in *Doom II* stems from a portal in the marine’s home town, a portal that he ultimately destroys, thus saving humanity and preserving his own identity.

*Doom* not only played upon the theme of invasion, it also established some common tropes seen in later first-person shooter video games. The lone space marine player-character, for example, is one of the first examples of the “silent protagonist” commonly found in video games. These heroes are intentionally designed with minimal backstory and personality to allow the player to identify with them as much as possible. In this way, *Doom’s* space marine prefigures several important video game protagonists, such as Gordon Freeman of the *Half-Life* series (who has famously never spoken a word throughout the course of two-plus games) and Master Chief in the *Halo* games. In addition to these characters relative silence, they are often cast as humanity’s “last hope.” Theirs is the task of preserving the national identity or the human way of life. Unlike the readers of invasion literature, who are forced to look on as their nations are threatened, these video game heroes allow the player to be an active participant in the national
epic. Now that a link has been established with earlier invasion narratives, it is important to
examine the ways in which video games separate themselves from other media, especially in
spreading hegemonic ideas.

PROCEDURAL RHETORIC AND THE SHOOTER VIDEO GAME

Discussing a method of approaching video game criticism, Alexander Galloway argues
that video games are best understood as actions, both on the part of the player and whatever
machine the video game is running on:

Without action, games remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the
active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer
code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is
executed; they exist when enacted…Consider the formal differences between video
games and other media: indeed, one takes a photograph, one acts in a film. But these
actions transpire before or after the fabrication of the work, a work that ultimately
assumes the form of a physical object (the print). With video games, the work itself is
material action. (2)

The idea of basing video games in material action dramatically shifts the way we interpret the
medium. In terms of invasion stories told through video games, the player must take action
against the invading forces in order to progress the story and eventually “beat” the game.

This action is especially important in shooter video games. Unlike Role Playing Games
(RPGs) or Real-Time Strategy (RTS) games, that remove or position the player above the action,
shooter games, both first and third person, place the player directly in the thick of things. Shooter
video games usually confine their stories to one player-character. Therefore, players’ diegetic
experiences within the game world are confined to this character; their knowledge of what takes
place in the story is limited to what the player character knows and learns. In addition to echoing
the literary technique of *The Battle of Dorking*—limiting the experience to a single soldier
captured in a greater conflict—in terms of material action this limit can also toy with players’
sense of power. They can thwart an alien invasion as an armored supersoldier in *Halo* or they can
be powerless to prevent the detonation of a nuclear weapon (and eventually become a victim of
the weapon) in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. The true power of invasion video games comes
in their ability to manipulate players’ sense of control over the game.

In shooter video games, much of this sense of power is tied to the way in which players
experience the world. In shooter games, this is achieved through players either seeing through
the character’s eyes (first-person) or the camera taking up a position over the character’s
shoulder (third person). Galloway notes that in cinema these first person “subjective” shots are
typically used to show the predatory perspective of monsters or to create a sense of alienation or
disorientation (68). However, he notes that the subjective shot has the opposite effect in video
games: “While film has thus far used the subjective shot as a corrective to break through and
destroy certain stabilizing elements of the film apparatus, games use the subjective shot to
facilitate an active subject position that enables and facilitates the gamic apparatus” (69). We
shall turn next to this “gamic apparatus” to explore how it plays a role in fueling the anxieties of
invasion.

Up to this point, I have mainly focused on the formal aspects of video games and the
ways in which players are able to act within them. As Galloway makes clear, video games do not
simply rely on players’ actions, but they also require action on the part of the hardware and
software, the “gamic apparatus,” in order to properly function. Despite a sense of power, players
merely enact the game; their experiences are limited by what the game presents to them. In his
Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames, Ian Bogost posits that it is this quality of video games, what he calls “procedural rhetoric,” that allows them to make arguments. Bogost defines his term as such, “Procedural rhetoric, then, is the practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular” (3). Through the process of playing, in concert with the way the game reacts to the player and presents its rules and world, video games can influence the way we view and think about the world.

It is my assertion that this is exactly what is happening in video games that deal with invasion as a central theme. While video games do present fantasy worlds, these worlds are grounded in the “real” world, the one that the player inhabits. In this way, video games can, and often do, deal with issues central to nationhood. Intentionally or not, the way these video games are set up privileges certain viewpoints and attempt to validate certain worldviews. But it is important to note that these games go beyond simply presenting a worldview. Following Bogost’s procedural rhetoric, the process of playing the game is an argument in favor of that worldview. If video games are actions, as Galloway suggests, then the actions of both the player and the machine are parts of the argument. Unlike literature or film, where the argument remains outside of the audience in whatever transpires on the page or screen, video games directly involve players in the argument, letting them experience it for themselves.

Just as invasion literature was used as an argument for a stronger military or to battle the ideological threat of communism, invasion video games move beyond mere entertainment. Where invasion literature is commonly presented as an unchangeable chapter in a nation’s history, video games offer the opportunity to make history, however false or personal that history may be. Instead of listening to the story of a soldier who participated in the Battle of Dorking,
video games allow players to be that soldier, fundamentally altering the way in which the narrative is experienced. Currently, many shooter video games reinforce hegemonic ideas surrounding nation and race in the post-9/11 world. Playing on the cultural anxieties following those attacks, invasion video games rationalize and normalize views that support Western involvement in the Middle East and the continued “War on Terror,” as well as perpetually designating Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples as Other. Anxieties over terrorism, which transcends national boundaries, were magnified by the September 11 attacks. That the attacks did not come from an identifiable nation but instead a group that extends across the globe is particularly unsettling. Marcus Power suggests that games such as *Conflict Desert Storm* (2002) help Americans cope with these fears by concretizing the conflict. They “allow players to feel as if they are ‘defending the country’ and enables them to vent frustrations in ways which make clear the lines of division between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ self and other, freedom fighter and terrorist” (208).

More to the point, not only do these games dispel fear, they also legitimize the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Power argues that the valorization of past wars helps build support for the current war effort. He continues:

> The power in this game is not solely in the ability of its players to occupy and conquer foreign lands, nor in the mass carnage gamers can effect through carpet bombing but in the ability to transpose fear into historically-based combat scenarios with clear battle lines in a war that is safe and winnable. Here the legitimacy of war is never questioned and it is almost always inferred that the product of war is national safety and security. (208)
This observation highlights an important distinction in the current discussion. Video games that depict past conflicts, mainly World War II, make players feel safe because the outcome is assured (in my own unscientific observation, games set during World War II are disproportionately popular compared to those featuring other conflicts, such as Korea or Vietnam). In these games, all the battles take place in foreign lands away from home. In them, the nation is never truly threatened. At the same time, however, video games that are set in the present almost always bring the fight home and depict a nation in peril. Interestingly, the games in two prominent video game series, *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor*, have transitioned from depicting World War II to more contemporary conflicts such as the one in Afghanistan.

Whatever the case, American involvement in these wars goes unquestioned.

Returning to Bogost, these video games conform to his idea that video games using procedural rhetoric position their arguments within an ideological frame. Instead of simply reproducing “real life” or real world situations, Bogost argues that some video games are presented from a particular political perspective. But it goes beyond this. The actual process of playing the game reinforces this perspective and makes it real. Bogost explains:

The rules of the game…stand as symbolic structures of a higher order than natural language. These procedural metaphors operationalize the figures of the verbal metaphor into a system whose very operation represents the desired position… Whereas verbal rhetoric invokes the frame without acknowledging that it even exists let alone structures the rhetoric, procedural rhetoric depicts the frame in tangible form, in the rules of the game. (108)
Therefore, video games that depict invasion do not simply reinforce ideas about nation through depicting Muslims as their enemies. The act of playing the game brings about the idea that the nation is threatened and therefore its actions are justified.

Additionally, using Bogost’s idea of ideological framing allows us to move beyond video games that depict real world conflicts. Enemies in video games can operate at a metaphorical level, taking on any number of forms. Aliens, of course, are ever popular invaders, but just because they aren’t from this planet doesn’t mean they can’t have symbolic weight. Discussing the Republican political game *Tax Invaders*, Bogost points out that “As a matter of cultural practice, alien invasions are tightly tied to theft…alien invasions from The War of the Worlds to Independence Day all depict aliens as malevolent agents bent on stealing the very planet Earth from its inhabitants. There is perhaps no more effective metaphor for theft than alien invasion” (107). In stealing the planet from humans, aliens also threaten the idea of nation; they will either totally annihilate it or colonize it, subjecting it to a higher authority. The two games in the *Crysis* series bring together several elements of invasion narratives. The first game, released in 2007, pits the player against communist North Korean and alien forces, both major threats to American identity. *Crysis 2* (2011) ups the ante with an alien invasion of New York. Striking at the economic and cultural heart of America solidifies the aliens’ threat. Before moving on, it is important to widen the scope beyond video games and look at the cultural implications of play.

**PLAYING AT INVASION**

Video games are primarily entertainment products and, as such, are “played” for fun and amusement. Scholars disagree on an exact definition of play and how it operates, especially within the context of video games. As all of the video games discussed here deal with wars—both fictional and real—this thesis will naturally focus on the link between play and war. In
*Homo Ludens*, his seminal work on play in human culture, Johan Huizinga notes that war and play seem to be inextricably linked: “Ever since words existed for fighting and playing,” he writes, “men have been wont to call war a game” (89). He adds that “all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation.” In this conception, video games are simply an extension – or evolution – of the war-play relationship. Sports, for example, are often metaphorically linked to battle. Video games replace the metaphor with simulacra. Instead of the war play taking place in the real world – with the gloves on, so to speak – video games bring war into the digital realm.

Instead of being a trivial activity for children, as it is often viewed, Huizinga argues that play performs a vital role in society. While describing the terms of play, Huizinga notes that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (8). Furthermore, we are aware that play is not “real.” Additionally, he points out that both play and rituals take place in an area marked off and delineated from ordinary life (20-21). Video games seem to literally embody this demarcation, with the player inputting actions that take place on the television screen. This establishes a feedback loop separate from the rest of the world. The controller and television are essentially the chessboard. Nevertheless, Huizinga reasons that play is of the utmost seriousness. He writes:

> It adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual—as a life function—and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a culture function. The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals. (9)
Despite being separate from the culture, play carries with it cultural meanings. It therefore can help players better learn and perform their culture. The games can also act as a way for outsiders to learn about a foreign culture. Obviously video games are not simply an American phenomenon. Players from across the world encounter these games and they can be some people’s most meaningful encounters with American culture. Additionally, the advent of online play and the interconnectedness of gaming have given rise to an international presence in many video games. The various identities that the players can take on will be discussed later, but suffice it to say that video games can teach others about American culture as much as they can teach Americans about their own culture.

Understanding Huizinga’s conception of play is critical for looking at the importance of video games reflecting cultural anxieties and creating an image of the Other. Roger Caillois more explicitly delineates the link between games and culture in his *Man, Play, and Games*. Caillois stresses that certain games, such as chess, have taken on specific cultural meanings in specific time periods. For example, “In antiquity, hopscotch was a labyrinth in which one pushed a stone—i.e. the soul—toward the exit” (81). This leads Caillois to conclude, “Thus, a game that is esteemed by a people may at the same time be utilized to define the society’s moral or intellectual character, provide proof of its precise meaning, and contribute to its popular acceptance by accentuating the relevant qualities” (83). Therefore, video games can take on and reflect the values of a culture as well as helping to define its characteristics.

No video game series better exemplifies Caillois’ point than the *Call of Duty* franchise. Originally released in 2003 for Windows, the original *Call of Duty* took place during World War II, spanning the time between the American invasion of Normandy and the end of the war in Europe. The game puts the player in three soldiers’ shoes: an American, an Englishman and a
Russian. The series continued through two more games before moving to a more contemporary setting in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Mixing patriotism with the heart-pounding exhilaration of being in the thick of battle, the *Call of Duty* games never question America’s wartime policies or decision making. While historical fidelity can be used to defend the WWII-era games, the *Modern Warfare* games take on a dimension of their own.

**THE DIGITAL SUBALTERN**

The points of view presented in the video games discussed in this thesis are strikingly one-sided. In building their procedural rhetoric in favor of the continued War on Terror, they privilege the Western perspective. In this way, the enemies are silenced, reduced to nothing but the image of evil that needs to be eradicated. This literal silencing that takes place in these video games is similar to the silencing referred to by Gayatri Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak argues that to maintain the West as a subject requires the construction of a colonial Other (25). Furthermore, under imperialism these oppressed Others are neither able to know or speak against their situation. This is perfectly captured in these video games. The enemies become stereotypes and Others to be used for the benefit of affirming Western imperialism. As Spivak states, “This project is also the asymmetrical obliteration of that Other in its precarious Subjectivity” (25). In video games such as *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Homefront*, we see the perfect realization of this. Subaltern peoples, those that the West seeks to maintain dominance over, in these games will always be enemies, as necessarily prescribed by the rules, goals and objectives of the game. They cannot speak for themselves, nor can they present any version of themselves outside the role of “enemy.”

This silencing is, of course, a symbolic one. The enemies in these video games are simply representations, lines of code preprogrammed and imbued with artificial intelligence to behave in
a certain way. But this makes all the difference. The Western player-characters are imbued with the power to take life and determine when that killing is justified. They are the sites of player identification and help define the game world for the player. Video games have the power to directly involve the player in experiences that evoke the current political climate. Through these experiences, they can reflect – and help disseminate – dangerous ideologies. Unlike film or television, where the narrative continues without regard for the audience, video games inherently require player action to proceed with the game’s overall story. Viewers of movies and television can choose to disassociate with the main character. Video game players, on the other hand, are not afforded that luxury. They may be able to acknowledge that video game protagonists are different from themselves, but they are nonetheless forced to perform actions that may be outside their own personal values. The only recourse they have to counteract this is to turn off their game system and stop playing.

Furthermore, the silencing implicit in these video games here accompanies an agenda that normalizes imperialism while damning the Other. In their “Monster, Terrorist, Fag” Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai note how, in post-9/11 examinations of terrorism, the figure of the terrorist has been made into a sexual deviant in the face of normalized Western heterosexuality. Therefore:

…an implicit but foundational supposition structures this entire discourse: the very notion of the normal psyche, which is in fact part of the West’s own heterosexual family romance—a narrative space that relies on the normalized, even if perverse, domestic space of desire supposedly common in the West. Terrorism, in this discourse, is a symptom of the deviant psyche, the psyche gone awry or the failed psyche…”(124)
This, of course, has implications on much more than just terrorism. Puar and Rai argue that it is an attempt by the West to simplify terrorism into a readily understandable package while also claiming superiority over it. Similarly, creating this digital subaltern, then, reinforces the imperialist mentality by reducing the dark Others to nothing more than enemies that need to be dispatched.

**VIDEO GAMES AS PROPAGANDA**

Aaron Delwiche’s ideas about video games being used as propaganda can be useful here. Differentiating propaganda from ideology, Delwiche declares that propaganda is “systematically disseminated with the intent of prompting certain attitudes and behaviors. Savvy propagandists tap into the affective power of dominant ideologies, but they do so with the conscious desire to shape attitudes and behaviors” (93). According to this conception, the status of games such as *Call of Duty* as propaganda is debatable as it is doubtful most game developers consciously strive to affect gamer’s attitudes. However, what makes these games even more potentially dangerous is the fact that they do tap into dominant ideologies but in a seemingly innocent and natural way. Much like Louis Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses that present shared values and beliefs, video games like *Call of Duty* reinforce dominant cultural rhetoric. According to Althusser, our actions are the expression of our ideas. In turn, these actions are governed by rituals “which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject” (342). In short, games like *Call of Duty* affirm dominant cultural ideals (such as a reaction against terrorism) and players enact these ideals through the practice of playing the game.

The most basic way in which this happens has already been discussed: the game’s enemies are common enemies of the particular culture. In *Special Force* these enemies are
invading Israeli soldiers, for *Call of Duty*, they are Russians and militant Middle Easterners. Visual cues taken from popular culture are used to differentiate between friends and foes. Normalized images are used to identify the enemies: they have darker skin, wear headscarves, talk with thick accents (or don’t speak English at all) and use AK-47’s (easily identifiable as Soviet and post-Soviet automatic rifles and in clear contrast to the American M16). Friendly troops, on the other hand, feature a mix of races (the better to show a united front against America’s enemies), speak clear English, and use weapons that are identifiable as American, namely variations of the M16 rifle.

Delwiche’s “Four I’s” are strongly at work here. The games immerse players in another reality completely separate from their own. In this case, however, the alternate reality is recognizable as at least a simulacrum of the world the player inhabits. The intense engagement of the games is built directly into their formula: players engage in firefights while accomplishing various objectives in order to complete the mission. These firefights may be repetitive, but they offer just enough excitement to encourage the player to continually come back for more (This is perhaps best epitomized by the “30 seconds of fun” philosophy of Bungie, the developers of the hit *Halo* franchise, who sought to engage players in 30 second chunks [Thompson, *Wired*]).

But it is with identification and interactivity that video games most effectively reinforce dominant ideology. A link to the broader narrative tradition is essential in establishing the ways in which video games encourage identification. In his essay “Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar,” Bob Rehak points out that, in video games, the figure on the screen (the avatar) is a direct extension of the spectator (the player) (103). At the same time, Rehak also notes that video games have begun to emulate film genres and have appropriated various cinematic techniques, both narrative and formal. This leads him to the conclusion
That video games are starting to resemble movies more than they do “real life” suggests that games, as a cultural form, are produced and consumed in phenomenological accord with preexisting technologies of representation. At the same time, video games plainly rework the formulas of cinema—and spectatorship—in ways that demand addressing (104).

First person-shooters in particular encourage player identification with the avatar. Using the idea of the mirror stage put forth by Jacques Lacan, Rehak offers a way for players to recognize themselves in the onscreen characters. Put more succinctly, there are several ways in which “video games ‘reflect’ players back to themselves” (Rehak 104). Following Lacan, Rehak argues that “appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index” (106). Avatars and players are tied together in that one enacts the desires of the other. This model limits the degree of identification between player and avatar on an ideological level. This is not to say, however, that such identifications cannot be made.

Furthermore, each game encourages certain behaviors and ways of thinking by creating what Mark J.P. Wolf calls its own “worldview.” In his essay, “Narrative in the Video Game,” Wolf outlines this worldview:

The very ‘rules’ and cause-and-effect logic that dictate the events of the video game’s diegetic world contain an imbedded worldview which matches actions with consequences and determines outcomes, and it is here that an author can best guide a player into a particular way of thinking (and acting). (109)
In other words, in order to progress in a game, players must adhere to the game’s worldview. So, in games such as *Call of Duty*, players must confront, fight and kill enemy Others in order to “beat” the game.

This inherent worldview significantly alters the way in which video games are received by their audiences. While still leaving room for the possibility of subversive readings, video games almost totally eliminate this possibility within the game world. For example, because of the “kill or be killed” worldview of most shooter video games, it is impossible for the player to attempt to be a pacifist or to aid enemy soldiers and still progress through the game. In simpler terms, video games make players act a certain way in order to succeed. The ways that they must act in order to succeed are preset by the game. In other words, players must negotiate their identities before choosing to play a specific game. Their personal identity may be in opposition to that of their avatar, but their motivations in game are limited to the avatar’s.

Specifically applied to shooter games, the concept of the worldview reveals the complexity of the relationship between player and character. When playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, players are necessarily limited to the characters presented to them. Throughout the *Modern Warfare* series, the major characters include American, British and Russian soldiers. Seeing the world through these characters’ eyes, players are drawn into their worlds and encouraged to adopt their worldviews. The character’s enemies, in this case, Middle Easterners and Russian Ultranationalists, therefore become the player’s enemies. While this dynamic is certainly problematic and possibly contributes to and feeds on the current, post-9/11 fear of Arab/Middle Eastern Others, a closer examination is needed to determine the ways in which these video games enforce hegemonic ideas about race and politics. Looking to the past can help here.
THE BATTLE OF DORKING AND HOMEFRONT: A CASE STUDY

It has already been established that The Battle of Dorking was intended as a propaganda piece; Chesney fully intended to sway the hearts and minds of his readership to the cause of modernizing the British army. Although the video games being discussed here may not fit the definition of propaganda in the strictest sense, several intriguing parallels exist between them and the invasion novels that indicate shared constructions of cultural anxieties. Part of what made The Battle of Dorking so effective was that it brought the fight home. By setting his story on English soil—just outside of London, in fact—Chesney shocked his audience out of their delusions of safety. The English Channel, in Chesney’s conception, was not adequate protection from invading forces, despite what the country’s leaders may have said.

America was in a similar state of mind during the early parts of this century. Like the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, the attacks of September 11, 2001, shook the nation from its contentment. When compared to the invasion novels of the late Victorian era, remarkable similarities begin to emerge. As has been previously stated, invasion narratives present threats to the nation, or the perception thereof. To increase the emotional impact, these stories are primarily told after the fact; the invasion has already taken place and the participants are ruminating upon it. In fact, The Battle of Dorking is littered with regrets about the unprepared state of the nation: “It was in organization and forethought that we fell short” the story’s unnamed narrator complains, “because our rulers did not heartily believe in preparation” (6). Lack of preparation also dooms the United States in Homefront. Too reliant on foreign oil and production, America is at its most vulnerable.
Continuing on, within the narrative of *The Battle of Dorking*, England has been reduced from its former glory into a heavily taxed German subsidiary. Nearing the end of his tale, the narrator questions his resolve:

> When I look at my country as it is now—its trade gone, its factories silent, its harbors empty, a prey to pauperism and decay—when I see all this, and think what Great Britain was in my youth, I ask myself whether I have really a heart or any sense of patriotism that I should have witnessed such degradation and still care to live! (62)

To add insult to injury, England is no longer a desirable place to live: the story is narrated as the grandchildren are preparing to leave England for better opportunities (presumably in America). The decline of empire is directly linked here with the loss of its youth. The narrator is the only link his grandchildren have to their country’s glorious past. That glory dissolved, the grandchildren’s departure cements the decline of the nation.

To make matters worse, the tragedy was entirely preventable. The story is littered with references to the fact that had the nation been prepared for the invasion, the Germans would have easily been repelled. In one of the most melancholy proclamations in the story, the narrator tells his grandchildren, “After all, the bitterest part of our reflection is, that all this misery and decay might have been so easily prevented, and that we brought it about ourselves by our own shortsighted recklessness” (63). It is in these moments that the story’s function as propaganda becomes most obvious: the military must be modernized in order to prevent the fictional invasion from becoming an actual invasion.

A similar situation takes place in *Homefront*. Taking place in the mid-2020s, the events that bring about the game world are already in motion in 2012. Not only, then, does this vision of the future show us the nation in a degraded state, it also suggests that it is entirely preventable by
our actions in the contemporary world. The game opens after the successful invasion of the U.S. by Korean forces, with the protagonist being ordered to a re-education camp in Alaska. In the midst of Korean occupation, the United States has lost any semblance to the dominant world power that we know today. This decline echoes that of England in *The Battle of Dorking* when the narrator remarks

> Fools that we were! We thought that all this wealth and prosperity were sent to us by Providence, and could not stop coming. In our blindness we did not see that we were merely a big workshop, making up the things that came from other parts of the world; and that if other nations stopped sending us raw goods to work up, we could not produce them ourselves (4-5).

Here, the decline of empire is predicted not just by the ramshackle state of the military, but also by an unsustainable economy. It is telling that *The Battle of Dorking* was first published at a time when the British Empire was beginning a decline in global importance and that *Homefront* was developed when the same questions are being asked about the United States.

Unlike *The Battle of Dorking*, however, *Homefront* does not present itself as a straight reminiscence about the loss of a once prominent nation. Instead, *Homefront* offers players the opportunity to repel the invaders and reclaim their nation’s former glory. Throughout the course of the game, player-characters and their supporting cast slowly mount a successful resistance to the Korean occupation, culminating in a showdown in San Francisco in which the occupiers are soundly defeated. This victory proves to be the turning point in a guerilla war to reclaim America. The episode depicted in *Homefront* distills several American (and, to an extent, Western) fears. In the game, the longstanding threat of communism articulated throughout the Cold War is compounded by the fact that the communists in this case are of East Asian origin.
Faced with competition on the global stage from emerging Asian nations, particularly China, *Homefront* solidifies these anxieties into a game world where players can reclaim their country’s former glory from marauding Others (both racial and ideological) in a few convenient hours. In an ironic twist of fate, the Chinese were intended as the game’s original antagonists but were switched to Korean based on the United States’ increased reliance on China and fears of the Chinese Ministry of Culture (Totilo, *Kotaku*).

In order to achieve this effect, like *The Battle of Dorking*, the game draws upon fears both past and present to increase players’ paranoia. In addition to the themes of communist aggression, *Homefront*’s advertising campaign included a close-up image of a blindfolded American soldier’s head. The blindfold is emblazoned with a single red star. Next to the soldier’s head are written the words “Home is where the war is,” with the word “war” being scribbled over top of a crossed out “heart.” The ad drives home the point that the simulated war of *Homefront* will take place on U.S. soil while the prominent red star semiotically evokes the ominous presence of communism. Furthermore, the blindfolded soldier hearkens back (for those who can remember or are informed enough to know) to the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-81 and the powerful images of captured Americans that came from it. The image also has parallels in videos released by terrorist groups of captured Americans and others. By linking to these real-world incidents, it is clear that the developers hope to evoke a strong response from players that places them on the American side of the conflict.
In their article “Socializing the Cyborg Self: The Gulf War and Beyond,” Kevin Robins and Les Levidow discuss the ways in which media coverage of the Gulf War is linked to images from video games. Discussing the first Gulf War, they argue that linking these images to video games encouraged vicarious participation that drummed up support for the attack (122). Furthermore, the authors note that “Video games in the wider culture are also about the mastery of anxiety and the mobilization of omnipotence phantasies.” The video games here perfectly embody this model: they help players manage their anxieties while giving them a sense of control over the game world. In Robins and Levidow’s conception, the anxiety produced by video games is necessary to keep players involved, to keep them playing. They write:

Video games can thus be understood as a paranoiac environment that induces a sense of paranoia by dissolving any distinction between the doer and the viewer. Driven by the structure of the video game, the player is constantly defending himself, or the entire universe, from destructive forces. The play becomes compulsive, pleasurable repetition of a life-and-death performance. Yet the player’s anxiety can never be finally mastered by that vicariously dangerous play (122).

In the present context, the player acts out invasion narratives, managing the culturally produced anxieties and eventually emerging as the hero.

Erskine Childers’ 1903 novel The Riddle of the Sands shares much of the same paranoia and vicarious pleasure as video games such as Homefront. The Riddle of the Sands is unique among invasion stories in that it does not actually depict an invasion. Throughout the tale, the reader vicariously lives out Carruther’s and Davies’ dangerous game of subterfuge. And despite the main characters’ paranoia, they are still rewarded at the end of the novel. The Riddle of the
Sands would probably make a poor video game, but the structures of the popular invasion narrative and its appeal have transferred across media.

**CONTROVERSY AND IMPERIALIST HEGEMONY**

Much of the mainstream attention paid to video games has focused on the violence found in games. More specifically, games have been criticized for the gratuitous amounts of violence they display in a medium that is commonly viewed as being primarily for children. For the most part, however, these criticisms have focused on the aesthetic aspects of video game violence and largely ignored deeper culture signifiers. At this point I have hopefully established the problematic relationship between video game players, the protagonists they play as, and the enemies they fight and kill, especially in games that attempt to mimic real-world events. One video game controversy clearly illustrates the link between video games and hegemony.

Near the beginning of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, the player takes control of a deep cover U.S. operative who is undercover as a member of a Russian terrorist group. The terrorists enter a Moscow airport with heavy machine guns and are instructed by their leader to speak no Russian before opening fire and slaughtering scores of civilians. Several factors make this sequence crucial to our overall understanding of the themes being discussed here. First, unlike the rest of the game, where the player is forced to kill in order to progress, the “No Russian” mission does not require players to fire upon or kill any of the civilians to advance. In fact, some international versions of the game automatically display a “Game Over” screen if the player kills any civilians (MTV Multiplayer). On the flip side, players are also not allowed to attempt to stop the terrorists, either. They are forced to at least witness the rampage, if not take part in it. Hegemonic ideas leak through this break of the game’s worldview. In essence, the game attempts to justify the killing of one group while condemning the killing of another. It must not be thought
here that I am condoning terrorism and the killing of civilians, but it is telling that the game’s worldview so closely matches that of the contemporary western world.

The issue becomes truly problematic when moving beyond the game and examining the reaction to the mission. Shortly after the release of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, several media outlets criticized the inclusion of the mission. Vince Horiuchi of the Salt Lake Tribune wondered whether the sequence could have been a non-interactive cut scene. He writes, “I have a problem with conveying an airport massacre through the eyes of a player who must murder innocents.” Despite the slight inaccuracy (players are not forced to kill innocents), Horiuchi and others have issues with the player being involved with a terrorist action. Elsewhere he notes that players must battle with airport security forces, writing “you can’t progress to the next chapter unless you kill riot police (at one point, the game tells you how to use a grenade launcher on them).” Ironically, Horiuchi and others who have criticized the “No Russian” sequence give little thought to the killing that goes on elsewhere in the game. In fact, Horiuchi admits that he gave the game a positive review, praising it “for its otherwise outstanding gameplay and graphics.” This willful ignorance of the rest of the game’s content speaks to the game’s interaction and stance toward the Other.

Here, the distinction between who is “innocent” and who is not is of the utmost importance. According to popular rhetoric, killing innocent civilians is not an acceptable action for the player to take part in. However, the killings present in the rest of the game are unquestioned. Presumably, then, these killings are justified and those killed were not among the innocent. The main distinction, of course, is that the enemies in the game attack the player and generally antagonize him or her throughout the experience. Here is where the full significance of these enemies’ portrayal comes to be fully realized. The game weeps for the deaths of the slain
civilians of a terrorist attack while trivializing the player’s killing of racial Others. Again, it is important to note that I am not advocating the murder of innocent civilians or aggrandizing the actions of terrorists, but the normalization of such patterns of violence is alarming. In this manifestation, these Others are reduced to objects of play, unspeaking subalterns of entertainment to be dispatched for the pleasure of the player.

On the same note, it is important to emphasize that these games rarely depict any negative impact on the civilians in the “enemy” countries. Where scenes such as “No Russian” explicitly and powerfully illustrate the impact on Western civilians⁴, the civilians in Middle Eastern countries get no such treatment. Even though a significant portion of the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series is set in the Middle East, we only get fleeting glimpses of civilian life. Near the beginning of Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, for example, the player’s armored column moves into an unnamed Afghani city. As the column snakes its way through the cramped streets, civilians (mostly, if not all, male) scurry for cover before the fighting begins. The player never witnesses American or British soldiers killing civilians, intentionally or not. In fact, the structure of the game would suggest that civilians in countries such as Afghanistan have experienced little to no impact due to American intervention. Furthermore, by rendering these civilians nearly invisible, the games conflate these countries with the enemy combatants that players encounter. Thus, the association of people from these countries as “enemy” and “Other” is reinforced.

Throughout this chapter I have discussed the relationship between video games and culture. Instead of existing solely outside of culture in the realm of play, video games represent a complex set of actions whereby culture is practiced and reproduced. The window for this study

⁴ A similar scene in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (2011) depicts an American family vacationing in London. In the non-interactive scene, the player watches (the scene is framed as the family’s home video footage) as the family is killed by an exploding biochemical weapon.
has been the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* franchise, a series that feeds upon contemporary cultural anxieties regarding terrorism and a fear of the Other. This construction of the Other is symptomatic of the overall power structure of the world. Far from being read as a document supporting terrorism, this paper should be seen as shining light on the ways in which video games are involved in affirming and perpetuating American hegemony. And finally, it establishes a link between video games and the representation of subaltern peoples. Perhaps acknowledging how these people have been silenced by this new medium will be a step toward finding them voices.
CHAPTER 3
THE ALIEN IN ME: VIDEO GAMES AND THE INVASION OF THE MONSTROUS

The mood of the landmark first-person shooter series *Halo* is perhaps best encapsulated in its opening moments: Shortly after exiting slipspace (a method of faster-than-light travel in this universe), the human ship Pillar of Autumn is quickly besieged by forces of the Covenant, a group of alien races set on destroying mankind. Instead of simply attempting to destroy the ship, the Covenant boards the ship, their distinctly alien landing craft penetrating the ship’s hull. Shortly thereafter, human soldiers passionately defend their ship from the invading forces. The onslaught becomes so intense, the ship’s commander decides to crash land the Pillar of Autumn on the *Halo* ring they have recently discovered instead of facing the aliens head-on.

Such is the plight of humanity in the *Halo* universe. Throughout the series, which consists of a main trilogy, two spin-offs and a remake, humans are constantly fighting for survival against the Covenant. We constantly find ourselves on the defensive. In addition to the Pillar of Autumn, the Covenant invades Reach, humanity’s main colony, and eventually the ultimate prize: Earth. In addition to the constant threat of invasion, the *Halo* games also feature a sense of desperation. In these games mankind faces seemingly insurmountable odds against unstoppable forces. Games such as those in the *Gears of War* and *Resistance* series all depict humanity’s final stand against these marauding alien forces.

Building upon ideas of the Other in video games delineated in the previous chapter, the commonalities between these games point to several significant ways in which cultural anxieties are created and disseminated. We will begin, though, where these games diverge from those discussed in the previous chapter: With a discussion of the monstrous. Even though games such as *Halo* and *Gears of War* are set in worlds that share few similarities with our own, they are
birthed from the culture that surrounds us. And while the enemies in these games may not be
direct manifestations of our fear of the racial Other, like H.G. Wells’ Martians or Stoker’s
Dracula, they still hit at the heart of what frightens us and what makes us the most anxious and
insecure.

**EXPLORING THE MONSTROUS**

Shifting from the human realm of *Call of Duty* to the monstrous realm of *Halo* and
*Resistance* means shifting to the psychological. The monsters we create for ourselves exist in a
liminal state, somewhere between reality and our imaginations. In these monstrous constructions
of our minds we are able to see what we, as a culture, are truly afraid of. Monsters are nothing
new to humans. From the Wendigo of the Algonquian-speaking peoples of Canada to
Frankenstein, it seems as though all cultures at all times have created monsters (Gilmore 1-4). As
they have migrated from folktales to popular entertainment (such as video games and popular
literature), monsters have become objects of mass consumption. In this transition, monsters may
have lost some of their literalness – it is doubtful that many people still believe that monsters
actually exist (although some undoubtedly do) – but they have retained many of the anxiety-
inducing traits that made them popular folklore subjects.

When examining monsters in video games, it is necessary to look back to the tradition of
monster-creation. In his *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary
Terrors*, David D. Gilmore notes that there is more to monsters than simply fear. In explaining
his goal for the material, he writes:

> The point of this book is to show that for most people monsters are sources of
> identification and awe as well as of horror, and they serve also as vehicles for the
> expiation of guilt as well as aggression: there is a strong sense in which the monster is an
incarnation of the urge for self-punishment and a unified metaphor for both sadism and victimization. (4-5)

Monsters occupy a complex place in the popular imagination, offering no simple explanations or easy answers.

Luckily, in our efforts to classify and describe the monsters of contemporary shooter video games, we have an entire history of monsters in popular literature to give us direction. Despite the large gaps in time, the monsters that inhabit the Halo, Gears of War and Resistance universes have much in common with the Martians of War of the Worlds and Dracula himself. The obvious bridge between the last two chapters and our current discussion is, of course, Dracula. In many ways Bram Stoker’s 1897 work combines both branches of my main argument. The novel definitely reflects the time period in which it is set and, as an Eastern European, Dracula himself shares similar roots with the invaders of The Battle of Dorking and Riddle of the Sands. However, I include Dracula in this chapter because he is a monster and therefore invokes anxieties beyond those of his appearance. It should be noted here that I am using Gilmore’s conception of monsters, which is narrowed to “supernatural, mythical or magical products of the imagination” (6). So Gilmore does not include monsters in the figurative sense of the word.

Dracula, in many ways, is unique from the other invasion novels of the time period. Unlike the other novels discussed thus far, Dracula does not feature a large scale invasion from another country. The eponymous vampire is the only true invader present in the novel. The symbolic burden is then on Dracula himself. Stephen D. Arata points out that many scholars of the Gothic focus on the psychoanalytic interpretations of the genre while neglecting the question of race. Arata insists that the cultural context of Late Victorian Britain is central to the novel,
noting that “Late-Victorian fiction in particular is saturated with the sense that the entire nation – as a race of people, as a political and imperial force, as a social and cultural power – was in irretrievable decline” (622). This tension between the psychoanalytic and the historical will be central to my arguments in this chapter. I will use elements from both sides of the equation, arguing that the novels and video games that will be discussed reflect cultural anxieties very much dependent on their particular time and place. Furthermore, I will suggest that the monsters in these texts symbolize these specific cultural anxieties while retaining the qualities that make them universally frightening.

In his essay, “Monster Culture: Seven Theses,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen presents what he calls “a method of reading cultures and the monsters they engender” (3). Largely eschewing the pursuit of any higher truth, Cohen instead presents seven ways that monsters can be read. Several of these will be useful here. The first, “The Monster’s Body Is a Cultural Body,” will be examined at length. Cohen writes:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. (4)

This is indeed an appropriate place to begin, as the monster’s bodies are the key difference separating them from the human antagonists that have already been discussed. Furthermore, the bodies of the monsters are key points of signification, representing real-world fears.

**ALIEN INVADERS AND REVERSE COLONIZATION**

If things are kept at the surface level, alien invaders can be seen as a clear racial metaphor. Unlike the clear racialization of enemies in games such as *Call of Duty*, aliens keep
things ambiguous, preventing any direct racial comparisons from being made. In many ways, this is obvious. Discussing *The War of the Worlds*, Peter Fitting writes, “In terms of the alien, for instance, we all know that ‘the aliens are us’, or that in some way or another they stand as emblems of the Other” (128). But it is critical to examine how these alien Others are established and depicted—especially in the context of video games. By establishing the player as the protagonist fighting against alien Others, these games immediately establish a relationship in which the player identifies qualities in his or her opponents that signal their difference. Appearance is the most common attribute that can signal their difference. In order to break down the qualities that establish difference, we must first identify what they are.

In his examination of Late Gothic fiction, Arata points out a lurking fear of the Other in novels such as *Dracula* and *The War of the Worlds*. He notes that a narrative of what he calls “reverse colonization” pervades late 19th and early 20th century British literature. He explains that in each case, a terrifying reversal has occurred: the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized. Such fears are linked to a perceived decline – racial, moral, spiritual – which makes the nation vulnerable to attack from more vigorous, “primitive” peoples (623). It should be no surprise, then, that these games were all released at a time when the United States’ continued world dominance is being called into question (the first *Halo* game was released shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks and both *Resistance: Fall of Man* and *Gears of War* were released in November 2006).

Furthermore, Arata also makes an important distinction between the “imperial Gothic” and other “invasion-scare narratives”: Invasion scares (including *The Battle of Dorking* and *Riddle of the Sands*) tended to focus on other industrial nations invading and strove to achieve
“documentary-like realism” (625). Literature closer to the turn of the century (like Dracula and The War of the Worlds), on the other hand, is more likely to include elements of the supernatural.

On paper, it appears that this easy distinction can be readily applied to video games. Games such as Homefront tend more toward realism with industrial nations playing the role of the aggressors while the shift to science fiction seen in Halo, Resistance, and Gears of War marks a turn toward enemies that represent primitive or colonized people. Upon closer inspection, though, this argument begins to break down. First, the games that feature more realistic depictions of invasion also include peoples from less developed countries. Secondly, in the science fiction games, the aliens usually have more powerful technology than the humans. But instead of dismissing this theory, I wish to examine it further and perhaps give it a 21st century update.

There are obvious differences in the shift from the anxieties leading to the First World War and our current anxieties about terrorism post 9/11. Undoubtedly the most significant development that has taken place since World War I in terms of warfare was the development of the nuclear bomb. These powerful – and potentially world-ending – weapons have been the subject of much debate and strict regulation; we want to know – and control – who has access to them. Arising from this concern over the control of nuclear weapons is an anxiety about them falling into the wrong hands, namely those of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda. Therefore, in the “reverse colonization” taking place in modern shooter video games, is it any surprise that the enemies possess superior technology than the humans? These aliens simply represent the ultimate expression of our fears of terrorism. The Martians in The War of the Worlds, of course, also possess weapons far superior to humans, but they will be discussed later on.

**ORAL AGGRESSION**
Returning to Cohen, of all the monstrous bodies that will be examined, *Dracula’s* is the closest to being human. However, it is his mouth, with its blood soaked fangs, that evokes the most fear. In fact, according to Gilmore, monster’s mouths are one of their distinguishing characteristics. These “malevolent maws,” as he terms them, are “yawing, cavernous mouths brimming with fearsome teeth, fangs, or other means of predation” that “are used to rip and tear humans, to bite and rend and devour” (176). He ultimately concludes “that this betrays a universal obsession with oral aggression” (176-8). This certainly seems to fit the monsters that we are currently discussing. In addition to Dracula’s fanged mouth, the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* feature grotesque mouths. According to the narrator, “it was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the lipless brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva” (Wells 139). In describing the terror invoked by the Martians, the narrator makes sure to include “the peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of brow ridges, the absence of a chin beneath the wedge-like lower lip, the incessant quivering of this mouth…” (139). Clearly, the aliens’ strange mouths are one of their central features. It is interesting to note that the Martian’s mouths don’t pose much of a threat. Like Dracula, the true horror of the aliens comes from the nourishment they receive from human blood.

Moving into video games, the primary enemies in each of the games discussed in this thesis feature formidable mandibles. Although the Covenant in *Halo* features several races, perhaps the most formidable are the Elites, whose mouths feature four lower jaws lined with
razor sharp teeth. In fact, their mouths are perhaps their most frightening characteristic compared to the rest of their relatively humanoid bodies. Similarly, the Locust soldiers seen in the *Gears of War* series have equally frightening mouths. Closer to human mouths, they nonetheless feature razor-sharp teeth that appear ready to rip the flesh off of an opponent’s bones. Finally, the most common form of Chimera found in the *Resistance* games features an extra-large mouth with protruding teeth and fangs. In all of these cases, it is telling that the enemies’ mouths seem to be their most alien physical characteristic. Apart from their skin (and possibly numbers of fingers and toes), all of these alien invaders appear relatively human. It can be inferred, then, that in these games the mouth is a key component in endowing the antagonists with Otherness.

**BODILY TAKEOVER**

At this point, it is interesting to note that despite the oral aggression apparently displayed by all of the aforementioned villains, none of them attack the player using their mouths. It would appear that their mouths were designed solely to lend them monstrous characteristics. There are, however, several enemies in these games that do attack orally, and they reveal something much more sinister. While the Covenant certainly take center stage throughout the *Halo* series, another threat lurks in the background: The Flood. As a species of parasitic organisms, the Flood attack and take over their opponent’s nervous system, mutating them into a member of their collective. The Flood are an extremely...
adaptable species whose Infection Form leaps at prey, latching on with their mouths. Once attached, the Flood rapidly takes over their hosts’ bodies, turning them against their former allies. Considering this, along with their ability to assimilate nearly all intelligent life, the Flood are perhaps the true antagonists of the *Halo* trilogy.

From the standpoint of this study, the Flood display many interesting traits. The first is, of course, the oral aggression made real. In addition to the real threat of attack from the mouths of the Infection Forms, other members of the Flood feature grotesque maws. When a human body is taken over by the Flood, its head is pulled back and various tendrils and tentacles rise out of this new “mouth.” The end result is a frightening sight. But there is more to the Flood than pure visual spectacle. In the discussion of the monstrous seen in these video games, the body itself becomes a site of contestation and reverse colonization. The Flood poses the threat of not only death, but of forceful transformation into the enemy, where the once imperial subject becomes indelibly marked as the Other.

There is, of course, precedence for this as well. Dracula does not simply kill his foes, but instead turns them against the ones they love. The threat of transformation arises out of the perceived decline of one’s own culture. As Arata writes, “Horror arises not because Dracula destroys bodies, but because he appropriates and transforms them. Having yielded to his assault, one literally ‘goes native’ by becoming a vampire oneself” (630). What’s more, victims’ old identities are no longer relevant; they are completely subsumed by the foreign presence. Arata continues, “Miscegenation leads,
not to the mixing of races, but the biological and political annihilation of the weaker race by the stronger” (630).

This is remarkably similar to what takes place with the Flood in *Halo*. Not only are human and Covenant soldiers alike killed by the Flood, their identities are stripped away and are no longer relevant. What remains is less of a hybrid and more of a husk that retains some of its former traits. The forced identity shift is a prominent feature in many shooter games and echoes the reverse colonization that takes place in novels like *Dracula*.

Indeed, capture and transformation are common themes of these games. In the *Resistance* games, human soldiers are incapacitated and infected with a Chimeran virus. They are then taken to “conversion centers” where they are transformed into either Chimeran soldiers or “Menials,” mindless slaves that are charged with routine tasks (and, in another instance of oral aggression, latch onto and bite the player). In the Half-Life universe, small creatures known as headcrabs perform a similar function to the Flood. After latching onto a victim’s head, they puncture the skull, eventually taking over the nervous system. The resulting “zombie” retains its human body, but none of its cognition. (It is also interesting to note that the Half-Life zombies feature a vertical tear up their abdomen, forming a grotesque mouth where the victim’s broken ribs have become de facto teeth.)

The transformations that take place through reverse colonization in these games dramatically enact a return to the primitive. Even though they were once soldiers, relying on advanced weaponry and equipment, the Flood battle with their bodies, using tentacles and organic projectiles. While they can use both human and Covenant weaponry, the Flood prefer close quarters combat, using their tentacles and spikes as weapons. The reversal from civilized to primitive is even more dramatic in Half-Life, where the zombies are former scientists. Like their
brethren across popular culture, the Half-Life zombies are of low intelligence, seemingly only motivated by their desire for flesh. Again and again, we see the body as a site for reverse colonization, for transformation into the dark other.

The fear of transformation into the primitive Other, of course, moves past the individual. Arata points out that Dracula’s real threat is his potential to form an ever-widening circle of vampires in Britain: “The Count’s ‘lust for blood’ points in both directions: to the vampire’s need for its special food, and also to the warrior’s desire for conquest. The Count endangers Britain’s integrity as a nation at the same time that he imperils the personal integrity of individual citizens” (630). A similar situation arises in the Halo universe. The Flood not only threaten individual bodies, but all sentient life in the galaxy. As the series progresses, it is revealed that the mysterious Halo rings were ultimately designed to wipe out all sentient life in the galaxy, thus depriving the Flood of food and the ability to spread. Stopping the onslaught of the Flood becomes so central to the story that humans and some elements of the Covenant eventually agree to work together in a last ditch effort to end the infestation once and for all.

The Flood represent the forceful takeover of the civilized by the primitive. This takeover is not simply limited to a few individuals, but threatens the identity of the entire nation/race. If the appearance of vampires marks the decline of the British Empire, as Arata argues (629), then the appearance of aliens such as the Flood might herald the decline of the United States as a world superpower. They reflect a nation’s anxieties about its lasting power and identity. Shohini Chaudhuri makes the connection even more explicit by directly linking vampire narratives to alien invasions. She notes that, like Dracula, aliens are often motivated by their search for life-giving “fluids” (185). Noting that vampires are created not by the simple sucking of blood, but the exchange of blood, Chaudhuri writes:
[Dracula’s] imperialist rhetoric makes blood the basis of imaginative projection about race and nation—about the mixing of the pure blood of the imperialist nation with the vampire/Eastern European’s blood, and about the vampire/Eastern European’s draining and diluting of the nation’s blood (and the stable national identity that purity of blood represents). (186)

This provides a link to the other major novel to be discussed alongside video games in this thesis: H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds*. Wells’ Martians clearly represent the Other, but their advanced weaponry also prefigures the devastating weapons of World War I. Similarly, the alien antagonists in shooter video games typically possess devastating weaponry while also embodying the Other. Again, it is my assertion that in the contemporary world these aliens represent our anxieties over the control of nuclear weapons.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

But to truly evaluate the cultural impact of monsters, we must move beyond simply evaluating monstrous bodies. Monster’s bodies may be their defining characteristics, but the anxieties that they give rise to move beyond their appearance. When comparing the monsters of turn of the century invasion literature with the monsters of modern shooter video games, it is important to point out what makes each era distinct. To simply argue that monsters have persisted and little has changed would be a gross oversimplification. Cohen advises, “Monsters must be examined from within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (5). In order to achieve this goal, we can examine the historical context of *The War of the Worlds* and then attempt to apply its themes to contemporary invasion video games. Two significant elements are at work in Wells’ novel. First, the novel is meant as a critique of imperialism, illustrating to the British the consequences of conquest, specifically the
conquest of Tasmania (Renfroe). In doing so, Wells simultaneously invokes the threat of reverse colonization and the threat of invasion by a modern power stirred up by *The Battle of Dorking*. Many scholars have noted these two concurrent themes in the novel. George Zebrowski, for example, sums it up well when he writes:

> Human pride and arrogance are reduced to mere pretensions before the modern weapons of the invaders. This not only suggested a critical look at how the imperial powers subdued the poorer peoples of the world of economic gains, but also prefigured the inhuman mechanization of wholesale slaughter in World War I. (238)

So, *The War of the Worlds* not only disrupted the Victorian perception of the world, it also articulated fears that were made real with the coming of World War I.

In hindsight, one of the most prophetic aspects of Wells’ novel is its depiction of chemical warfare. The Martians’ terrifying “black smoke” is deployed with calculated efficiency, wiping out pockets of humanity in advance of the tripods and eerily heralding the horrors of the poison gases of the First World War. At the same time, Wells makes the connection with the colonization of Tasmania explicit repeatedly throughout *The War of the Worlds*, but especially when he writes “The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?” (125-6)

Scholars have recognized and commented upon this Martian duality. Peter Fitting notes that Wells breaks from Chesney and *The Battle of Dorking* in that “[Wells] is not as interested in the inadequacy of British military preparedness (although this is also a theme in the novel), but in the rationale for British imperialism and colonialism” (132).
In order to get the point across, *The War of the Worlds* performs a switch, turning colonizer into colonized. A crucial aspect of colonization, of course, is the superior technology possessed by the colonizers. Thus the Martians wield weapons that Britain’s European rivals may or may not have been developing at the time of the novel’s writing. But the novel goes deeper than simply reversing the roles. By calling British imperial policies into question, Wells also destabilizes the late 19th century British worldview, whereby it was right and natural for them to conquer “lesser” peoples. Fitting notes the lack of a political motivation for the Martian invasion of England; Instead, they invade for the survival of their species and win because they are the superior species (138). Following this social Darwinist logic, the Martians treat the humans (the British in particular) the same way that the British treated indigenous peoples: as an inferior species.

It should be clear at this point that the Martians display two seemingly contradictory characteristics: Their advanced weaponry elevates them to the role of colonizer, while their very alienness indelibly marks them as inferior “Other.” The defeat of the humans at the hands (?) of the Martian is then doubly horrifying. Fitting sums the situation up nicely when he writes:

Wells goes beyond the issue of the threats posed by the militarization of European rivals, to propose a humiliating onslaught, by superior creatures who share none the less some of the characteristics of Earth’s ‘lower’ species, a humiliation which is compounded by their apparent lack of interest in the humans as an intelligent species. (130-131)

The entire episode of *The War of the Worlds* is important because it not only articulates many of the anxieties that we are still coming to grips with, but also because it highlights many of the methods underpinning the colonial mindset.
The crux of the matter for both invasion literature and invasion video games is the dehumanizing aspects of colonialism. Like the Martians, it is easier for players to tear through and kill scores of aliens they feel are less than human. Similarly, the games encourage anxiety and fear of these others by casting them as aggressors who possess superior weaponry. Reflecting on *The War of the Worlds*, Zebrowski explains the reality of the situation when he writes:

The blood-red ‘reality’ of *The War of the Worlds* had emerged in the new weapons of World War I, and in how the colonial powers continued to treat Third World peoples as ‘slopes,’ ‘gooks,’ ‘ragheads,’ and ‘hajjis’ – demote them and you can kill them with little or no concern, which is how the Martians exterminated human beings, as one steps into a nest of ants. (236)

Unfortunately, unlike Wells, shooter video games seem unaware and uncritical of this worldview. They remain concerned neither with the legacy of colonialism nor with the impact of cultural imperialism. In all but a select few cases, the aliens are reduced to nothing but cannon fodder.

So, while the connections between the eras are important to establish a continuity in monsters, we must also look at what makes each unique. In this regard, one important distinction becomes apparent. The invasion literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is anticipatory. It may have risen out of the fears stoked by war, but it really references tensions that led to World War I and anxieties over the consequences of colonialism. In modern shooter video games, these consequences are beginning to be realized. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the September 11 terrorist attacks galvanized a newly perceived national threat, replacing communists with terrorists in our national imagination. Therefore, just as the decline of the
British Empire and the onset of the First World War were anticipated by *Dracula* and *The War of the Worlds*, the perceived decline of the United States as a world power – at the hands of terrorists – is mirrored in these video games.

**VIDEO GAME PARALLELS**

Upon inspection, many parallels exist between the fictional, simulated worlds of shooter video games and the real world that evoke anxieties of reverse colonization. *Halo* is perhaps the finest expression of this. Not only do the parallels exist, but they have been recognized and noted in the mainstream media. The *Halo* saga, covering six games and counting (*Halo* 4 is due to be released in late 2012), is set in the 26th century. By this time, humanity has mastered faster-than-light travel and has begun to colonize other planets. When humans finally come into contact with the Covenant, the aliens attack with little reason and almost no warning. Several details of this scenario are worth noting here. The first is the marked difference between human and Covenant society. In the *Halo* universe, the people of Earth are united under a single government, dubbed the Unified Earth Government, or UEG. While specifics are never given in the games (although they are greatly expounded upon in the tie-in novels), it is implied the UEG is some form of democracy, evidenced by the continued existence and influence of the United Nations. It is also implied that the UEG follows a capitalistic system. In fact, the UEG and its primary military branch, the UNSC (United Nations Space Command, of which the main player-character, the Master Chief, is a part), strongly resemble the United States and other Western nations. The military structure is exactly the same, for example, and the soldiers share similar mannerisms and behaviors with popular depictions of the U.S. military. Sgt. Avery Johnson, for example, fits the mold of the cigar chomping tough guy, continually barking orders at his men. While this depiction of human forces helps familiarize players with the universe and reduces any
disorientation they may have, it also suggests a deeply-seated Western worldview, especially when considered next to the depiction of the Covenant.

Unlike the humans, the Covenant follow a class-based system founded upon religious belief. In what can only be described as the antithesis of the depiction of human society, not only does each race of the Covenant exist within a hierarchy, each one has a specialized function from which it can never deviate. The Prophets, for example, are the religious leaders of the collective and sit at the top of the hierarchy. They produce the religious doctrine that all the other races must follow. On the military side, the Elites lead the Covenant military forces, following the orders dictated by the Prophets. The races below the Elites are often reduced to their specific functions. Hunters, hulking monsters with arm mounted cannons and gigantic shields, are brought in for heavy support. Grunts are used for their sheer numbers, as are Jackals, although the latter can take on multiple specializations, including sniping. Assigning each species certain, specific functions limits the freedom of individual members of each species and effectively reduces them to roles that various weapons or equipment would play on the human side of the equation.

By now some of the parallels with contemporary sociopolitical anxieties should be apparent. The Covenant as a religious collective who attack humans without warning has clear connections with fundamentalist Islamic terrorism as articulated by groups such as al-Qaeda. In fact, echoing much of the rhetoric used by leaders of these groups, such as the late Osama bin Laden, the Halo: Combat Evolved instruction manual explains that “Covenant religious leaders declared humanity an affront to the gods, and the Covenant warrior caste waged a holy war upon humanity with gruesome diligence” (4). The reference to a “holy war” echoes the Islamic term “jihad,” which has become a buzzword for terrorist activities. Another similarity between Islam
and the Covenant is a schism between two factions; the Elites eventually resist the teachings of the prophets, Sunni and Shia Muslims have been battling one another for hundreds of years. The connections to terrorism even bleed into the gameplay. When faced with overwhelming odds, enemy grunts will activate two plasma grenades and charge at the player in last-ditch suicide attacks.

This connection between the Covenant and Islam is strengthened by the series’ strong Christian overtones. In addition to the obvious “Halo” and “Covenant” terminology, prominent examples include repeated uses of the number seven (there are seven Halo ringworlds, for example), the presence of an “Ark” to combat the Flood and a god-like race known as the Forerunners who built the Halos and whose technology has greatly advanced both human and Covenant civilization. The clues are prevalent but never stated explicitly enough to cause much debate in the blogosphere and on Halo forums and message boards as to whether or not the series is an allegory for modern times.

Perhaps the strongest—and most telling—Christian imagery surrounds the series protagonist, the player character known as Master Chief. With an ambiguous appearance (he is always seen in full body armor with a helmet covering his face) and few lines of dialogue, the Master Chief was intentionally designed to encourage players to identify with him. Throughout the series, he (and therefore the player) is constantly referred to as humanity’s last hope and savior. As if his existence were prophesied, the A.I. constructs aboard the Halo rings recognize him (they have existed for millennia) and refer to him as “Reclaimer.” On the other hand, to the Covenant, he is known as “The Demon.” Finally, at the conclusion of the main trilogy, Master Chief seemingly sacrifices his own life in order to preserve humanity.
The Master Chief’s obvious connections to Christ suggest that the Halo games not only privilege a Western-centric worldview, but also that this divide is a deeply philosophical and religious one. Like The War of the Worlds, the Halo games reverse the script; depicting Christian colonizers under threat of extinction from alien Others who believe the humans are of lesser intelligence. But again, unlike Wells, the intention of these games is not to force the player to view the consequences of imperialism, but to enforce the dominant worldview. This is confirmed by their radically different endings. In The War of the Worlds, humanity doesn’t so much win the war as it is rescued by the intervention of bacteria. In the Halo series, however, not only are the teachings of the Prophets debunked (they are even likened to a cult, their ultimate goal was to activate the Halo rings in a sort of mass suicide), but the Covenant is utterly destroyed, ensuring the continuation of human hegemony.

But while Halo may have the most overt connections, it is certainly not the only shooter video game to include such themes. The Locust in Gears of War have perhaps the closest links to so-called “primitive” or colonized peoples. They literally live under humanity’s feet, in the hollow parts of the planet Sera. Although it is never explicitly stated, it is hinted that they are the products of human experimentation. The nature of their attack is just as sudden: They burst forth from the soil and begin attacking humans in an event that becomes known as Emergence Day (E-Day). Again, the reasons and motives behind their attack are shrouded in mystery. The Locust, too, are experiencing a civil war. Interestingly, in this war, one of the major factions, the Lambent, threatens bodily colonization by spreading their infection amongst normal Locust and humans alike.

In the Resistance series, while the Chimera feature a unified front with little to no internal strife, their form of attack is just as swift. After several years of a communications blackout with
Russia, the Chimera suddenly emerge to wage a blitzkrieg-style war, conquering most of continental Europe in under a year. The Chimera’s motivation for invasion and their exact origins remain shrouded in mystery for most of the series, with some questions remaining unanswered. It is also worth noting here that the Resistance series adopts a very Euro and American-centric worldview in that the games deal only with Chimeran invasions of European nations and the United States. This implies that either other nations weren’t worth invading or that they put up so little of a fight that it isn’t worth mentioning.

**ALIEN OTHERS**

The enemies in all of these games have two important traits in common. First, they are all depicted as animalistic. Despite their advanced weaponry, these species are also likened to animals in both their physical abilities (several species have enhanced senses of smell, for example) and their overall appearance (Locust drones are hulking monstrosities of seemingly low intelligence). Some of the aliens are even modeled on various species on Earth. The Brutes in Halo, for example, are highly intelligent apes with the ability to stand upright and the Drones (or Buggers) resemble oversized insects. Animalizing the alien species that make up the enemy forces in these games effectively establishes their Otherness while also aiding in their dehumanization. It is easier to kill a bug than it is a human, even if that bug is equipped with high tech weaponry. Secondly, all of these enemies come from elsewhere and display cultural or ideological traits associated with the Other. If a Chimera Hybrid’s glowing yellow bug eyes can’t convince the player that it needs to be killed, then perhaps its origins in Russia will. Encouraging an association with the primitive, these monsters adhere to ideologies (collectivity) and religious beliefs (non-Christ centered) that seem not only foreign to Western players, but have been flatly rejected by Western thought. In these games, invasion does not simply mean annihilation by an
extraterrestrial race; it also means takeover by an alien force that possesses ideology in clear opposition to the player’s own.

The significance of this Orientalized view of the enemy is that it demarcates difference as evil. These games produce an exoticized version of the Other, combining various elements of Eastern culture that demonize the strange and unfamiliar while simultaneously granting the human, and therefore the player’s, side power over these alien monsters. Instead of probing the source of our anxiety, these games put it in the sights of a gun. Scholar Jessica Langer has noted a similar situation in the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft*. Langer argues that the game “carries out a constant project of radically ‘othering’ the Horde” and that this project is based not upon distinctions of good and evil, but rather on distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery. The assumptions of good and evil that derive from these characterizations are not direct, but are rather symptoms of a common Western cultural association of foreignness and insidiousness, an association that itself derives from Western colonial ideologies. (87-88)

Obviously all of the games being discussed in the present context single player games, but the move to an online, multi-player affair has its own consequences. In *World of Warcraft*, players have the option of choosing which side they will play on (Alliance or Horde). So, while the game may radically other the Horde, the possibility of experiencing the game world from the perspective of one of these characters is still an option. Furthermore, *World of Warcraft* is a game that deemphasizes its own story. Despite being burdened with the backstory of three *Warcraft* real-time strategy games, the story of *World of Warcraft* largely remains on the macro-level. On the individual level, the game emphasizes questing, leveling up and, as Langer points out, player vs. player (PvP) battling. Shooter games, on the other hand, typically force players
into a single side of a conflict. In *Halo, Gears of War* and *Resistance*, the player plays exclusively on one side of the conflict. All avenues for exploring the monstrous are blocked off, leaving the source of our anxiety unexplored and just as frightening.

It has been long established that the monsters that inhabit our popular imagination are not devoid of symbolic weight. From their very inception, monsters have been the markers and harbingers of a society’s ills. One of a monster’s defining characteristics is its liminality. Monsters are neither one thing nor the other. The monsters in both the invasion novels of the late 1800s and the invasion video games of the early 21st century embody this concept in dramatic fashion: They embody both the primitive threat to polite society and the potential for a full scale invasion by an advanced power. They make excellent video game villains because they allow us to visually confront our fears. However, in doing so we leave ourselves open to the influence of hegemonic notions of race, ethnicity and ideology. It is easy to put aliens in the crosshairs. If only it were just as easy to eliminate our fears altogether.
CONCLUSION

VIDEO GAMES AND THE FUTURE OF INVASION NARRATIVES

Throughout this thesis, I have had two goals in mind. First, I have attempted to situate certain video games in the larger tradition of invasion narratives. Looking to the past establishes the conventions of the genre, including the central concerns therein. Invasion narratives largely express anxiety about the survival of national identity. In these narratives, these anxieties usually stem from racial or ideological Others. In these narratives, including those in video games, difference is something to be rejected and destroyed. Examining the foundation built by narratives such as *The Battle of Dorking* and *The War of the Worlds* aides us in identifying these common elements of invasion narratives that cross over in video games.

Secondly, building upon this foundation, I have argued that video games, while retaining these common elements, are fundamentally different from other media and must be examined as such. Because video games rely on the actions of both the player and the machine, they directly involve players in their rhetorical arguments. The video games discussed here have presented worlds that reinforce Western hegemonic ideas of race in the post-9/11 world. More specifically, these games symbolically silence Muslim and other Middle Eastern peoples while presenting them as inherently inhuman and unalterably Other.

Looking to the future, it is hard to predict the future of invasion narratives in video games. On the one hand, as the medium matures, more and more games are appearing that challenge these hegemonic ideas. Gonzalo Frasca’s *September 12* (2003), for example, presents a critique of American intervention in the Middle East since the September 11 attacks. Free to play online, the game tasks players with bombing a Middle Eastern city in an effort to kill terrorists. However, in doing so, they inevitably also kill civilians living in the same city. This collateral
damage causes some of the surviving civilians to become terrorists, thus continuing the cycle of violence. According to Frasca, “The basic idea behind ‘September 12th’ can be described as ‘violence generates more violence’” and he goes on to explain, “Our games are original because they are not meant just to entertain. Through this piece we want to encourage players to think critically about the efficacy of the United States’ current strategy against terrorism” (newsgaming.org). Frasca and his design team are clearly exploiting video games’ ability to produce procedural rhetoric; the design of September 12th makes an argument.

On the other hand, video games that challenge dominant viewpoints are quickly vilified and discarded. Recent controversies over games such as Six Days in Fallujah and Medal of Honor attest to the hegemonic control placed on video games. Instead of depicting a fictional battle or one from a war fought nearly 70 years ago, Six Days in Fallujah is set during the Second Battle of Fallujah during the Iraq War in 2004. Before the game was even released, it garnered press attention and criticism for depicting a war that was still being fought. Amid the controversy, the game’s planned publisher, Konami, abandoned its plans to release the game. Similarly, even though it was fortunate enough to see release in 2010, Medal of Honor’s multiplayer originally allowed players to play as the Taliban. After a public outcry over sensitivity to troops fighting in Afghanistan, the Taliban was changed to the more ambiguous “Opposing Force.”

Both of these cases point to the current cultural standing of video games. Unlike other media, which are generally seen as acceptable vehicles for attempting to effect social change, video games are too often written off as mere entertainment. So, while stories such as The War of the Worlds can be a popular story that also critiques British imperialism, the same does not seem to be true of video games. As Six Days in Fallujah and Medal of Honor can testify, war can be
entertaining as long as it sticks to culturally mandated depictions. When it deviates from these hegemonic depictions, it is deemed “insensitive” and snuffed out.

As a fundamentally participatory medium, however, video games do open unique avenues of resistance. Chiefly, gamers themselves have increasingly been able to find creative ways to turn their favorite video games on their head. In their *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter describe the efforts of independent game designers and other activists to co-opt the traditional rhetoric of shooter video games. These efforts included beaming footage of *America’s Army* on the wall of a building during the 2004 Republican National Convention to critique the Bush Administration’s foreign policy and its attempts to recruit young gamers (185-6). In contrast to what they call “games of Empire,” Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note that these “games of multitude” allow players to fight back against an industry that they see as spreading imperialist hegemony.

Invasion narratives and shooter video games go hand in hand as games of empire. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note that in games of Empire “Players, of their own choice rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities” (192). It is clear that the games discussed in this thesis attempt to lead their players into these subject positions. While other video game genres may allow players some latitude in constructing their characters and their subject positions, the tight focus of shooter video games—especially those discussed in this thesis—limits players’ opportunities to resist the imperialist rhetoric. If we are to move beyond games of Empire, it will take effort by both video game players and developers to move beyond the standard shooter plot.

Finally, I will end where I began: with invasion narratives. That video games so easily fit into the tradition of invasion narratives speaks to the effectiveness of the genre. Invasion’s ability to strike at the heart of our deepest cultural anxieties combined with the empowerment offered
by many shooter video games can be a powerful mixture. Video games concern so many people for this exact reason; because they require players to enact the story, the worry is that the violence and aggression from the games will lead to violence and aggression in the real world. This discussion needs to be expanded to consider the cultural context of the games themselves.

The threat of invasion can evoke powerful feelings. Video games take things a step further effectively evoking these feelings and then demanding player act upon them. It is this affective power that makes video games addicting objects of entertainment as well as useful tools for persuasion. In her *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray famously described *Tetris* as “a perfect embodiment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s—of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught” (144). Similarly, the columns of aliens slowly creeping down the *Space Invaders* arcade screen perfectly capture the essence of the invasion narrative: Feelings of dread take over and tension mounts in the face of a superior enemy. This is the true power of video games. But like any power, it should not go unchecked.


ILLUSTRATIONS

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*Homefront* advertisement. From OCweekly.com.

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*Halo* Elite. From Bungie.net forums.
http://www.bungie.net/Forums/posts.aspx?postID=3249890&postRepeater1-p=1#3274105

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Locust warrior from *Gears of War*. From ign.com.
http://comics.ign.com/articles/927/927623p1.html

Chimeran hybrid from *Resistance: Fall of Man*. From filefront.com forums.

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